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Wild(e) on Stage: Manipulated Scripts and Suppressed Truths in Nadine Gordimer's "The Amateurs"

Abstract: This paper deals with the topic of historical inheritance and literary discourse through a prismatic lens. It focuses on Nadine Gordimer, a well-known white South African writer of Anglo-Jewish and Eastern European origins, who always stood up against racism and the colonialist legacy which deviously paved the way for the apartheid system in her country. In particular, light is shed on "The Amateurs", one of her earliest short stories and a piercing portrayal of South African segregation policies during the 1940s. At the same time, Gordimer engages here in a critical dialogue with the English *fin de siècle* and the comedy-of-manners genre by recollecting an episode from her youth, when she happened to play Gwendolen's role in an amateur staging of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. As we shall see, "The Amateurs" is a semantically poignant story where the threads of European literary tradition, metatheatricality and personal memory are powerfully interwoven.
Keywords: Nadine Gordimer; South Africa; Racism; Historical and Personal Memory; Oscar Wilde; Sociopolitical Critique.

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The year 2023 marks the centenary of the birth of Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014), one of South Africa's most acclaimed and authoritative writers. The first South African author to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (1991), throughout her remarkable career she has been the recipient of honorary doctorates, fellowships and numerous other awards, including the CNA Prize and the Booker Prize. Gordimer has now definitively entered the Olympus of the major representatives of Anglophone literature in her country as well as in the wider context of contemporary World Literature. Her passing away in July 2014, at the age of 90, was accompanied by a series of warm and encomiastic obituaries by fellow writers, journalists, intellectuals, and public figures. In one of these tributes, Dennis Walder thus sums up her main achievements:

> A significant figure in world literature, Gordimer plumbed the depths of human interaction in a society of racial tension, political oppression and sexual unease. The connection between the intimate and the public lay at the heart

> of her work, an apparently inexhaustible stream of novels, short stories and essays. An outspoken voice against the evils of apartheid, Gordimer continued to express forthright views after its collapse and the emergence of a multiracial democracy. Promoting even as she questioned white liberal values in her early work, she went on to espouse an increasingly radical position in the essays and fiction of the mid-1970s and later, openly supporting the liberation movement and associated cultural bodies such as the Congress of South African writers[1].

In 2023, when Gordimer would have celebrated her 100th birthday, it seems only too fitting to dedicate space to some further evaluation of her work. This is not to say, of course, that her production has been so far underrated or scarcely investigated. Indeed, the critical corpus relating to Gordimer's *oeuvre* is astoundingly wide and manifold, having developed over the years throughout countless contributions by national and international scholars[2]. As one would expect, in most cases the exegetic framework pivots on the modes whereby Gordimer endeavoured to dig deeply into the sociopolitical and moral issues that have often pushed her country towards the edge of civil war. If capable of speaking to a transnational audience and addressing questions of universal relevance, her stratified perspective can hardly be severed from the turmoil and violence that tore apart the South African nation from within, especially during the segregation years (1910-1948) and the apartheid era (1948-1991). In the words of Stephen Clingman, one of the most perceptive critics of her work, sense of commitment and theoretical views, to many people

> she has, through her fiction, become the *interpreter* of South Africa as, over the years, her country has marched down its doom-ridden slope of apartheid. Inside that tragedy Gordimer's has been a voice of conscience, of moral rigour, and of a clarified hope – the kind of hope that writing of brilliance can bring with it, no matter what kind of social distortions it is forced to survey […] Nadine Gordimer is a most extraordinary observer of her society[3].

A subtle anatomist of the burdensome legacy of colonial relations and the callous policies of ethnic segregation, Gordimer has excavated routes that testify to the traumatic consequences of institutionalised racism in a public/collective as well as personal/individual sphere. One of her most lucid statements on such an ingrained dynamics of oppression and discrimination dates back to the 1960s, when, in the course of an interview, she retraced the crucial phases of her growing awareness until she came *vis-à-vis* the momentous truth of humankind's equality, dignity, and unalienable rights:

> As a person, my allegiance to South Africa is responsibility toward the situation to which I was born. A white South African, brought up on the soft side of the colour-bar, I have gone through the whole packaged-deal evolution that situation has to offer—unquestioning acceptance of the superiority of my white skin, as a small child; acceptance of the paternal attitude that 'they' are

> only human, after all, as an older child; questioning of these attitudes as I grew up and read and experienced outside the reading and experience that formed my inheritance; and finally, re-birth as a human being among other human beings […] Whether I like it or not, this has been the crucial experience of my life […] I have no religion, no political dogma—only plenty of doubts about everything except my conviction that the colour-bar is wrong and utterly indefensible[4].

The untenability of the ideology of separateness and colour-bar legislation, along with the thorny question of white privilege and connivance, is a *fil rouge* that vividly runs through her pre-1994 writings. At the same time, Gordimer's approach has also moved towards multifocalisation and dialogism. By widening her 'observation window', she has added more and more dashes of colour to her diagnostic picture of South African life. This has brought about a virtual breaking of the barriers that used to cordon off areas of contact among ethnic groups – namely, whites (Afrikaners and people of British ancestry) and non-whites (Blacks, Coloureds, Asians) – and has been accompanied by an inner process of increased understanding, re-evaluation and rethinking. Gordimer's pursuit might thus be compared to a sequence of epistemic journeys that have allowed her to cross the boundaries of the albinocratic enclave and envisage scenarios of possible interracial encounters. In her words, one must find ways "to break out of the color cocoon" along a trajectory where first "you leave your mother's house, and later you leave the house of the white race"[5].

