

Making the "Revolutionary Gesture":
Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee and Some
Variations on the Writer's Responsibility

KELLY HEWSON

THE OLD ISSUE CONCERNING the nature of the writer's responsibility, taken up most famously by Jean-Paul Sartre in *What is Literature?* and more recently by Roland Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero*, has been re-opened with a new urgency in this decade, and the questions that arise from it are questions that agitate a number of contemporary writers. Nadine Gordimer is one such writer.

In "The Essential Gesture," an essay she titles with a phrase from Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero*, Gordimer undertakes to answer the question of the writer's responsibility as it pertains to her historical situation.¹ Understanding along with Barthes that a writer's choice always faces in two directions — toward society and toward the literature — Gordimer wrestles with the problem of how to reconcile those demands from without to be socially responsible with those demands from within concerning artistic integrity.² She makes it clear that the problem is a particularly complicated one when the society one is writing in is South Africa.³

For living in South Africa, as Gordimer describes it in another essay, is "living in the interregnum" — in "the space between two social orders and two identities, the one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined."⁴ In this precarious situation, the question of the writer's responsibility becomes even more vexing. For how, as a writer, does one put oneself into a meaningful relationship with a society that is not yet born? Clearly, in the interregnum that characterizes South Africa, there arise, both

from without and within, different sets of demands for black and for white writers.

Because the future holds "different things for different colours," the result, according to Gordimer, is that black writers find themselves "in history" ("Interregnum" 26). (I presume by this that Gordimer means they find themselves in the *emergent* history.) Abruptly situated in Sartre's sense, they find the values of their historical situation more urgent than the "transcendent" values of art (26). Their "soon-to-be-born" society demands this of them as writers; thus, says Gordimer, black South African writers come closest to reconciling the outer and inner demands. Because, as they are writing, they are also being politically active. They are teaching, organizing and proselytizing ("The Essential Gesture" 141). They can put themselves into a meaningful relationship with the black predicated society by being "only" writers.

Gordimer is *not* saying that all black writers in South Africa have accepted the demand from without (which she calls "responsibility as orthodoxy") as the only way to make their essential gesture as social beings. Many have begun — and she cites Mphahlele's *Africa my Song*, Essop's *The Emperor* and Ndebele's *Fools* as recent examples — "to negotiate the right to their own interpretation of the essential gesture by which they are part of the black struggle" (144).

It is a different matter for white writers in South Africa who, to use Gordimer's phrase, find themselves "out of history." Nevertheless, she insists that they too must struggle, but *in their own way*, to attempt the same position black artists aim for:

to be seen as relevant by, and become committed to, commonly understood, commonly created cultural entities corresponding to a common reality — which is to say, an indigenous culture.⁵

Gordimer does not presume to know how white writers will find a place for themselves in the new history. But she does know that whatever the choice, to be "more than a writer" or "only" a writer, the essential gesture in South Africa is a "revolutionary" one ("The Essential Gesture" 147). To help us understand one of the ways in which a writer can make her essential gesture, some of the issues raised in Gordimer's *The Conservationist* and *Burg-*

er's Daughter will be discussed. This discussion will prove particularly revealing when the issues raised in it are contrasted with those raised in J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*.

Both Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee are white South Africans — the former is of European descent, the latter, of Afrikaans — and both are novelists with large audiences in Europe and North America.⁶ Consequently, it is common for them to be compared by critics, if only to be contrasted.⁷ Typically, Gordimer and Coetzee are linked in critics' minds by their colour and the coincidence of their geographic location; they are often evaluated in terms of who makes the more "essential" gesture.

Gordimer herself entered the debate with a review of Coetzee's novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*.⁸ It is a difficult review to assess because of its ambivalence; however, amidst claims for the novel's greatness, Gordimer raises several questions concerning certain aspects of the novel and one striking criticism. She maintains that in the novel "the organicism that Lukács defines as the integral relation between private and social destiny is distorted more than is allowed for by the subjectivity that is in every writer" (6). Clearly it is Lukács's theory of critical realism she is appealing to here, the mode she favours for political expression.

