

What's a Poor White to Do?
White South African Options in
*"A Sport of Nature"*¹

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AS THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRAGEDY gains momentum daily, one looks in vain for a white role which might ease the transition to majority rule in South Africa and reduce the toll of life there.² Unfortunately, not even in the best of committed white fiction, where one might hope for influential visions to arise first, do we find a vision which is compelling.

Nadine Gordimer's most recent novel, *A Sport of Nature* (1987),³ examines and rejects a variety of white South African roles — conservative, hedonist, and liberal — and offers a vision of a more revolutionary alternative. The vision, unfortunately, seems less than compelling, even to Gordimer herself. It seems to be an attempt to push beyond the revolutionary alternative endorsed in *Burger's Daughter* (1979).⁴ There she rejected the approach of the South African Communist Party and proposed an alternative evidently intended to be more humane.⁵ In *A Sport of Nature* she recognizes that the proposal offered in *Burger's Daughter* did not adequately come to terms with the power relationships so crucial to change in South Africa and proposes a new alternative which faces the demands of power more squarely. However, she seems less than pleased with the result. As if uncertain what to think, she so distances herself from the new approach that it is not clear whether she has endorsed it or condemned it. Her ambivalence may well arise from its sacrifice of humane means to ends that are at best uncertain and quite possibly unattractive.

In *A Sport of Nature* the female relatives of the protagonist, Hillela, represent the three least satisfactory white options. Her Aunt Olga is happy with the status quo; her mother, Ruthie, flees South Africa; and her Aunt Pauline is as committed a liberal as we have seen in Gordimer's works. Hillela herself at first unconsciously follows her mother's hedonistic escapism, but later develops through several more committed approaches.

In Olga, Gordimer continues her long-standing but muted criticism of conservative whites. Olga is kind to her servants and preserves strong family feeling and a respect for her Jewish traditions, but is preoccupied with material values and oblivious to politics. Olga and her husband "can't take pleasure in anything that hasn't a market value" (18). Pauline notes to Hillela that Olga's reaction to the Sharpeville massacre is that

... I've no right to deprive you of a holiday. For reasons of my own. That was her phrase exactly: 'for reasons of your own'. That's all Sharpeville and sixty-nine dead meant to her. (27)

And Olga's reaction to politics "is always to be afraid of *trouble!*" (25). She is thankful for the police and the courts because they "lock away burglars, rapists, embezzlers, car thieves, murderers where they couldn't threaten decent people any longer" (327). Gordimer takes it as given that *apartheid* is indefensible,⁶ and considers most who support it to be smugly ignorant and materialistic, faults worthy more of contempt than of great moral vehemence.⁷

Gordimer has shown more interest over the years in those who flee South Africa. These come in two varieties: those so overcome by the moral dilemmas of South Africa that they attempt to defect (as did Rosa Burger); and those oblivious to South African realities who flee on hedonistic journeys. Gordimer rejects both approaches, but with considerable understanding. Those who attempt to defect she uses to drive home the impossibility of escape and the necessity of commitment. And the hedonists she uses as a source of principles which humanize her committed protagonists.

Hedonistic flight figures as prominently in *A Sport of Nature* as it did in *Burger's Daughter*. Conrad's hedonism forms one of

the theses in the dialectical argument of *Burger's Daughter*. Gordimer rejects the hedonism but uses Conrad's emphasis on emotion to criticize the excessive ideologization of the Communists and as a source of the emotional reaction to suffering which is central to Rosa's committed synthesis.⁸ In *A Sport of Nature* the hedonism figures so strongly that Krauss has concluded (mistakenly) that it is Hillela's essence, making her nothing more than "a highly impressionable sexual object."⁹ But here too Gordimer rejects the hedonism while valorizing some of its constituent elements.

Ruthie has fled "the Calvinism and koshering of this place" in search of "passion and tragedy" in the fado songs of Mozambique (46), abandoning her child Hillela, and leaving behind for her little more than drafts of letters to her Portuguese lover (48-50). She has rejected both Olga's materialism and Pauline's love of her fellow man to pursue the love of one man (49), and that expressed in joyously physical terms.

Neither in her youth (4; 47) nor when she meets Ruthie much later (289-99) does Hillela show any family feeling for the mother she has hardly known. But she does respond to the descriptions of physical love in Ruthie's letters, and unconsciously follows Ruthie in her sexual freedom, her scant attention to both Olga's materialism and Pauline's liberalism, and her flight from South Africa because of a man who subsequently abandons her. Hillela in her early years is oblivious to South African realities and bent on a rebellious pursuit of pleasure. In Pauline's words: "She's a-moral. I mean, in the sense of the morality of this country" (44).

Hillela is not a conservative accommodationist, since part of her amorality is an attractive unwillingness to pay attention to the categories that order life in South Africa: she is thrown out of her Rhodesian school for visiting a Coloured boy (12-13); she explodes in defence of her father's new wife Billie whom Olga thinks too "tarty" to be a fit mother (17); and she ignores the Afrikaner background of her musical friend Gert Prinsloo (54-6). When she meets Rey she pays no attention to his nationality: "categories were never relevant to her ordering of life" (108). Even in

making love to her cousin Sasha she refuses to categorize people (32).

