Nadine Gordimer's The Late Bourgeois World: Love in Prison

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OF Nadine Gordimer's six novels to date,[1] her fourth, *The Late Bourgeois World*,[2] is the most neglected. All have been widely reviewed and the others have been pointed out as interesting failures — generally, critics find the anatomy of failure more interesting than that of success. Criticism has focused on the short stories, on which Nadine Gordimer's reputation as a writer rests. However, *The Late Bourgeois World*, which is really a novella, has not received the attention attracted by the stories. One critic impatiently dismissed it as "a short hastily written and journalistic novel."[3] In fact, using the tight form of a short story, Nadine Gordimer has here, as in all her novels, focused on a personal tale within a general political framework.

The story is set in South Africa of the early 1960's, after the authorities had broken the backbone of the underground movement to which most activists looked for a change in the existing order. Another South African writer who dealt with this situation was Peter Abrahams, a non-white. His novel, *A Night of their Own*, published in 1965, was dedicated to the black leaders who had been thrown into jail; its optimistic message, that a glorious dawn will follow the current night, was addressed to the black masses. Nadine Gordimer has addressed her novel to the whites; supposedly free, in reality they were incarcerated in a more timeless prison than the blacks. Thus *The Late Bourgeois World*, like Albert Camus' *The Stranger* and Franz Kafka's

The Trial, makes use of the metaphor of imprisonment as its central symbol for the human condition. The white suburbs in which the story is set constitute "the white laager," as claustral as any gaol.

Obviously in a story that depends so much on irony to make its impact the management of viewpoint, the "I" of the beholder, is crucial. *The Late Bourgeois World* has been described as "a particularly embarrassing failure" because of Nadine Gordimer's mismanagement of the point-of-view problem: "Elizabeth, the woman in her thirties telling the story, has the swaggering bravado of a teenage rebel. How she could have supposedly lived through the events of her life and remained the tiresome adolescent she is, boggles the mind."[4] This is, of course, the whole point about the use of a narrator in the novel. Elizabeth's role-playing candour leads us to suspect her judgement not only on the personal but also the political subjects of the novel.

As demonstrated in her short stories and her second novel, *A World of Strangers* (1958), Nadine Gordimer invariably uses a narrator and shows events from a peculiarly obscured viewpoint in order to intrigue, not repel, the reader. She is very much aware of the possibilities of viewpoint manipulation. In her heroine, Elizabeth, she has created a character peculiarly suited to the subject matter to be viewed. "I know I'm a damned intelligent woman," Elizabeth says in one of her moments of self-congratulation. But the story demonstrates both the limits of her intelligence and the limitations of the use of intelligence in her society. Her manner of viewing illuminates not only herself and her ex-husband, Max Van Den Sandt, but also the political theme of the story. Elizabeth is very anxious to convince us that Max "wasn't the sort of person he thought he was." But we come to understand that Elizabeth herself is not the person she thinks she is; nor is political activism the madness she thinks it is. So *The Late Bourgeois World* deals, like all of Nadine Gordi-

mer's works, with the search for the self. As in all quest stories, the true identity of the searcher is crucial.

When the story opens, Elizabeth, thirty, has just received a telegram telling her of her ex-husband's suicide by drowning. Her reaction is strange, to say the least: "It was as if I had had a quarrel — but with whom? — and waiting for the right thing to be said — but by whom?" (p. 9). Of course, she and Max had quarrelled, then separated, and then divorced. "Max was dead; I felt nothing directly about the fact except that I believed it. Yet it divided the morning before I had read the telegram from the morning after I had done so, and in the severance I was cut loose" (p. 14). The freedom which Elizabeth treasures is the freedom of the loose end. She now carries on a loose relationship with Graham Mill, the forty-six year old lawyer whom she first knew during Max's trial, a relationship lacking the demands — and dangers — of marriage, or even a serious love affair: "It's made up of the bits of old ones that don't work. It's decent enough; harms nobody, not even ourselves" (p. 60). Their liberal posture is an extension of their personal inclinations to play safe: "we keep our hands clean. So far as work is concerned, at least. Neither of us makes money out of cheap labour or performs a service confined to people of a particular colour" (p. 60).