For Lukács, "great realism" must make clear the "organic connection between people as private individuals and people as members of a community." Measured this way, literature determined either by "pure introspection" or "a naturalistic levelling-down" would be distorting (8). The aim of the critical realist, on the other hand, is to reveal that "everything is politics":

... every action, thought and emotion of human beings is inseparably bound up with the struggles of the community, i.e., with politics; whether the humans themselves are conscious of this, unconscious of it or even trying to escape from it, objectively their actions, thoughts and emotions nevertheless spring from and run into politics. (9)

Thus, the tension and much of the irony in Gordimer's *The Conservationist*, for example, derived from the battle between Mehring's inability to come to terms with himself and the circumstances which he inherited, and the power of those circumstances

to determine his character and his fate. Part of Gordimer's project in that novel was to reveal, despite Mehring's reluctance to recognize it, the persuasiveness of Lukács's credo.

The central criterion of Lukácsian realism is "the type": "a peculiar synthesis which binds together the general and the particular both in characters and in situations" (6). It is not its *average* quality that makes it a type but the fact that in it

all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development, in the ultimate unfolding of the possibilities latent in them, in extreme presentations of their extremes, rendering concrete the peaks and limits of men and epochs. (6)

So, in *The Conservationist* again, Gordimer presented us in the figure of her protagonist with a certain "type," a type that some critics have identified as "a representative white South African." But Gordimer, as if in acknowledgement of Lukács's recommendations, is much more particular in her characterization than that. Mehring is not from South Africa, but from Namibia, a country which is illegally occupied by South Africa. He is a wealthy white capitalist who deals in pig-iron. Because of his business concerns he travels widely and has substantial international contacts. He is revealed to have an interest in "conservation" and clearly wants a connection with the land. However, while the latter were seen to be *potentially* good qualities, Gordimer points out the *limits* of such qualities, given Mehring's situation.

Two more characteristics of "great realism" are identified by Lukács: one, that the writer take as her starting point the problems of community in order that she identify "humanly and artistically with some popular movement" (12); two, that she "ruthlessly scrutinize" her own world picture (11).

Clearly Gordimer identifies as a citizen and as a writer with "some popular movement" — the struggle against apartheid — and at the same time is critical of her own world picture: the weaknesses as well as the strengths of characters who represent her side in the struggle are uncovered in her novels.¹⁰ But it is her dogged insistence on the interconnectedness of the public and private spheres that ranks Gordimer among the great realists. For unlike some political novelists, who reveal "everything is politics"

to the extent that the private life becomes defunct or irrelevant, Gordimer understands that the private life and its virtues count but that they must exist in an enriching relationship with the public life if they are to achieve full significance. This is the lesson Mehring was to have learned in *The Conservationist*. The obverse but equally important lesson is the central question of *Burger's Daughter*, and that is: what is the meaning of any kind of commitment if there is no self to commit? Gordimer is as interested in individuals and their relationships as she is in the society that surrounds them, and it is for this reason that Robert Boyers hails *Burger's Daughter* as one of the finest political novels.¹¹ Gordimer has, writes Boyers,

reconceived the very idea of private experience and created a form that can accommodate microscopic details of individual behaviour and sentiment without suggesting for a moment that individuals are cut off from the collective consciousness and political situations characteristic of their societies. (122)

In his discussion of *Burger's Daughter*, Boyers mentions *The Conservationist* as a point of contrast.¹² Not that it isn't an accomplished novel, but that it isn't a strictly political novel. According to Boyers, *The Conservationist* is *not* a political novel because there is no single political idea foregrounded in it. Political implications are everywhere, he concludes, but they remain "in the background," "a climate"; nothing with a specific shape emerges to be addressed (123).

But the reason for this, as Gordimer skilfully implies, is that the novel's protagonist resists addressing political ideas (which are indeed everywhere in the novel) in any effective way. A "self-made" man, pig-iron industrialist and weekend farmer, Mehring fails to think of himself in specific historical terms. He believes the private sphere is his to shape and dominate, and that it can offer a refuge from the public world. But the shortcomings of such a consciousness are carefully uncovered: the more Mehring resists the world he thinks he is beyond, the more isolated and tortured he becomes. One of the messages of the novel seems to be that to exist in defiance of the public realm is not only to exist in indifference and alienation but is to ensure self-destruction.

Mehring participates in imaginary debates with his opponents, his son Terry, and his ex-lover Antonia, in which he reveals his own position as well as an understanding of theirs, but unfortunately these "debates" are one-sided; they take place in his head; their outcome is predictable:

He has them up, arraigned, before him and they have no answer.
 . . . He feels inside himself the relief and overflow of having presented the unanswerable facts. (80)

It follows, then, that Mehring fails to acknowledge the public realm in his conscious mind. Yet its influence works on his subconscious: fragments from it continually surface in his thoughts. The newspaper he is carrying when he falls asleep in the pasture, for instance, is an uncomfortable reminder of the world outside, throwing its troubling facts up to him: atrocities in Cambodia, no maize crop in the Transkei (46). Whether he is conscious of it or not, it seems that everything *is* politics.