To Gordimer, experiencing a 'rebirth' means rejecting narrow-minded views, racial prejudice, the fear of otherness and taking a bold leap forward in order to figure out new angles of vision. If focusing on a stable set of core themes, her intense gaze never dwells on them in the exact same way. Each time it sheds a different light on the mosaic piece it singles out, ranging from a broad, objective social scrutiny to psycho-social analyses of the ambiguities, distortions, emotional distress and neurotic syndromes exacerbated by apartheid's iron rules of exclusion and division. Nevertheless, Gordimer's writing always recoils from sentimental or melodramatic excess, nor does it indulge in defeatism and, even less, propaganda. Indeed, the notion of the artist's freedom of expression can be seen as a staple of her poetics, along with the seemingly paradoxical tenet of the 'truth of fiction', that is to say, the unique power of the literary word to condense and transpose meaning onto a metempirical, symbolic plane. Bearing in mind the harrowing political context of South Africa during the 20th century, this position was clearly an effort to carve out a relatively autonomous space for the artist's voice and consequently resist the pressure of partisanships, allegiances or appeals to serve a cause. Gordimer took her stand on this key issue on several occasions, among which is "Living in the Interregnum", a lecture she originally gave at the New York University Institute of the Humanities on 14 October 1982 and henceforth one of her most quoted essays:

> I have to offer you myself as my most closely observed specimen from the interregnum; yet I remain a writer, not

> a public speaker: nothing I say here will be as true as my fiction […] There are two absolutes in my life. One is that racism is evil – human damnation in the Old Testament sense, and no compromises, as well as sacrifices, should be too great in the fight against it. The other is that a writer is a being in whose sensibility is fused what Lukács calls 'the duality of inwardness and outside world', and he must never be asked to sunder this union […] writers, looking pretty much like other human beings, but moving deep under the surface of human lives, have at least some faculties of supra-observation and hyperperception not known to others[6].

In a nutshell, while clinging to the assumption that stories do arise out of actual experience – that your "material, your themes, take hold of you from the life around you"[7] – Gordimer constantly drew a distinction between the writer's quest for a place in history and his/her responsibility to deal with values and concepts that go *beyond* history. This is especially the case when facts and events are filtered or censored through state control over the broadcast media, the channels of an ideologically biased historiography and other forms of intrusive monitoring. It is in this provocative sense that Gordimer looked at the creative imagination and "hyperperception" of writers as a sort of moral antidote to demagogical manipulation.

Fiction's lies might well be truer and more 'honest' in essence than the forged truths of many historiographical accounts and information reports. Far from boiling down to sheer flights of fancy, such 'lies' should be conceived as the outcome of a writer's ongoing, heuristic negotiation between self-absorption and involvement in the mundane sphere, introspection and responsiveness. In Stephen Clingman's apt phrasing inspired by Gordimer's various statements of intent, fiction contemplates an "area in which historical process is registered as the subjective experience of individuals in society; fiction gives us 'history from the inside'"[8].

The dialectic between historical memory, individual experience and literary discourse is therefore central to Gordimer's ethos and writing principles. In her aesthetically accomplished works, powerful echoes from the turbulent state of affairs in South Africa across the decades reverberate within a diegetic pattern that both incorporates and transcends the realm of contingency.

Before concentrating on "The Amateurs", attention should be paid to another aspect of Gordimer's output, i.e. her lifelong engagement with short-fiction writing. As is well known, among 20th-century authors living on the fringes of the British Empire, publishing short stories was often conceived as a way to 'learn the trade' – or, for that matter, decentralise the European canon via a counter-response from the peripheries – and start making a name for oneself in the literary world. Gordimer was no exception from this point of view, her earliest stories dating back to her teens, namely "The Quest for Seen Gold", which appeared in 1937 in the Children's Section of the *Sunday Express*, and "Come Again Tomorrow", included in the 1939 volume of *The Forum*, a national review based in Johannesburg. However, in the long term this choice would prove definitely more

than instrumental, suggesting how the short-narrative mode continued to work for Gordimer as a suitable medium to express certain themes that 'took hold of her from the life around', to paraphrase her assertion quoted above.