Elizabeth's "arrangement" with Graham forms a counterpoint to her life with Max. She is a woman eminently sane, who feels that she has "nothing to give," and is terribly afraid of personal relationships. On the telephone she and Graham discuss the details of Max's suicide like "cool criminals discussing a successful getaway" (p. 56). She does not know herself, and is afraid to know herself. The first quotation, from Kafka, which Nadine Gordimer used as an epigraph to the novel applies to Elizabeth: "There are possibilities for me, certainly; but under what stone do they lie?" The question is "how to be," how best to realize the self within limitations imposed by society.

Elizabeth seems incapable of only casual attachments. It is notable that in recounting her own life she never goes further back than the summer when, aged seventeen, she first met Max. Helping out, for Christmas, in her father's shop, she was disgusted to see worthless articles palmed off on the blacks.

> The shoddy was my sickening secret. And then I found that Max knew all about it; that the house he lived in, and what went on there, his surroundings, though richer and less obviously unattractive, were part of it, too, and that this quality of life was apparently what our fathers and grandfathers had fought two wars abroad and killed black men in "native" wars of conquest here at home, to secure for us. Truth and beauty—good God, that's what I thought he would find, that's what I expected of Max. (pp. 102-3)

Elizabeth had found Max an ally in her rebellion against her parents' world, and was less concerned about loving him. The two youths met in making love to each other; but that was the closest they came in establishing a meaningful personal relationship:

> I don't know whether Max loved me. He wanted to make love with me, of course. And he wanted to please me—no, he wanted my approval, my admiration for whatever he did. These pass as definitions of love; I can think of others that are neither more nor less acceptable. This business of living for each other, that one hears about; it can just as well be living for the sight of one's self in the other's eyes. Something keeps two people together; that's as far as I'd go. "Love" was the name I was given for it, but I don't know that it always fits my experience. . . . . I wanted to make love to Max, and I wanted to give him the approval he wanted, I wanted to please him. But it wasn't a matter of watching your husband rising a notch in the salary scale. What I wanted was for him *to do the right things so that I could love him.* Was that love? (pp. 81-2)

In the beginning, whatever reservation Elizabeth had about the absence of genuine affections in her relationship with Max was suppressed by the attraction of his family wealth, and her yearning to escape from the imprisonment of her parental home. "The concept of marriage as shelter remained with me, even if it were only to be shelter from parents and their ways. There, whatever the walls were made of, I should live a woman's life" (p. 59). This is

why she skips so lightly over what passed for love between her and Max and over the moment of self-forgetfulness which led to her becoming pregnant, and contracting a shotgun marriage. Instead of being merely a reluctant camp-follower who increasingly had to wear the pants in the family,[5] Elizabeth was Max's parody. And as is usual with parodies she had the advantage of understanding the psychology of her victim (and her model) and of using the very tactics he had used on his enemies. Both her pride in her intelligence and her instinct to play safe had been undermined by the momentary lack of caution which saddled her with marriage to a zealous rebel like Max. She imitates all of Max's beliefs. This is why she dwells upon, with great ardour, indeed celebrates, her sense of outrage, as in her venomous attack on Max's mother when the two women meet when he is being tried for having planted a bomb.

> I was excited with hatred of her self-pity, the very smell of her stank in my nostrils. Oh we bathed and perfumed and depilated white ladies, in whose wombs the sanctity of the white race is entombed! What concoction of musk and boiled petals can disguise the dirt done in the name of that sanctity? Max took that dirt upon himself, tarred and feathered himself with it, and she complained of her martyred respectability. I wanted to wound her; could nothing wound her? (p. 38)

There is something fraudulent in all of Elizabeth's public displays of outrage. She is a pseudo-liberal who, in her self-consciousness, speaks out of a pseudo-humility that in its perverse arrogance is more intolerable than the original arrogance which led Max to his rebellion. Elizabeth condemns herself in order to condemn her society; the monologues she addresses to her society enable her to turn the tables on her white countrymen because in voicing this personal sense of injury she is demonstrating that she is more aware of justice than her society can be. For example on seeing white women going about their routine activities, in apparent indifference to Max's life and death, her outrage explodes again:

> They were gathering together their weekend purchases all round me, the good citizens who never had any doubt about where their allegiance lay. The steady winter sun, so bone-warming, so reassuringly benign (perhaps we can't help feeling that if we have the best climate in the world we must deserve it?) shone on the shapes of bottles of wine and whisky, the prawns and cakes and bunches of flowers, plain evidence of the superior living standards of white civilization, that they were taking home. I saw them give their children pennies to drop into the S.P.C.A. collection box and the hat of the black beggar. Home-made bombs have not shaken the ground under their feet, nor have the riots, the marches, the shootings of a few years back, though like all decent people, they deplore the inhumanity of violence, and, reserving the right of constitutional action to themselves alone, commend it to others as the only decent way to achieve change—should one want such a thing.
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> I too have my package of pork fillets and my chair in the sun; you would not know me from the others. We are all still alive and the cars are crawling impatiently one behind the other. Whereas Max is in the sea, in the soup, at the bottom of the sea; poor madman: I suppose it will be possible to say that, now, as it has been satisfactorily possible to say, in the end, of many who have proved awkward, including the one who didn't know that a Prime Minister with a divine mission might need a silver bullet. Only madmen do such things. But can any white man who wants change really be all there? It's a comforting thought. (pp. 42-3)

Unlike Max, the conscientious moral saviour, Elizabeth is an inconsistent rebel who yearns to return to her prosaic past. "I was brought up," she reminisces wistfully, "to live among women, as middle-class women with their shopping and social and household concerns comfortably do, but I have to live among men. Most of what there was to learn from my family and background has turned out hopelessly obsolete, for me" (p. 59). Her partial devotion to conformism makes suspect her fiery zeal for rebellion; her seeking refuge in liberal outrage instead of revolting in the face of the absurd predicament in her society is disguised as sanity. Her self-abnegation is her weapon to hate her society, to force that society to hate itself, and to condemn it for possessing less awareness than she of its depravity. Although she has vicariously experienced Max's stage of rebellion, his dogged and destructive rebellion is higher than her outrage. Indeed, according to the second

quotation, from Maxim Gorky, which Nadine Gordimer used as epigraph to the story, "The madness of the brave is the wisdom of life."

It is not surprising that Elizabeth, so mistaken about herself, was unable to comprehend what sort of person Max really was, or the true nature of his rebellion. To her, his suicide is merely another aspect of his life-long yearning for self-recognition, and she turns cold with anger in "the feeling that he was looking over the shoulder of his death to see . . . if I were looking" (p. 13). But what to Elizabeth is a mere gesture is at the deepest level a manifestation of Max's life-long rebellion against an existence that had denied him love and human communion. From the details supplied by Elizabeth about his upbringing, we can see that Max grew up in an atmosphere hardly conducive to the warmth of personal relations. Rather, it forced persons to be reduced to things. So Max grew up feeling the need to seek a new and unprecedented acceptance by others. Without exception he failed.

Max grew up in a home where private feelings had been refined almost out of existence: "the Van Den Sandts interpret honour as something that exists in the eyes of others; you can do each other to death, in private; shame or pain come only from what leaks out" (p. 44). While they schemed at their incessant parties in their country estate on the veld to keep the best of everything in the land for themselves, their children were kept outside the usual "thicket of babble," eating and drinking in their own silence. "Max had grown up in that silence; the babble was perhaps what he heard in the distant conversation of the ducks, when he approached the farm alone over the veld" (p. 36).

Max hit out at the wall of his prison home, first by rejecting the privileged world of the whites — he refused to join the country club, or play an active part in the youth wing of the United Party — and, more positively, by seeking to enter the world of the under-privileged, "men who,

while they worked as white man's drivers and cleaners and factory hands, had formulated their own views of their destiny and had their own ideas of setting about to achieve it" (p. 39). But his intention of finding a new home was frustrated by his parents, who used their privileged position to cushion him from the consequences of his action; "but of course they didn't do it for Max, they did it for themselves." They didn't want to face the public embarrassment of having their son in prison for defiance of the colour-bar laws. "If Max wouldn't act as a white man for white men, the Van Den Sandts wouldn't let him act at all" (p. 42).