But the phrase that recurs most persistently in Mehring's thoughts is the apocalyptic one, "soon there will be nothing left." It seems that he believes there is nothing to be done, that cyclical history will dispense the appropriate punishment at the appropriate time and soon "it must be our turn to starve and suffer" (46-47). This is how Mehring justifies his passive role. In the face of the inevitable cataclysm, as he understands it, comes his interest in conservation, his heightened awareness of the preciousness of nature and his desire for a rural sanctuary. But Gordimer's unspoken point is this: in South Africa, there can be no sanctuary. Politics is not just a climate one can seek shelter from if it is intemperate. In South Africa, "politics is fate."¹⁸

What Mehring fails to realize is that there is no easy way out of his social history. It has to be faced and lived through, responsibly and with awareness. An ecological politics, a politics that concerns itself with preservation and nature, is simply not adequate for meeting the needs of his time and place. It is an escapist politics: Mehring uses his love of the land to screen out the desperate problems of his country.

In an essay titled "The Screen and *The Spike*," John Berger defines the phenomenon of "screening" as a way of looking at the

world that prevents seeing.¹⁴ His term is an appropriate one to use in conjunction with Mehring for it is clear that there is a screen that comes between him and reality, and that replaces reality.

As the screen isolates one from experience, it prolongs and makes absolute the state of inexperience, the state, as Berger puts it, "of never accepting what is" (259). (This state, he cautions, is not to be confused with innocence or naïveté, but is often accompanied by ruthlessness or sophistication.) This is precisely Mehring's problem. In possession of intelligence and imagination, he is nevertheless "persistently elsewhere"¹⁵ and unable to accept "what is." Through her choice of Mehring's problematic private life as one of the novel's concerns, Gordimer is stressing the need, especially in South Africa where screening as a way of looking at the world is dangerously entrenched, to make the right kind of connections, to understand one's historical place, to be *here* instead of "persistently elsewhere."

Perhaps the only way to escape the frightening demands of the metaphor "politics is fate" is to leave South Africa. Perhaps this is the choice that Mehring makes at the end of *The Conservationist*. He leaves the country in the realization that there is no "place" for him there. This is a choice that Rosa Burger, the protagonist of Gordimer's next novel, *Burger's Daughter*, makes, but it becomes, finally, a choice she cannot live with. She returns to South Africa in acknowledgement of, and in response to, the requirements of her place.

In many ways, Rosa Burger is Mehring's opposite. Where he eluded the public realm, she is immersed in it, her connection to her country's history enforced by the fact that she was born in May of 1948, the very month the first Afrikaner nationalist government took office. And whereas Mehring was alienated from his descendants and ancestors, Rosa is almost too bound by hers. A child of militant political activists, she is raised in an atmosphere of trials, prison visits, meetings, secrecy and personal sacrifice: the political, we see, is *ordinary* to her. But, unlike others of her generation and situation, she does not accept her heritage unquestioningly. She is made to realize the need to claim a private life of her own, and to discover a commitment that is hers with

which she can meet the new demands of her particular time and place.

The epigraph to the first section of *Burger's Daughter* is from Claude Lévi-Strauss. It reads "I am the place in which something has occurred" and serves as a fitting departure for a novel that deals with the importance, influence and, sometimes, the tyranny of "place" on its protagonist. The idea of "place" is central to this novel, for a "place" is where one can belong and feel secure. Having a "place" defines a person and gives her a position in social space. Without a "place," it follows, an individual is nowhere. Hence, the dilemma of Mehring. The idea becomes an especially complicated one for Rosa for she is not only in the place in which something has occurred but she is in the place in which something is occurring — in her country, the struggle between two social orders is on-going. The problem Rosa faces is the problem Gordimer as a writer faces, and that is, how to put oneself into a meaningful relationship (as a citizen or as an artist) with a social order that is not yet realized.