From the 1930s up to the 2010s, Gordimer penned about two hundred stories and published over twenty collections, becoming a master of the genre. When, in the 1950s, she began to test her ability in the field of the novel, this did not lead to a divorce from the more compressed style of the short story, to which she regularly returned in alternation with the phases of composition of her novels. One could say that travelling between the two ends of the spectrum allowed the author to hone her skills and enhance the potentialities of both forms. Besides bringing forth a vital interplay within her macrotext, this fluctuation also contributed to progressively breaking fresh ground in her sociocultural imaginary towards a desegregation/decolonisation of the mind[9]. Self-declaredly drawing inspiration from writers like Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekhov, Katherine Anne Porter, Ernest Hemingway, Eudora Welty – to whom one should add Edgar Allan Poe, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce – she became an eminent practitioner of a genre whose main traits hinge on brevity as well as concentration, poignancy, unity of effect and what she would call a 'distillation' of significant details. At the same time, the various historical evolutions of brief narratives show how consistency, craftsmanship and artful 'totality' of design may be purposely disrupted or problematised by way of ellipses, deferrals of closure, ambivalence and ironic self-referentiality. For her part, Gordimer trod both routes. On the one hand, conciseness, structured patterns and the power of *denouement* remained a yardstick in her production. She possessed an eidetic memory, a 'clinical' eye, an "illuminating intelligence" which functioned as a "magic lantern […] with x-ray properties"[10] and which was only reinforced by a polished "verbal 'poetry'" comparable to a gem-cutting style[11]. On the other hand, she was not blind to the far-reaching import of Modernist experimentation, ranging from Mansfield's slice-of-life mode to Woolf's moments of being and Joyce's epiphanies. Indeed, in her theoretical reflection on the short story, tellingly entitled "The Flash of Fireflies", Gordimer expanded on the motif of the insightful glimpse by equating the semantic potential hidden in the tale's microcosm with the typically intermittent glow of the firefly, moving "in and out, now here, now there, in darkness". The short-story writer would "see by the light of the flash" and aim to catch "a discrete moment of truth" as if in keeping with "modern consciousness – which seems best expressed as flashes of fearful insight alternating with near-hypnotic states of indifference"[12]. Hardly a minor form, the short story is hailed here as a medium which, like a mobile searchlight, is able to roam dark landscapes and enlighten their conspicuous traits.

All in all, Gordimer's short prose fiction shifts easily across the domains of technical command and inventiveness, codified rules and flexibility. This also implies playing on unresolved contradictions, reticence, abrupt beginnings and open endings, alongside the challenge of grasping epiphanies beneath the crusty exterior of apparently trivial occurrences. In the

1990s, Dominic Head underscored such overlapping directions, pointing out how Gordimer's stories "work *ironically* with [the] notion of 'aesthetic completeness' in the tradition of key modernist innovators such as Joyce and Mansfield"; her texts would rely on "the disunifying and disruptive potential of the short story […] significantly developed during the modernist period"[13]. More recently, although laying emphasis on the author's latest collections, Vivek Santayana has rejected the "tendency to regard Gordimer's short stories as lesser works than her novels" and stressed the qualities of their "non-linear and fragmented form"[14]. As to Gordimer's 'gem-cutting' approach as a focaliser and interpreter of her country's vexed issues, Pascale Tollance has finally remarked that she "handles in a particularly skillful manner the art of the fragment" and that her

> pen shares with the knife – or draws from the knife – something of its trenchant power. In her hands, the art of the short story comes closer to Poe's "effect" than to Henry James's "impression": it must cut the reader to the quick, make its mark in the flesh. […] The power of the narrative lies in the break, the shift, the blank which produce discontinuity or interruption […] One may nevertheless recognize something fiercer and blunter in Gordimer's stories which may be connected to the extreme violence – not least the discursive violence – about which she writes[15].

This commentary on Gordimer's poetics and stylistic choices helps us to properly assess "The Amateurs", one of her earliest and unfairly neglected stories, included in *Face to Face* (1949), her very first collection. A close reading of this work shows how the then young writer's faculties of supra-observation and hyperperception were already at full stretch, hovering on the cusp between social realism and visionary awareness, a clearly intelligible plot and the unexpected flash of "fearful insight". In this concise story – less than ten pages long – the description of a deceivingly ordinary event unfolds in tandem with the act of tearing the veil of appearances, with instants of crisis and disruption that reach their apex in a 'shock of recognition'. When surveying this combination of factors through the distorting kaleidoscope of 1940s South Africa, readers are nudged into literally coming *face to face* with the shameful, suppressed truth of racism. As a consequence, they vicariously experience the shattering of the philanthropic illusion that a young group of white do-gooders has been fostering before their cocoon world is pried open by an excruciating epiphany.

Such an epiphany acquires (meta) theatrical overtones and proves somewhat 'spectacular' because, as hinted by its title, the plot of "The Amateurs" gravitates around the staging of a play by a South African amateur acting company. Although the heterodiegetic narrator makes no reference to the colour of their skin, nor to how many of them are actually involved in the performance, it can reasonably be inferred that they are a small circle of boys and girls belonging to the liberal-minded wing of the white bourgeoisie. Their theatre piece is in fact offered to a selected audience of natives at Athalville Location – a fictional counterpart of the black slums or 'compounds' (the future townships) – under the

aegis of a cultural-uplift charity project, as a sign of brotherly love and humane support for one's neighbour, regardless of his/her race, status and beliefs, a principle that all good Christians should uphold. One of the first passages of the story seems to echo this ethical attitude behind the veneer of the performers' naïve, adolescent enthusiasm:

> The amateur company climbed shrilly out of their car. They nearly hadn't arrived at all! What a story to tell! Their laughter, their common purpose, their solidarity before the multifarious separateness of the audiences they faced, generated once again that excitement that so often seized them. What a story to tell[16]!