Nor could Max count on his wife for support. After marriage he left the university and drifted from job to job, and from one activist group to another, determined to sacrifice himself, to get away as far as possible from his family background. But Elizabeth balked him by refusing to take the demeaning jobs which Max urged in his gesture of defiance. Instead, she desperately wanted him to go back to the university full-time and finish his course. "I deprived Max of an opportunity of reaching an ultimate in his distance from them, and a gratification of his longing to come close to other people in a bond of necessity. I was aware of that longing, but I didn't always understand when I failed to further its fulfilment" (p. 68). In a final ironical twist, Max's movement from one activist organization to another, in his persistent desire to get away from his origins and move closer to the Africans, only progressively isolated him from everyone; for the politically active blacks had decided to keep out of white houses and to reject friendship and even intimacy with whites as part of white privilege. Set aside with whites, even his own chosen kind, he was still left out, he experienced the isolation of his childhood become the isolation of his colour" (p. 81). Soon his total political commitment destroyed his private life.

It is within this context that we must view what Elizabeth saw as Max's insatiable need to be acknowledged. The several women in his life — Felicity, Roberta, Eve and the others — offered a promise which they never fulfilled. "If I'd only known," Elizabeth wistfully recalls, "it didn't matter how many women Max had, it didn't make any difference. Whether or not he could really love a woman, me or any other woman, was not what was vital to him" (pp. 88-9). What Max was looking for was a unique relationship with women, one that could humanize him; but he was continually forced to recognize that he could never move beyond political commitment in his relationship with them. As in Sartre, sexual relations dehumanize, and hinder rather than promote any true union of persons. Max's relationship with women never moved beyond the limited and life-denying sort he had with Elizabeth at the beginning. That is why he kept coming back to her, even after they were separated, culminating in that telephone call at eleven o'clock at night, to warn her: "Liz? That you Liz? When the papers come out — d'you get the morning paper? There may be something big . . . Don't forget." Ironically, this is Max's only secret which Elizabeth still hugs to herself: "Nobody knows this. Nobody at all. I didn't even tell the lawyers. I have never told Graham. It's all that's left of Max and me; all there is still between us" (p. 91).

Max's bomb, placed at the post office, was found before it exploded, and he was arrested within twenty-four hours, subsequently tried and jailed for five years. His incarceration is the ultimate symbol of the futility of communion in his dehumanized society. Finally forced to recognize his failure to make any truly human contact, he moved from rebellion to resignation. He turned State witness after serving fifteen months. By betraying his comrades he finally created for himself a burden of guilt which undermined his right to find a new human relation and a new heroism, besides leaving his society still absurd but

finally triumphant, to be accepted as practically indestructible. Max became a pathetic individual with his ethical claims reduced to mere personal pretensions, even presumptions. But in his private arrogance, he still refused to submit to the society he could not accept. The consequence of his spiritual pride is his suicide. And although Elizabeth cannot approve of his all-too-human failings, including the manner of his death, she cannot also condemn him, because of her contempt for the alternatives to Max.

> He is dead now. He didn't die for them—the people, but perhaps he did more than that. In his attempts to love he lost his self-respect, in betrayal. He risked everything for them and lost everything. He gave his life in every way there is; and going down to the bed of the sea is the last. (p. 93)

Max, Elizabeth grudgingly admits to herself, "had succeeded in dying." But she does not fully understand the significance of his manner of dying. "I wept not for Max's death but for the pain and terror of the physical facts of it . . . . I believe I know all there is to know about Max. To know all may be to forgive, but it is not to love. You can know too much for love" (pp. 64-5). Suicide is Max's last gesture towards his community, evidence of his impossible but unquenchable hopes for communion with society. It is his final, almost self-mocking rebellion. Humanity had not stretched forward to him but Max had stretched forward to embrace his fate, one which allowed him to transcend his isolation. He is very much like Uliva in Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine*, who in spite of his disillusion with the prospect of changing society through political institutions, refuses to remain a victim of an inexorable fate, powerless to fight it, but reconciles himself to his fate by resorting to terrorism, assassination and suicide:

> I am not afraid of life, but I am still less afraid of death. Against a life which is dominated by pitiless laws the only weapon left to man's free will is non-life, the destruction of life, death, beautiful death . . . Life can control man, but man can control death—his own death, and, with a little wariness, the death of tyrants.[6]

There is, indeed, something both true to character and heroic about Max's choice of drowning. Elizabeth had asked him once — "long ago, at the beginning" — what one should do if somebody one loved died, how did one know how to go on. She has always remembered his answer: "Well, after even only a few hours, you get thirsty, and you want again — you want a drink of water . . ." (p. 132). Explaining the circumstances of his father's death to Bobo, Elizabeth says: "He must have driven his car into the sea. He was never afraid of the sea; he was at home in it" (p. 23).

Indeed, it is the necessity of telling their young son of his father's death that first forces Elizabeth to confront the enigma of Max's life and death. As she drives to the boarding school on a sunny winter morning, she passes through the veld where she and Max had grown up. This has the effect of throwing her back on herself:

> It was all exactly as it had been. When I was a child. When Max was a child. It was the morning I had woken up to, gone out into again and again; the very morning. I felt the sun on my eyelids as I drove. How was it possible that it could be still there, just the same, the sun, the pale grass, the bright air, the feeling of it as it was when we had no inkling of what already existed within it. After all that had happened to us, how could this morning, in which nothing had yet happened, still exist? Time is change; we measure its passing by how much things alter. Within this particular latitude of space, which is timeless, one meridian of the sun identical with another, we changed our evil innocence for what was coming to us; if I had gone to live somewhere else in the world I should never have known that this particular morning—phenomenon of geographical position, yearly rainfall, atmospheric pressures—continues, will always continue, to exist.
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> Max grew up looking on the veld, here. (pp. 11-12)

The open veld, changeless and featureless, is the prison yard, as much as the white suburbs. In rebelling against this masked prison, Max is rebelling against those who live in it, those who wear the mask. "There is a whole world outside this," he reminds guests at his sister's wedding. "Shut out. Kept out. Shutting this in" (p. 48). Max had spent all his life trying to tear down the walls of

this prison, once he discovered what existed within it. Although its survival, indeed its indifference to his passing, seems a mockery of all he dared, Max's belief that the whites are all prisoners who must strike through the wall has rubbed off on Elizabeth, as is manifested in her concern that Bobo should break out of this claustral environment: "I can only try to see to it that he looks for his kind of security elsewhere than in the white suburbs" (p. 16). Of Bobo's school Elizabeth muses: "how like a prison it was!" (p. 18), in spite of its being well-laid-out in the veld. "The sight of the school produces a subdued and cowed mood in me; I go on mental tiptoe from the moment I enter that gateway" (p. 18). Not surprisingly she lays out plenty of gifts before the boy whenever she visits. "I know that it is my way of trying to make up for sending him to that place — the school" (p. 15).

Elizabeth could not have forgotten Max's dream when Bobo was conceived — of seeing the world in reality through his child: "I'd like to have a child of my own. I'd like to have a child following me round, there's nothing doggy about children. A child shouts 'Look!' all the time and you see real things, colours of stones, and bits of wood" (pp. 16-17). So, when Bobo blurts out, "I feel sorry I didn't love him," Elizabeth, guiltily, moves for the first time to defend Max's memory:

> I said "There may be talk among the boys—but you know he went after the right things, even if perhaps it was in the wrong way. The things he tried didn't come off but at least he didn't just eat and sleep and pat himself on the back. He wasn't content to leave bad things the way they are. If he failed, well, that's better than making no attempt. Some boys' "—I was going to say "fathers" but I didn't want him to go attacking all the scions of stock-broking houses—"some men live successfully in the world as it is, but they don't have the courage even to fail at trying to change it." (p. 26)

Max, Elizabeth is beginning to realise, is dignified by his all-too-human failings. "He may have been just the sort of hero we should expect" (p. 28). But she refuses

to discuss with the boy intimations of mortality. Because all his life Bobo has been made aware of the necessity to recognize and alleviate suffering — "it's the one thing he's been presented with as being beyond questioning" — he is anxious to know that his father had not suffered too much pain before he died. Although she realizes that what the boy is really asking about is "the unknown territory of adult life where one would choose to die," Elizabeth refuses to deal with this.