This is a dilemma that probably plagues many whites opposed to the regime but is particularly complicated in Rosa's case because of her inherited circumstances. One of the central questions of the novel involves finding a viable "place" to be, politically, in a country where there seem to be only two choices — the extremes of either Right or Left. One of the difficulties of the historical situation in which Rosa finds herself is that there is no effective, uncompromised, moderate position to inhabit. But neither can she feel secure in the radical position as it was occupied by her parents. And the idea of a private life for anyone becomes problematic in a country whose legislative practices seem bent on impinging on every aspect of individual privacy. Thus, what Rosa discovers at the end of the first section of the novel is that there is no "place" for her in her father's country. She does not know how to act in it; thus, she makes that other choice: she leaves it. But, after being given a chance to seek out some measure of personal integrity in France, which then enables her to discover her own kind of commitment, Rosa returns to South Africa, and finds herself "in place," in prison, fulfilling her responsibilities to herself and to her society.

These brief examples from two of Gordimer's novels show how important it is to her that individuals acknowledge and act upon their historical circumstances. Because Mehring failed to acknowledge his responsibility to history, to the specific circumstances defining his public sphere, he "died" historically. On the other hand, because she faced up to the demands of her historical situation, despite their horrifying aspects, Rosa Burger was able to forge a place for herself in history.

It is not surprising, then, to discover that what disturbs Gordimer most about Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* is his choice of a protagonist. By choosing as his protagonist a figure who "ignores" history rather than "makes" it, Coetzee is, writes Gordimer in her review, "denying the energy of the will to resist evil" that she sees in Africans (6).¹⁶ What Gordimer seems to be implying is that Coetzee's assumptions are too naturalistic in his novel — that Michael K is not "typical" in Lukácsian terms; he is not representative of a particular social and historical movement. To make Michael K a recognizable type, Gordimer provides him in her review with a surname which would root him firmly in the Cape as a Coloured (3). By naming him "Kotze or Koekemoer," she chooses to deny the more general, associative and suggestive implications of the surname "K".

There is not the plethora of articles, interviews and lectures detailing Coetzee's views about a writer's responsibility that there is for Gordimer, yet a comment from Coetzee on Gordimer in a 1978 *Speak* interview is telling. Here he reveals an admiration for Gordimer's accomplishments in the critical realist mode with this addendum: "I would like to think that today the novel is after a bigger game than [the critical realist type]."¹⁷

Coetzee's comment is worth remembering in light of Gordimer's criticism of his novel, a criticism which might be answered in part with the help of an essay of Coetzee's published in 1971 entitled "Alex La Guma and the Responsibilities of the South African Writer."¹⁸ But of more importance is the fact that his comment provides us with a way into his novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*.¹⁹ When we see what "bigger game" Coetzee is after, and consider the kinds of strategies he employs to help guide our reading

of the novel in this “bigger” way, it is not hard to understand why Gordimer reads *Life and Times of Michael K* the way she does.

Consider, for example, the opening line of Coetzee’s novel: “The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip” (3). When we look back at this, we can see that Coetzee is doing something exceptional. He is drawing our attention to something *other* than the colour of his protagonist. The first thing the midwife notices and that we, in turn, are made to notice about Michael K is his harelip. We might wonder what to make of his point of focus. What is it saying about the character of Michael K? About Coetzee?

What this point of focus tells us about the character of Michael K is that he is not going to be Everyman. Instead, the impression created is, simply, that Michael K is going to be a particular figure, and one who happens to be distinguished by a harelip.²⁰ In fact, if anything, Michael K’s deformity identifies him with a group of freaks. As the midwife says of Michael K to his repulsed mother: “You should be happy, they bring luck to the household” (3).

But first, some readers will be sure to ask whether or not Coetzee is colour blind. It is clear, after all, from the place names in the novel that it is set in South Africa. Michael K works in “the Cape”; he travels to “Prince Albert”; “Stellenbosch” is a place of ill luck. It is also clear from K’s position in society that he is not a member of the ruling class. So it should be equally clear that Michael K is not white. However, on the issue that so resoundingly defines South Africa, its politics and its people, the issue of colour, Coetzee chooses to be silent, and this silence creates a space which begs to be filled. And while it is tempting to do as some have done and interpret his silence, particularly in light of the volatile context out of which it emerges, as irresponsible, surely there are more positive inferences to be drawn from it.²¹ To call Michael K anything, be it black, white or coloured, is to label him and formulate him. It is entirely possible that Coetzee deliberately omits mentioning Michael K’s colour precisely because he doesn’t want Michael K to be labelled or formulated. Because colour, while a burning issue on the one hand, is,

on the other, just as urgent a non-issue. A person is a person no matter what his colour. One of the problems with the process of politicization, particularly as it operates in South Africa, is that it systematically reduces people into categories. It deindividualizes and dehumanizes them. By creating a protagonist who eludes classification, Coetzee can be seen to be resisting this process. Omitting the detail of colour from his characterization of Michael K is just one of the strategies Coetzee employs to prevent us from making hasty generalizations about his novel.