This excerpt gives us a taste of Gordimer's cutting-to-the-quick irony, since, even at the level of sentence construction, the well-meaning whites' common goal and feeling of solidarity are seen as stumbling against a hyperconnoted, gloom-ridden word such as "separateness", patently synonymous with "segregation" and the apartheid state-to-be. Whether from the Christian perspective of *caritas* and the unity of God's people, or in the secularised sense of a demand for colour-blind reforms and policies for equal opportunities, the bulwark of separateness would be impenetrable for decades. Before the 1990s ushered in the yearned-for non-racial democracy, South Africa went through innumerable forms of strife, conflicts, armed struggle and a split political arena (from Afrikaner nationalists and white rule advocates to progressive liberals, democratic fronts, left-wing radicals, pan-africanist revolutionaries and freedom fighters). In this bewildering panorama, one of the harsh lessons that South Africans had to learn was that the hope of concretely relieving the needs of the oppressed – and nipping insurgency in the bud – might not simply rest on compassion, benevolent acts of altruism or nonviolent resistance. Structural reforms and a substantial change of regime had to enter the picture too. As J.M. Coetzee, another distinguished South African author and Nobel Prize winner, famously claimed in his "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech", in "a society of masters and slaves, no one is free. The slave is not free, because he is not his own master; the master is not free, because he cannot do without the slave […]. Fraternity ineluctably comes in a package with liberty and equality"[17].

An increasingly radicalised Gordimer was to fully endorse this thesis and, again in Coetzee's words, ponder how South Africans could advance from their "world of violent phantasms", with its "callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies", towards a "true living world"[18]. These fetters were memorably broken in April 1994, the year of the first general elections, which laid the foundations of a government of national unity led by the African National Congress under Nelson Mandela's presidency. People of all colours, now allowed to express their vote by universal suffrage, were recognised as citizens of a newborn "Rainbow Nation", as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Mandela himself called it. The term manifestly celebrated the idea of multiracial reconciliation, of all races being reunited under a covenant of peace, hope, fraternity and equal acknowledgment of their rights.

In one of her Charles Eliot Norton Lectures delivered at Harvard University in the same year, Gordimer graphically juxtaposed the 'miracle' of the new democratic dispensation, the jubilant atmosphere of communal healing and rebirth, with the bleak season of European colonisation and its perpetuation through white minority power and a police state. In so doing, she resorted to her typical history-from-the-inside maieutics and, quite interestingly, pinned down the very episode from her youth that constituted the factual basis for her 'truthful fabulation' in "The Amateurs". By appealing to her sharp palinscopic memory, she looked back on a phase in her life when she had not left her mother's house yet, to say nothing of the house of the white race. With hindsight, she thus read between the lines of a benefit performance of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* in which she had taken part in 1943. Given that this conscious re-actualisation through memory amounts to a blueprint of the tale, the passage is worth quoting in full:

> The only communal activity in which I'd taken part was amateur theatricals; the first uneasy stirrings of liberalism in the town came to be expressed in the mode the churches and individual consciences were accustomed to—charity. No one thought to petition the town council to open the library to blacks, but it was decided to take a play to the only public hall in the black ghetto.
> The play was *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and I had the role of Gwendolen. I was twenty and had never been into a black township before; I believe none of us in the cast had. I believe that no one in the audience had ever seen a play before; how could they? The Town Hall, which doubled as a theatre, was closed to blacks. The audience started off close-kneed and hands folded but was soon laughing and exclaiming. We thought we had had a great success, and drank to it back-stage with our usual tipple, some gaudy liqueur.
> When the scenes of that evening kept returning to me in aspects turned this way and that, and I began to write a piece of fiction, make a story out of them, what emerged was a satire—on us.
> On the absurdity of taking what we imagined was bountiful cultural uplift, an Oscar Wilde play, to the ghetto the town had created. I came to the full appreciation that the audience, those people with drama, tragedy and comedy in their own lives about which we knew *nothing*, were laughing at us.
> No at the play, but us. They did not understand the play with its elaborate, facetious and ironic use of the language they half-knew, English; but they understood *us*, all right. And we in our pretensions, our idea of what we were 'giving' them, were exquisitely funny. Oscar Wilde perhaps would have been amused to think that his play became doubly a satire, functioning as such far from Lady Bracknell's drawing-room[19].

The recollection is linked to no less than Gordimer's first experience in a black ghetto. If still at a 'safe distance' from the misery of the Africans' condition, that

experience was tantamount to an initiation rite that saw her temporarily cross the border between the white suburb of Springs – a small mining town thirty miles from Johannesburg, where she was born and lived with her parents – and the natives' compounds on the mine property and surrounding veld.