When in the afternoon she visits her grandmother in an old people's home, Elizabeth is assailed once again by the fear of death. As in her earlier visit to Bobo (of whom the old woman had been very fond, and to whom whatever money she has left will go) Elizabeth does not have to show any emotions, partly because the senile woman loves only plastics — artificial flowers, "simulated" silk, synthetic marble, fake leather. "There was no sense of the day or week" inside her room. "No seasons, either. Spring or winter, it feels the same" (p. 95). Elizabeth allows her to remain imprisoned in her time-capsule: "She forgets that I was divorced from Max and if I were to tell her he is dead, she would forget that, too. In her room with the signed photographs of famous artists on the walls (she has her own things around her) it always seems that nothing has happened. Or that everything has already happened" (p. 98). She doesn't want to know of the only thing left to happen to her — death. "She asks now only the questions that are never answered. I can't tell her, you are going to die, that's all. She's had all the things that have been devised to soften life but there doesn't seem to have been anything done to make death more bearable" (p. 105).

Elizabeth, without mentioning Max at all on this visit, has had to deal with his manner of dying. When she reaches home, the question she puts to Graham, who comes visiting, is: How does an old woman who has never had to put up with what is natural accept death? Graham,

who as a lawyer despises emotions and does his work without sloganizing, replies stoically: "It's natural to be afraid of death" (p. 116). Even at eighty-seven Elizabeth's grandmother, who "has very little interest in natural things" (p. 99), is afraid of death, the terror which Max conquered by his suicide. All her life, the old woman has refused to put up with what is natural. "Neither grey hairs nor cold weather. It's true — until two or three years ago, when she became senile, she hadn't lived through a winter in fifteen years — she flew from winter in England to the summer here, and from winter to summer in England"(p. 117). But from the coming terror of death there is no escape. So, when in discussing this question of life in her "undergraduate chart" with Graham he slips in the question, "How would you say things are with us?" both of them understand that the reference is not to "all that we competently avoided, a question about him and me," but to their age:

> I said, "Graham, what on earth do you think they'll call it in history?" and he said, "I've just read a book that refers to ours as the Late Bourgeois World. How does that appeal to you?"
> I laughed. It went over my skin like wind over water; that feeling you get from a certain combination of words, sometimes. "It's got a nice dying fall. But that's a political definition, they're no good."
> "Yes, but the writer—he's an East German—uses it as a wider one—it covers the arts, religious beliefs, technology, scientific discoveries, love-making, everything." (p. 114)

Graham, of course, does not have the answer to the question of life that lies deep in Elizabeth's consciousness, just as the American space endeavour which has pushed the story of Max's suicide from the front pages of the newspapers fails to sweep him from Elizabeth's mind. Like Max the rebel, the astronaut who walked in space, "a dim foetal creature attached by a sort of umbilical cord to a dim vehicle" (p. 107), represents man's free nature. Several times he was ordered to return to the space craft, but he seemed to be enjoying himself out there, "horsing around" until he was tersely ordered back into the capsule from

the ground. The astronaut has carried his prison with him into another environment — like Max, who went down into another element in his car, carrying his boxful of revolutionary papers with him.