While it is true, as Gordimer says, that Michael K "ignores" history, it is also true that Michael K is the one figure in the novel who is able to compete, to some extent, *with* history. And it is for this reason that the Doctor in the rehabilitation camp finds K so fascinating.²² His desire to live as he is is the source of his strength, lies at the core of his peculiar form of resistance, and is the reason why he is, as he says, "out of the war." It is not because he is slow-thinking, a bad story-teller, or because he has a harelip. He is out of the war because his whole being is engaged in existing on his own terms. He is simply not responsive to being determined by anything outside of them. Those terms, however, make him vulnerable to others, particularly to those embroiled in and subject to the history of the regime.

Throughout the novel, Michael K is animalized by numerous others. He is referred to as a monkey, an insect, a grub, and he is likened to a dog, a cat and a parasite. What is it to dehumanize another person? It is to see him as lacking a self. It seems fitting, then, that those who have been dehumanized, deterritorialized and disenfranchised should be forced to redirect themselves toward the earth, to things weaker and more delicate than themselves. This orientation, accompanied by a kind of infantilism, is clearly evident in Michael K's actions and consciousness.

In order to hide from those who deny him privacy and dehumanize him, Michael K decides to build a shelter on the grounds of a farm. Forced, essentially, to burrow underground so as to leave no trace of his living, it would seem that Michael K has been reduced to an animal existence. However, there is a special allegorical meaning that can be drawn from Michael K's act of construction: he is building the "house" he could never

build, possess or occupy in his society; it is a dwelling in which he can relish his own kind of food, grown from the earth and tended by him; and it is a place in which he can enjoy the activity he is good at, gardening. And he speaks, in his garden, of the "cord of tenderness" stretching from him to the patch of earth he tends. The melons he grows are "his sisters," the pumpkins, "his band of brothers." His first fruit is "his mother," a tie that binds him:

So what is it, he thought, that binds me to this spot of earth as if to a home I cannot leave? We must all leave home, after all, we must all leave our mothers. Or am I such a child, such a child from such a line of children, that none of us can leave, but have to come back to die here with our heads upon our mothers' laps, I upon hers, she upon her mother's, and so back and back, generation upon generation? (171)

Coetzee's comment that the novel is after a bigger game than the critical realist type can again be noted when accounting for his depiction of Michael K's situation. While it should be easy to deplore K's predicament, which is, as he himself admits, a bleak one (when he is not forced to work in camps, he is holed up in a burrow, feeding on pumpkin and drifting in and out of consciousness), the fact is that the negativity of his situation is projected positively. Michael K's retreat from History to cultivate his own garden can thus be understood as a creative, radical attempt to maintain innocence and to assert his own history.²³

The idea of gardening is not a new idea. It is an idea that brings to mind Voltaire's *Candide*, among others, who, in a different tone, reminded us to cultivate our garden. Many take Voltaire's credo, as they may take Coetzee's, as a defence of quietism or an indifference to the plight of humanity, but surely the call to cultivate our garden can be understood to mean something more positive? Perhaps it can mean that we must direct our attention to that which is in our power to improve.

The idea of gardening is the idea that Gordimer herself singles out as the most meaningful in the novel. She titles her review of *Life and Times of Michael K* "The Idea of Gardening" and ends the review with a moving commentary on the significance of the idea itself. "Beyond all creeds and moralities," she writes,

there is only one: to keep the earth alive, and only one salvation, the survival comes from her. . . . Hope is a seed. That's all. That's everything. It's better to live on your knees, planting something . . . (6)

The figure of Michael K is sure to provoke ambivalent responses in readers just as it provokes them in the Doctor. Some will see K's form of resistance as pathetic or unfeasible, just as they may understand the moral of his story — "there is time enough for everything" (249) — as a definition of complacency. Those seeking a call to action in *Life and Times of Michael K* will undoubtedly be disappointed, for if there can be said to be a call to action, it is so quiet, and the resulting action so minimal, that one might be led to conclude that Coetzee is implying the futility of anything more substantial, given the circumstances. To answer some of these objections, however, it is worth exploring in just what way K imagines himself living. The final two paragraphs of the novel, in which we find Michael K telling himself a story about the future, are worth quoting in full so that we can then discuss what is being suggested by his story:

It did not seem impossible that whoever it was who disregarded the curfew and came when it suited him to sleep in this smelly corner (K imagined him as a little old man with a stoop and a bottle in his side pocket who muttered all the time into his beard, the kind of old man the police ignored) might be tired of life at the seaside and want to take a holiday in the country if he could find a guide who knew the roads. They could share a bed tonight, it had been done before; in the morning, at first light, they could go out searching the back streets for an abandoned barrow; and if they were lucky the two of them could be spinning along the high road by ten o'clock, remembering to stop on the way to buy seeds and one or two other things, avoiding Stellenbosch perhaps, which seemed to be a place of ill luck.

And if the old man climbed out of the cart and stretched himself (things were gathering pace now) and looked at where the pump had been that the soldiers had blown up so that nothing should be left standing, and complained, saying 'What are we going to do about water?', he, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when

he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live. (249-50)

The first thing Michael K imagines, then, is a companion, someone like himself, down on his luck, homeless and with a desire to leave the city. The man he envisions will be inconspicuous and insignificant — the kind of man the police will ignore. So what Michael K imagines in his future is a community of two: vagrants, perhaps, but diverse equals nonetheless.

The trip they will take together has the air of holiday about it: K has them “spinning” along the high road. Significantly, he casts himself in a principal role, as a “guide,” as someone who “knows the roads.” He will take the lead and direct the course of their travel. Stellenbosch will be avoided because it seemed like a place of “ill luck.” Notice the resilience with which Michael K is characterizing himself here. To press on, keeping clear of the place which by chance seemed to bring misfortune, is surely a positive conception, just as the idea of community itself implies important qualities like fidelity and forgiveness.

The aim of the journey is to reach the country and begin to cultivate the land. There, we assume, the two of them will grow food, mutually, to feed each other. To the query about water, which his companion may make, K will respond with a gesture at once simple, hopeful and resourceful: he will nourish his friend as his mother nourished him, with a teaspoon. And in that way, he imagines, “one can live.”

The conditional tense of the final line of the novel points to a possibility. One of the possibilities is that through creative, co-operative enterprise, a community can be founded. It need not posit a rural utopia, this idea of tending the earth, but suggests a means of achieving some personal power, independence and interdependence against a backdrop which denies individual integrity and privacy. Another possibility suggested by the final line of the novel is this: that what is classified as shabby, derelict and insignificant by the outside can be transformed inside. For to think that “there is time enough for everything” is to think that time is as full as it ever was. It is to transcend the time of history, of war, which is a time of waiting and of living in suspension. To think that there is time enough for everything is not to think of oneself

"as a castaway marooned in a pocket of time" like the Doctor, "listening with one ear to the banal exchanges of camp life and with the other to the suprasensual spinning of the gyroscopes of the Grand Design" (217). Rather, it is to transform the time of history into the time of natural cycles. It is to respond to time as it is conveyed in that famous passage from Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8. It is, in a sense, to rediscover the Garden.

Interestingly, it is to Gordimer's "The Essential Gesture" that we can turn to sum up some of the implications of Coetzee's novelistic techniques, at least as they are manifested in *Life and Times of Michael K*. In the essay, Gordimer says things in praise of Samuel Beckett that could just as easily apply to Coetzee. (Coetzee has, incidentally, acknowledged Beckett's influence on his work; certain similarities between the two writers in style and attitude are striking.) Beckett, writes Gordimer, takes on as his essential gesture a responsibility "direct to human destiny, and not to any local cell of humanity" (148). Through his general politicized allegorizing, Coetzee can be said to be doing the same. Beckett is removed from the temporal, continues Gordimer, yet "makes some kind of final statement exacted by the temporal" (148). Similarly, by the relative absence of particularities of time and place in *Life and Times of Michael K*, this kind of analysis can apply to Coetzee's novel. Beckett "has chosen to be answerable to the twentieth century human condition," concludes Gordimer, "which has its camp everywhere or nowhere" (149). Again, what Gordimer is describing to a large extent are the gestures of her fellow countryman, gestures which she deems earlier on in the essay as impossibilities for writers in South Africa, but gestures nevertheless that seem to embody a considerable amount of power.