In "That Other World That Was the World", she interlaced the episode with broader sweeps that touched on her family ties too. The second daughter of Isidore Gordimer – a Jewish watchmaker and jeweller who, at the age of thirteen, had moved from Latvia to South Africa to escape pogroms – and Hannah (Nan) Myers, a lower-middle-class Anglo-Jewish woman from London, Gordimer made no mystery of her transnational and mixed genealogy, both in the 1994 lecture and other essays or interviews. As a matter of fact, she spoke openly about her difficulties in communicating with her introverted, half-educated father and her conflictual relationship with her mother. This was allegedly due to Nan's possessiveness, condescension and deferential emulation of English manners and views.

A long chapter might be opened here on the author's early adolescence and the way she perceived her lifeblood to be metaphorically drained by an anxious, overprotective mother who, when nine-year-old Nadine was diagnosed with a heart condition, quickly withdrew her from school and sporting activities. From the age of eleven until she was fifteen or sixteen, Gordimer had a private tutor and was rarely allowed to go out with her friends, only to discover later on that her rapid heart beat was no serious disease after all. It was caused by a transitory enlargement of the thyroid gland, a rather common ailment among girls going through puberty. Be that as it may, in that period of confinement she felt like a camouflaged 'little woman' grown old before her time and sulkily tied to her mother's apron strings. She appeared at Nan's side when paying visits to relatives and acquaintances, at tea parties and social gatherings, including the promotion of charity work in the form of assistance, donations and theatrical entertainment for the underprivileged. Such autobiographical details provide useful background information and interpretative clues for an overall assessment of "The Amateurs". Although Gordimer was twenty at the time of the production of Wilde's play in the shanty town, her behavioural and axiological codes could not be far removed from those of her mother, an anglophile liberal humanist, if not someone who continued to consider England as her true 'mother country'. It would not be preposterous to claim that writing this story helped Gordimer to *epiphanically* put things into perspective also in connection with her domineering mother's aura. How the young writer started to break free from her 'mummy's nest' – from the decency as well as double standards of a white citizen who, deep down, was not willing to drastically change the existing order – is confirmed by other pieces. One is an interview that Gordimer gave in 1986:

> I find my mother a very interesting character. She was the dominant member of the household and a sincere do-gooder. She was one of those people who started a crèche in the black township near us. We led a very free kind of life in the community, and it was through my mother

that the amateur dramatic society I was in arranged to go to a hall in a black township. A "great adventure": a performance of—guess what—*The Importance of Being Earnest*! […] My mother's attitude towards black people was maternalistic, but there was always an uneasiness there. She saw the need to collect old clothes and so on[20].

Another one is a 1979 interview:

In a society like that of South Africa, where a decent *legal* life is impossible, a society whose very essence is false values and mutual distrust, irony lends itself to you, when you analyse what happens. Let me give an example from "The Amateurs" […] It was based on something that happened to me. I was one of the members of this group. I was going to play Gwendolen and was dressed up in a marvellous dress with a bustle and false bosom, all of which made me look like an hourglass […] I had never been in a black township before, it was filthy, ghastly, all of the story's descriptions of the environment are absolutely true to what I saw. I think I suffered a sort of culture shock in my native country: what I saw was so vastly different from the white world I knew, and yet so close in distance a few miles from where I lived. And who were we, feeling superior, showing off European culture in this South African dorp, to an audience with no background for understanding what we were doing, an audience whose own culture *we* did not know at all[21]?

Despite its belonging to her juvenilia, then, "The Amateurs" was never blithely dismissed by the mature author, for whom it palpably marked a milestone, a first point of no return on her approach path towards non-European alterity and discovery of the Other's humanity. In sum, the composition of the story was triggered by a "culture shock" and, when reflecting on it with a cool head, Gordimer felt empathy coming out tinged with acrid (self-)irony. The plot of "The Amateurs" is accordingly kept spinning through a jarring mix of smugness and puzzlement, along with the defamiliarising blanks, fractures and ellipses of which we spoke before. Right from the beginning, a baffling note of discord seems to creep over the 'jolly band', for whom the blacks' location objectifies a Foucauldian "heterotopia of deviation", a place hosting "individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm"[22]. The compound is like a dystopian satellite rotating on its own axis and suspiciously spying on the intruders, making them feel uncomfortable and unwelcome:

> They stumbled round the Polyclinic, humpy in the dark with their props and costumes. "A drain!" someone shouted, "Look out!" "Drain ahead!" They were all talking at once.
> The others waiting in the car stared out at them; the driver leaned over his window: "All right?"
> They gesticulated, called out together.
> "— Can't hear. Is it OK?" shouted the driver.
> Peering, chins lifted over bundles, they arrived back at the car again. "There's nobody there. It's all locked up." […] Driving along the narrow,

> dark streets, they peered white-faced at the windows, wanted to see what it was like. But, curiously, it seemed that although they might want to see the location, the location didn't want to see them[23].

This is again a poignant passage, capable of conveying a feeling of covert resistance and estrangement. As most heterotopic counter-sites, the location is not easily accessible, so much so that the visitors first get the address wrong and eventually manage to walk through its gates escorted by a policeman. By simultaneously mirroring and upsetting other surrounding spaces, the compound challenges and potentially subverts the hegemonic order, with life appearing "to be in the next street, voices singing far off and shouts, but when the car turned the corner – again, there was nobody"[24]. That is why, as soon as they step over such an uncanny threshold, the representatives of the politically strong group seem to pale into white ghosts peering out from the 'cosy world' of their car, prophetically stumbling *in the dark*, looking awkward and fake with their props and costumes (a reminiscence of the dress, bustle and false bosom worn by the young Gordimer). In consonance with the unity-of-effect principle, this preamble might be read as a foreboding of the story's epilogue, when the troupe is left in a quandary, as though frozen in their immature state as 'amateurs in life', as callow subjects inhabiting a racially segregated country they are not able to figure out as yet.