The full meaning of what Max and the American astronaut have attempted, in their different ways, does not come to Elizabeth until she receives another visitor, this time a black activist, Luke Fokase. He had telephoned Elizabeth in her laboratory on Thursday. But she keeps us guessing about who is coming to dinner until shortly before Luke appears. In fact she hurries Graham out of her house to enable her to receive Luke. Luke Fokase is a reminder of the old days:

> I don't know why I asked him again. I rather wish he'd leave me off his visiting list, leave me alone. But I miss their black faces. I forget about the shambles of the back-yard house, the disappointments and the misunderstandings, and there are only the good times, when William Xaba and the others sat around all day Sunday under the apricot tree, and Spears came and talked to me while I cooked for us all. It comes back to me like a taste I haven't come across since, and everything in my present life is momentar-
> yet I know that it was all no good; like every other luxury,
> ily automatous, as if I've woken up in a strange place. And friendship for its own sake is something only whites can afford. I ought to stick to my microscope and my lawyer and consider myself lucky I hadn't the guts to risk ending up the way Max did. (pp. 118-9)

Elizabeth, by inviting Luke to visit her, unwittingly demonstrates that the old Eve is still alive in her. At dinner she impulsively informs her visitor of Max's death. "I hadn't thought about mentioning anything to this visitor; the day was over, it had no connection with the visit; the visit had no connection with anything else in my life" (p. 132). But Luke prevents this from being another loose connection by slipping in a request for someone whose account the underground could use to bring in money from abroad to support families of underground members in trouble. Elizabeth immediately feels trapped: "So that was it. I was caught out; like that game we used to play as children, when the one who was 'he' would drop a

handkerchief behind your back and you would suddenly find yourself 'on'; it doesn't matter how alert you think you're being, you still get the handkerchief served on you" (p. 144). In spite of her protestations, Luke gives her more details, and Elizabeth admits to herself that a way out may be found in her grandmother's account.

Luke is Elizabeth's secret sharer, able to pierce her armour by seeming to divine that spot of weakness known only to her. "I had the feeling that he had somehow known all along, all evening, that there was a possibility, some hidden factor, that he would get me to admit to myself" (p. 147). They talk at length, as if the "someone" she is to approach were already found, and Luke disappears into the night, after promising to return in three or four days, leaving Elizabeth feeling physically incarcerated:

> At this time of night, all the objects in the room lie around me like papers the wind has blown flat in an empty lot. I stand about; but where can I go, to whom? This is the place I have hollowed out for myself. Only the flowers, that are opening their buds in water and will be dead by Monday, breathe in the room. I put my face in among them, ether-cool snowdrops; but it is a half-theatrical gesture.
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> I even thought I might go out for a while, go down to one of the Hillbrow clubs where people I know are likely to be on a Saturday night. I do that, sometimes, when Graham has gone home. I put on a coat and some lipstick and go to one of those noisy dark places he's never seen the inside of. He talks about "the white laager" but this is really it. (p. 150)

Elizabeth must break down the walls of her own prison, work out her destiny by herself, for herself. Although she realizes that it would be best to consult Graham about how to handle Luke's request with minimum risk — he helped her obtain a passport after she had been refused one for years — Elizabeth understands she can no longer operate by her rational faculties; so she is going to keep quiet. "This is one thing you could never ask Graham; this is the end of asking Graham . . . Graham has defined the safe limits of what one can get away with — 'a woman in your position' " (p. 158). With her eyes wide

open, she decides to take the plunge. "There is certain to be some clause one'll fall foul of, some provision one can't fulfil" (p. 158). Elizabeth is not fooled by "the fatally easy assurance" given by Luke; but she understands that without love no one will ever do anything in the world.

Love, Elizabeth discovers, is the answer to the question that had been tormenting her, in different forms, since she heard of Max's death. It was the ingredient absent from the privileged world in which Max grew up; it was what he had gone in search of in the world of political activism, and finally in his suicidal plunge. In her reflection on the American space endeavour Elizabeth gains insight into Max's life-long rebellion. "You can go down after love or up after the moon" (p. 154). The astronauts above and Max down below attempt to transcend "our terrestrial and finite being . . . . Together they represent, in the only conception we're capable of forming of it, infinity. Nightly, lilac infinity" (p. 155). Elizabeth's sarcastic comment to Luke about the motivation for Max's suicide contains more truth than she had realized at the time: "There are people who kill themselves because they can't bear not to live for ever . . . . I mean, they can't put up with the limitations of the time they're alive in. Saints and martyrs are the same sort" (p. 135). Indeed, without the religion called love, who will dare anything? By agreeing to aid the underground movement, she herself will only be giving expression to the deepest form of love. "Everything is impossible, if one calculates on the safe side" (p. 159). Anything can be dared, if one is motivated by love.