Certainly the place in which both Gordimer and Coetzee write is fraught with complex problems. The segregation of human beings on the basis of colour is Berger's "screening" taken to its most horrific extreme. Then there is the screen the South African government sets up by denying journalists the freedom to report events as they see them and by banning books whose messages might reveal too much. These are only some of the most obvious obstacles that make it difficult for writers inside to tell the stories of South Africa to the world outside. In such a situation, a writer

might consider it one of his or her responsibilities to attempt to break through the screen. Gordimer shows us one way in her commitment to critical realism and the reliance in her novels on actual history, a reliance, no doubt, that has been responsible for the fact that several of her books have been banned in South Africa.

Coetzee gives us another variation on responsibility. By its autonomy, its freedom from any distinctly political programme, a novel like *Life and Times of Michael K* can slip through the censor's net to help remind us, his Western audience, that oppression and injustice are not limited to South Africa, that, in some sense, they are eternal. He helps remind us of this without allowing us to sink into cynicism or indifference. He helps remind us, through the particular sensibility of Michael K, that human desire can be, at bottom, not a desire for some idealized transcendence, but for life in its simplest, most ordinary form.

NOTES

- ¹ Nadine Gordimer, "The Essential Gesture" in *Granta* 15 (1985): 137-51.
- ² Gordimer also casts the question in other words, Camus' words: how does a writer reconcile the demand from without to be "more than a writer" with the demand from within to be "only a writer"?
- ³ The social demands made on the writer in North America, for instance, would not be like the demands made on the writer in South Africa, and the problem of how they would be met might not be as critical a one for North American writers as for South African writers. The social demand on a writer in South Africa might, for example, call upon her to write on a subject that would result in her being banned, detained or forced into exile. As Gordimer explains in the essay, "there is no responsibility arising out of the status of the writer as social being that could call upon Saul Bellow, Kurt Vonnegut, Susan Sontag, Toni Morrison or John Berger to write on a subject that would result" in the same (138).
- ⁴ Nadine Gordimer, "Living in the Interregnum" in *The New York Review of Books* 20 Jan. 1983: 21. The title of Gordimer's essay is taken from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, and it serves, in part, as the epigraph to her novel, *July's People* (1981). The entire epigraph reads: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms."
- ⁵ Nadine Gordimer, "Apprentices of Freedom: Relevance and Commitment in South African Arts" in *The Writer and Human Rights*, ed. Toronto Arts Group for Human Rights (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1984) 21.
- ⁶ Both Gordimer and Coetzee would probably object to being introduced as "white South African novelists." Gordimer situates herself in an African tradition as is made clear in *The Black Interpreters* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1973). And Coetzee resists the label which he feels is forced

on him by "the vast and wholly ideological superstructure constituted by publishing, reviewing and criticism." See his interview in *From South Africa*, a special issue of *TriQuarterly* 69 (1987): 460.