When they finally get inside the Hall, the performers find themselves in front of a specially selected audience of schoolteachers, social workers, clerks and a young girl enrolled in college, i.e. "the educated of the rows and rows of hundreds and hundreds who lived and ate and slept and talked and loved and died in the houses outside"[25]. Therefore, miscommunication and a skewed perspective impinge on the play's project from its very premise (suffice it to say that the natives suppose they will be attending a concert). The effect is intensified when, in a small kitchen behind the stage, the actors and actresses begin to dress and paint their faces to create the illusion of a late-Victorian drawing-room comedy. When an attendant tells them not to bother with make-up because the public "won't understand the period anyway"[26], getting into character becomes harder and harder, until the ambition to 'play well' irrevocably fades as the curtain goes up:

> The curtain screeched back on its rusty rings; the stage opened on Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
> At first there was so much to *see*; the mouths of the audience parted with pleasure at the sight of the fine ladies and gentlemen dressed with such colour and variety; the women? – gasp at them; the men? – why, laugh at them, of course. But gradually the excitement of looking became acceptance, and they began to listen, and they began not to understand […]. They watched the players as a child watches a drunken man, attracted by his babbling and his staggering, but innocent of the spectacle's cause or indications. The players felt this complete attention, the appeal of a great blind eye staring up at their faces, and a change began to work in them. A kind of hysteria of effort gradually took hold of

> them, their gestures grew broader, the women threw great brilliant smiles like flowers out into the half-dark over the footlights, the men strutted and lifted their voices […] The cerebral acid of Oscar Wilde's love scenes was splurged out by the oglings and winks of musical comedy[27].

From wonder and laughter to befuddlement and forced complaisance, from the excitement of watching to the total impossibility of entering into the ultra-refined spirit and epigrammatic wit of a *fin-de-siècle* comedy of manners: this is the downward trajectory of the black spectators' reception, which ignites in turn a series of adjustments by the company. Such changes consist in countermoves which transform Wilde's 1895 masterful example of society comedy into a grotesque variety show, a broad farce where the amateurs, with the complicity of the audience, end up distorting and decontextualising a classic work of the English (and European) literary tradition. Owing to this conjoined manipulation of the original script – "'Poor Oscar!' whispered the young girl, behind her hand"[28] – bad jokes and exaggerated gestures get the better of the sophisticated mannerisms, sparkling repartees and clever innuendoes of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Instead of putting on stage a Wilde comedy, the performers literally turn *wild on stage*, as if spurred by the onlookers' feedback.

As Gordimer underscored in "That Other World That Was the World", the Wilde who teasingly courted misunderstanding, the multiplication or short circuit of points of view and the paradoxes of mask-wearing would have been amused at this flagrant breaking of the fourth wall. What we witness here is a curious kind of improvisation theatre, the materialising of a double-edged satire that dramatically cuts across the fictional domain to disclose the troupe's identity as the epitome of an enlightened, if ineffectual, coterie of South African colonials. The artistic representation is progressively (re)moulded and laid bare as in a metatheatrical game of mirrors, with the assembled audience actually laughing not at the show, but at the *real* people performing it.

Although the references to Wilde – from 19th-century dandyism and aesthetic preciousness to the rhetorical acrobatics of his style – are somehow ingrained in the autobiographical dimension of "The Amateurs", we may conjecture that, in the allegorically strengthened syntax of her story, Gordimer capitalised on a few elements connected with Wilde's poetics at large. Besides the prismatic reversals of roles and of the categories of truth and fiction, being and acting, as well as the relevance attributed to the phenomenology of reception, one could mention the ironic deconstruction of the elites' patronising attitudes and the ridiculing of naturalised conventions or prejudices masquerading as common sense. Regarding *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the critique of the pretension and hypocrisy of Victorian high society (as reified by Lady Bracknell), with its double life (exemplified by Jack Worthing/Ernest and Algernon Moncrieff/Bunbury) and its giving absolute primacy to names, parentage and an *earnest* façade, scarcely needs stressing. Moreover, in spite of its sensational turns, comedy-of-errors devices and perfectly orchestrated happy ending, it would be reductive to simply equate

Wilde's well-made play with an enticing parade of frivolity. Its darker implications have been variously foregrounded in the field of Wildean criticism, which has detected a subterranean anarchist thrust and even undertones of political radicalism. When thinking of "The Amateurs", there is little doubt that a deep concern with rigid social hierarchies, claims for recognition and seeing through imposture serve a paradigmatic function.