> Why on earth should I do such a thing?
> It seems to me that the answer is simply the bank account. I can't explain; but there is the bank account. That's good enough; as when Bobo used to answer a question about his behaviour with the single word: "Because". Am I going into politics again, then? And if so, what kind? But I can't be bothered with this sort of thing, it's irrelevant. The bank account is there. It can probably be used for this purpose. What happened, the old lady asked me: well, that's what's happened. Luke knows what he wants, and he knows who it is he must get it from. Of course he's

> right. A sympathetic white woman hasn't got anything to offer him — except the footing she keeps in the good old white Reserve of banks and privileges. And in return he comes with the smell of the smoke of braziers in his clothes. Oh yes, and it's quite possible he'll make love to me, next time or some time. That's part of the bargain. It's honest, too, like his vanity, his lies, the loans he doesn't pay back; it's all he's got to offer me. It would be better if I accepted gratefully, because then we shan't owe each other anything, each will have given what he has, and neither is to blame if one has more to give than the other. And in any case, perhaps I want it. I don't know. Perhaps it would be better than what I've had—or got. Suit me better, now. Who's to say it shouldn't be called love? You can't do more than give what you have. (pp. 159-60)

By risking her own safety and security in helping Luke, Elizabeth would enlarge her world and her participation in it. She would break the wall of the prison in which all white South Africans live, although paradoxically she thereby risks imprisonment by the authorities. Nadine Gordimer's point is that those who really desired to live in South Africa of the 1960's had to be prepared to exchange one prison for another. It is a choice of drownings. The final awareness that Elizabeth gains, in the closing words of the novel, is that she can only enlarge the circle of her imprisonment:

> It's so quiet I could almost believe I can hear the stars in their courses—a vibrant, infinitely high-pitched hum, what used to be referred to as "the music of the spheres". Probably it's the passage of the Americans, up there, making their own search, going round in the biggest circle of them all.
>
> I've been lying awake a long time, now. There is no clock in the room since the red travelling clock that Bobo gave me went out of order, but the slow, even beats of my heart repeat to me, like a clock; afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive . . . . (p. 160)

Finally Elizabeth understands that the struggle to be free is in itself a kind of freedom; that within her cloying society only rebellion provides an avenue for human beings to reach forward to one another. The inhumane way of the South African society dooms man; in spite of all his stretching forward he will never enfold another to himself.

As long as the oppression of the blacks remains, no white man can ever be free, for society taints everyone with no possibility of exemption. From birth, everyone is thrust into an absurd world that he must struggle to straighten out before he can begin the leisure of living. And if the nature of one's society precludes the chance of anything ever being settled, then the struggle is a desperate and ill-fated one but cannot be abandoned on that account; for one is not free to abandon it. In *The Late Bourgeois World* imprisonment is used as a metaphor to reflect the nature of existence as much as the claustral life of South Africa. "Every man is a madman," says a character in Andre Malraux's *Man's Fate*, a novel which also examines the relation between rebellion and the realisation of self, "but what is human destiny if not a life effort to unite this madman and the universe?"[7]

NOTES

[1]*The Lying Days*, 1953; *A World of Strangers*, 1958; *Occasion for Loving*, 1960; *The Late Bourgeois World*, 1966 (all published by Gollancz); *A Guest of Honour*, 1971; and *The Conservationist*, 1974 (both published by Cape.)

[2]All page references in this essay are to *The Late Bourgeois World* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1966).

[3]Robert F. Haugh, *Nadine Gordimer* (New York: Twayne, 1974), p. 143.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 136.

[5]*Atlantic Monthly*, No. 218 (August, 1966), 116.

[6]Ignazio Silone, *Bread and Wine*, trans. Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937), p. 177.

[7]Andre Malraux, *Man's Fate*, trans. Haako M. Chevalier (New York: Random House, Inc., 1934), p. 357.