- ⁷ See, for example, Richard Martin's "Narrative, History and Ideology: A Study of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Burger's Daughter*" in *Ariel* 17.3 (1986): 3-21. See also Paul Rich's "Apartheid and the Decline of the Civilization Idea: An Essay on Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*" in *Research in African Literatures*, 15.3 (1984): 364-91.
- ⁸ Nadine Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening" in *The New York Review of Books* 2 Feb. 1984: 3-6.
- ⁹ Georg Lukács, Preface to *Studies in European Realism* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964).
- ¹⁰ See "A Conversation with Nadine Gordimer" in *Salmagundi*, 62 (1984) in which she tells Robert Boyers that "the decision to be sincere is an artistic one. . . . Sometimes when I'm writing, there will be a character who belongs to 'my' side, the side of radical opposition to apartheid, but who is devious, perhaps exhibitionistic, and represents certain lies told on my side, too, for expedience. If I were Lionel Burger I would no doubt say, 'Well, what does artistic sincerity and integrity matter? What matters is the cause.' But I don't accept that. As a writer, I feel that my first duty is integrity as an artist" (4-5).
- ¹¹ Robert Boyers, "Nadine Gordimer: Public and Private" in *Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel since 1945* (Oxford: OUP, 1985), 121-46.
- ¹² Nadine Gordimer, *The Conservationist* (London: Cape, 1974). Subsequent references to the text will follow the quotation in parentheses.
- ¹³ Nadine Gordimer, "Politics as Fate" in *The Black Interpreters* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1973). She takes the phrase from Irving Howe: "Where freedom is absent, politics is fate."
- ¹⁴ John Berger, "The Screen and *The Spike*" in *The Sense of Sight* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 253-60.
- ¹⁵ Berger uses this phrase to characterize the state of an individual who chooses to place a screen between himself and reality.
- ¹⁶ Mehring also ignored history, but the main thrust of *The Conservationist* is to point out the inadequacy of such a consciousness. Michael K's "passivity," on the other hand, can be seen as potentially heroic in Coetzee's novel.
- ¹⁷ J. M. Coetzee interviewed by Stephen Watson. "Speaking: J. M. Coetzee" in *Speak* May/June 1978: 23.
- ¹⁸ J. M. Coetzee, "Alex La Guma and the Responsibilities of the South African Writer" in *Journal of New African Literature and the Arts* Winter/Spring Combined (1971): 5-11. Coetzee sets out in this essay to assert that despite "its naturalistic assumptions and doom-laden atmosphere," La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* is not naturalistic. Coetzee reads La Guma as a "critical realist" and sees embedded in the novel "an analysis of the political weaknesses of [the proletariat in] Coloured society in South Africa" (9). For Coetzee, this analysis provides "an explanation of the negativeness of a fiction that realistically portrays that society" (9). The most comprehensive political statement La Guma makes, says Coetzee, is that *A Walk in the Night* is a novel without a hero, although it is clearly

indicated who the potential hero is. Although Gordimer's point is that it is wrong to do so, it is possible to understand *Life and Times of Michael K* in the same way Coetzee understands *A Walk in the Night*, and to suggest that the reason there is no *active* protagonist in Coetzee's novel is that, as far as he is concerned, the conditions haven't arisen for one. His literary act might be described, in part, in the words he uses to describe La Guma's: "while the novelist cannot falsify his subject by creating heroes where none as yet have arisen, he can explain why they have not arisen and point to potentialities for political action" (11).

- ¹⁹ J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983). Subsequent references to the text will follow the quotation in parentheses.
- ²⁰ Michael's surname, of course, gives him greater symbolic weight than the aforementioned allows. "K" has ties with Joseph K in Kafka's *The Trial* and with the surveyor K in *The Castle*. Another allusion to Kafka is found in the Doctor's reference to "the Castle" in *Life and Times of Michael K* as the place from which his bizarre orders issue.
- ²¹ Some critics have commented passionately on what they see as Coetzee's racial/historical/class bias operating in *Life and Times of Michael K*. They make the point that typically Coetzee's protagonists are white, and that they are also lucid and intelligent (Eugene Dawn; Magda; the Magistrate). What is disconcerting to them is the fact that on the occasion Coetzee chooses to write from a "non-white" perspective, he depicts a figure who is inarticulate and simple-minded. Restrained as she is about it, I think this is also Gordimer's problem with the novel. At one point in her review of it, she asks why Coetzee has to "lay it on so thick." It is not enough that Michael K is one of the oppressed and a simpleton, he has to have a harelip which prevents him from speaking clearly. Why single out for attention such an eccentric, atypical figure, she seems to be asking.
- See Josephine Dodd's *The Crossroads of Power and Knowledge: Discursive Policy and the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee* for a discussion of the implications as she understands them of Coetzee's racial/historical/class bias. Unpublished M.A. thesis, U of Alberta, 1987.
- ²² The second section of the novel (it is divided into three sections) is focused on the Doctor's response to Michael K. K is in his third camp, this time a rehabilitation camp in which the Doctor works. It is through the Doctor that we get the strongest sense of the ambivalent response Michael K provokes in others. For although the Doctor is appalled by "Michaels" (the name, it seems, officials insist on calling him by) physical condition and spare existence, he is nevertheless drawn to view him as a harbinger of some great truth, as a kind of messiah. And while he dismisses "Michaels" as a "stick insect," "too busy, too stupid, too absorbed to listen to the wheels of history," at the same time he is intrigued by the way K has "managed to live in the old way, drifting through time, observing the seasons, no more trying to change the course of history than a grain of sand does" (207).
- ²³ Mehring sought a refuge from history through a connection to the earth, a desire shared by Michael K. But where that desire is understood and acceptable in Michael K's case, given his situation and his innocence, it is thwarted in Mehring's case precisely because of his situation and his sophisticated innocence.