By the same token, notwithstanding his search for patrons and popularity in the English metropolis, one should not underestimate Wilde's republican sympathies and endorsement of a socialist creed. This allows us to come full circle to the question of charity work, which, in Gordimer's story, smacks of an empty gesture in a sociopolitical scenery where the marginalisation of non-whites is enforced by law. The goodwill of the philanthropic actors is unable to pierce the giant's armour of the establishment and self-interest and is a long way off from any truly supportive approach and substantial assistance. To all appearances, different actions and measures are necessary. Again, the Wilde reference seems to be less fortuitous than one could expect. Although no racial segregation along the lines of the South African model existed in Victorian England, it might well be argued that Dorian Gray's double life in the degraded slums, the contrast between his whitened-sepulchre face and the shameful cheating and exploitation 'bursting out' from his metamorphic portrait are not totally alien to the scandalous rich-poor gap that lurked in the heart of the Empire. More crucially, at the beginning of the novel, Dorian is said to join Lady Agatha's feeble efforts to alleviate the sufferings of the poor by holding piano concerts in Whitechapel, a missplaced benevolent initiative that Lord Henry Wotton hastens to label with his typically corrosive cynicism: "It is the problem of slavery, and we try to solve it by amusing the slaves" [29]. When talking to his surly uncle, Lord Fermor, he also asserts that "Philanthropic people lose all sense of humanity. It is their distinguishing characteristic"[30].

The thesis of 'amusing the slaves' – by offering them *circenses* without *panem*, so to speak – was corroborated by Wilde in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, an essay published in the same year as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where he bluntly asked why the oppressed should "be grateful for the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table"[31]. These longer considerations resonate powerfully with the ideological backdrop of "The Amateurs":

> The majority of people spoil their lives by an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism […] They find themselves surrounded by hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation. It is inevitable that they should be strongly moved by all this […] Accordingly, with admirable, though misdirected intentions, they very seriously and very sentimentally set themselves to the task of remedying the evils that they see. But their remedies do not cure the disease: they merely prolong it. Indeed, their remedies are part of the disease. They try to solve the problem of poverty, for instance, by keeping the poor alive; or, in the case of a very advanced school, by amusing the poor. But this is not a solution: it is an aggravation of the

> difficulty. The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible[32].

In Gordimer's text, the "admirable, though misdirected intentions" of the performers come into the limelight in parallel with the transmutation of their pochade into a form of 'truth theatre' which, after the first act, is animated by a demanding public who takes a further step ahead in matter of script manipulation. Becoming wild both *in front of* and *on* the stage are now "the others, the people from outside who hadn't been asked [and who] began to come into the hall", pushing "past the laconic police-boys at the door, coming in in twos and threes, barefoot"[33], insolent and uncaring. In another hypersignifying formulation, the narrator notices that "no one dared question their right of entry"[34]. If it were a stage direction, this would emblematically read as "Enters Reality", the manipulated script being now the Eurocentric axiology in South Africa and its painstaking attempts to hold at bay disquieting, intrusive thoughts connected with colonial ranking and subjugation.

At the end of the last act, after an inflated burst of applause, an African girl takes it upon herself to speak out for those "others", in a chilling *coup de théâtre* that, through a dexterous resort to antiphrasis and paralipsis, rips open the curtain and, with it, the 'legal embodiment' underpinning racial inequality:

> "From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you, all of us here who have had the opportunity to see you, and we hope in our hearts you will come to us again *many times*. This play tonight not only made us see what people can do, even in their spare time after work, if they *try*; it's made us feel that perhaps we could try and occupy our leisure in such a way, and learn, ourselves, and also give other people pleasure […]". The girl took three strides to the centre of the stage. "I ask you", she cried out, and the players felt her voice like a shock, "is this perhaps the answer to our juvenile delinquency here in Athalville? If our young boys and girls […] had something like this to do in the evenings, would so many of them be at the police station? Would we be afraid to walk out in the street? Would our mothers be crying over their children? […] Isn't this what we need?"[35]

For an instant, the "web of falsehood"[36], duplicity and defense mechanisms is stripped away by virtue of an epiphanic flicker immortalised through a shining tear:

> The amateurs were forgotten by themselves and each other, abandoned dolls, each was alone. No one exchanged a glance. And out in front stood the girl, her arm a sharp angle, her nostrils lifted. The splash of the footlights on her black cheek caught and made a sparkle out of a single tear[37].

In this final twist, with the "*wild* shouts of the people [falling] upon the stage"[38], the actors are cast as puppets condemned to isolation in the face of the African girl's and her community's vibrancy. The visitors to the black ghetto thus vicariously experience a turn of the tide, an overthrow of the *status quo*

whereby the amateur performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* weirdly falls within the province of the play's original subtitle, i.e. "a trivial comedy for serious people". But it is exactly within this changed perspective that one must now interact with such serious people with *earnest* commitment.

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Notes

1. Dennis Walder, "Nadine Gordimer Obituary", in *The Guardian*, 14 July 2014.

2. I have provided a detailed survey of Gordimer criticism in my *Nadine Gordimer*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2013. This book carries out an in-depth analysis of her fifteen novels, from *The Lying Days* (1953) to *No Time Like the Present* (2012), along with focalisations on her aesthetic principles, moral commitment, and South African identity.

3. Stephen Clingman, "Introduction", in Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, edited and introduced by Stephen Clingman, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1989, pp. 1-2.

4. "Nadine Gordimer: A Writer in South Africa", Interview with Alan Ross, in *London Magazine*, vol. 5, n. 2, 1965, repr. in Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour (ed.), *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, Jackson-London, UP of Mississippi, 1990, pp. 34-35.

5. "Author: Nadine Gordimer", Interview with John Barkham, in *Saturday Review*, 12 January 1963, repr. in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, p. 9. "Cocoon" is a word often used by Gordimer in this critical sense.

6. Nadine Gordimer, "Living in the Interregnum" (1982), in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, pp. 264, 276-277.

7. "Nadine Gordimer: The Solitude of a White Writer", Interview with Melvyn Bragg, in *The Listener*, 21 October 1976, repr. in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, p. 75.

8. Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1986, p. 1. Clingman further comments that "if all South African writers are to varying degrees 'engaged' with history either deliberately or by necessity, there is surely no other South African writer who has engaged with it so directly as Nadine Gordimer, and whose work has so sharply defined and attuned a 'sense of history'" (*Ibidem*, p. 7).

9. I have delved into similar aspects connected with Gordimer's short fiction in a couple of articles which focus on two of her relatively recent collections. See Laura Giovannelli, "'Hieroglyph to be decoded': Exploring Routes of Representation and Telling in Nadine Gordimer's *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories*", in Richard Samin and Mathilde Rogez (ed.), *Études Littéraires Africaines*, vol. 38, 2014, pp. 93-103, and "Glimpses in the Dark: A Contextual Overview of Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*", in *Anglistica Pisana*, vol. 15, n. 2, 2018, pp. 63-78.

10. Lionel Abrahams, "Nadine Gordimer: The Transparent Ego", in *English Studies in Africa*, vol. 3, n. 2, 1960, repr. in Rowland Smith (ed.), *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer*, Boston, G.K. Hall & Co., 1990, pp. 27-28.

11. Kevin Magarey, "Cutting the Jewel: Facets of Art in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories", *Southern Review*, vol. 7, 1974, repr. in Rowland Smith (ed.), *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer*, p. 48.

12. Nadine Gordimer, "The Flash of Fireflies", in C.E. May (ed.), *The New Short Story Theories*, Athens (OH), Ohio UP, 1994 (1968), pp. 264-265.

13. Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer*, Cambridge, CUP, 1994, pp. 161-163.

14. Vivek Santayana, "By 'the Flash of Fireflies': Multi-Focal Forms of Critique in Nadine Gordimer's Late Short Story Cycles", in *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, vol. 41, n. 2, 2019, p. 92.

15. Pascale Tollance, "'[S]he Has a Knife in [Her] Hand': Writing/Cutting in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories", in *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, vol. 41, n. 2, 2019, pp. 25-26.

16. Nadine Gordimer, “The Amateurs”, in *Life Times: Stories, 1952-2007*, London, Bloomsbury, (1949) 2010, p. 9.
17. J.M. Coetzee, “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech”, in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, David Attwell (ed.), Cambridge (MA)-London, Harvard UP, 1992 (1987), pp. 96-97.
18. *Ibidem*, pp. 98-99.
19. Nadine Gordimer, “That Other World That Was the World”, in *Writing and Being: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1994*, Cambridge (MA)-London, Harvard UP, 1995, pp. 125-126.
20. “Nadine Gordimer: Junction Avenue Theatre Company”, in Pippa Stein and Ruth Jacobson (ed.), *Sophiatown Speaks*, 1986, repr. in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, pp. 247-248.
21. “Nadine Gordimer: Interview”, by Johannes Riis/1979, in *Kunapipi*, vol. 2, n. 1, 1980, repr. in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, pp. 102-103.
22. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, in *Diacritics*, Jay Miskowiec (trns.), vol. 16, n. 1, 1986, p. 25.
23. Nadine Gordimer, “The Amateurs”, pp. 8-9.
24. *Ibidem*, p. 9.
25. *Ibidem*, p. 10.
26. *Ibidem*.
27. *Ibidem*, p. 12.
28. *Ibidem*.
29. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, edited with an introduction and notes by Robert Mighall, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2000 (1891), p. 41.
30. *Ibidem*, p. 37.
31. Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, London, Arthur L. Humpreys, 1900 (1891), p. 9.
32. *Ibidem*, pp. 2-3.
33. Nadine Gordimer, “The Amateurs”, p. 13.
34. *Ibidem*.
35. *Ibidem*, p. 14.
36. Andrew Vogel Ettin, *Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer*, Charlottesville-London, University Press of Virginia, 1993, p. 80. The following observation by Ettin perfectly hits the mark: “Gordimer’s work exposes two forms of concealment. One […] is the systemic suppression or loss of knowledge, which permits inconvenient realities to be dropped from view and histories inscribed so as to give only the desired shape to transmitted knowledge, burying the truths too politically or emotionally dangerous to be articulated. The other is the avoidance of self-examination” (*Ibidem*, pp. 100-101).
37. Nadine Gordimer, “The Amateurs”, p. 15.
38. *Ibidem*, my emphasis.