Nor is Hillela a liberal, since she is also amoral in her deliberate ignoring of politics in South Africa. To show this Gordimer frequently juxtaposes political events and discussions against indications that Hillela is totally oblivious to them. Two examples suffice to illustrate this pattern.¹⁰ In one of the earliest occurrences of the pattern, Hillela greets Pauline and Carole as they protest the formation of the South African Republic, then returns to her coffee bar to sing folk songs, getting thrown out when the proprietor smells marijuana (52-3). The crudest such juxtaposition is the reference to torture in the observation that "while electric currents were passing through the reproductive organs of others, Hillela had an abortion" (114). When Hillela flees South Africa with Rey, the reader agrees with Pauline that:

Smoking pot in a coffee bar, that was more in that little girl's line. . . . She has no political sense, no convictions, not the faintest idea. . . . (121-2)

Pauline's explanation for Hillela's flight is accurate and clearly establishes the parallel with Ruthie:

Attached herself to some man — that's what it was all about, *He* was the one who had to go.

Pauline and Olga were only two of three sisters, after all; still.

Attached herself to some man.

My poor Ruthie. (123)

Gordimer uses elements of Hillela's hedonistic youth as bases for her more committed later approaches. Hillela's refusal to use South African categories in her assessment of people is crucial, as is her sexuality and the love for an individual man. Gordimer valorizes Hillela's love for a black man¹¹ as the source both of her utopian vision and of the motivation for her search for means of realizing that vision. As in *Burger's Daughter*, hedonistic escapism is rejected, but used to humanize and motivate the protagonist in her commitment.

For the liberal approach Gordimer reserves a vitriol which has grown ever stronger over the years. As ex-communists are said to

make the strongest anti-communists, Gordimer's own attempt to move beyond liberalism leads her to be increasingly unforgiving of liberals.¹² She increasingly finds the liberalism a hypocritical attitudinizing which salves the consciences of its adherents while contributing nothing to needed change in South Africa. In recent years Gordimer has evidently seen her political task as puncturing the delusions of South Africa's liberals and proposing more efficacious and more committed alternatives.

In *A Sport of Nature* the liberals, Pauline and Joe, are attacked as mercilessly as were the Smaleses of Gordimer's 1981 *July's People*,¹³ of whom Hardwick concludes that "something is askew in the vehemence of the moral rebuke to the Smaleses, husband and wife."¹⁴ The falseness of Pauline and Joe's position is treated no more kindly, despite the fact that they are more committed and active than most of Gordimer's liberals.

Pauline criticizes Joe's activities as a lawyer defending political cases, asking

What will you be at our Nuremberg? . . . The one who tried to serve justice through the rule of law, or the one who betrayed justice by trying to serve it through the rule of unjust laws? (67)

But Pauline's own activities are no more than meliorative: she defends a black waiter verbally abused by a schoolgirl (19-23); she organizes a Saturday school to compensate for the inadequacies of "Bantu Education" (22-23); she distributes leaflets against the Verwoerd republic, until she hears that liberals are being arrested and destroys the remaining leaflets (60-61); and she goes to protest meetings (52). She and Joe do give aid to a fleeing Black Consciousness activist (73-78). But when one of Rosa Burger's circle earlier asked Pauline to shelter an activist, Pauline refused, pleading that it would endanger Joe's "absolutely necessary" work as a lawyer (29). And Pauline feels caught out in her hypocrisy when Hillela looks at her in a knowing way (47). Sasha accuses them of being "careful not to let anything happen to you" (39). Hillela characterizes their approach as

hesitations and doubts, the shilly-shallying of what was more effective between this commitment or that, this second-hand protest or that. (209)

It was, she says, nothing but talk:

Everybody talked and argued . . . And whenever I heard them again, they were still talking and arguing, living the same way in the same place. (222)

In *A Sport of Nature* Gordimer criticizes most strongly the liberals' inability to find a role in a South African history which is multi-ethnic and predominantly black. The relations of Pauline and Joe with other ethnic groups are presented as anything but easy and natural. Pauline suspects others of anti-semitism (36), and all members of her family are clearly prejudiced against Afrikaners (36, 54). But more serious are their strained relations with blacks. They are unable to criticize the unwise activities of one of their black protégés (58-9). Sasha concludes that Pauline's "blacks were like Aunt Olga's whatnots, they were handled with such care not to say or do anything that might chip the friendship they allowed her to claim" (317). Gordimer criticizes this by contrast with Sasha's more natural relationships with blacks (83, 317), and by contrast with Hillela's unwillingness to categorize people, and her later marriages with blacks. Hillela has an honest and innocent recognition of the importance of racial differences (177), but sees beyond them. When she marries the black revolutionary Whaila she "had what [Pauline and Joe] couldn't find: a sign in her marriage, a sure and certain instruction to which one could attach oneself and feel the tug of history" (199).¹⁵ Hillela has "given up being white" but reports that Pauline and Joe "wanted to but they didn't seem to know how" (186).

Nor do Pauline and Joe have any vision of the future or of the means for attaining it. Sasha criticizes their rationality at the expense of a utopian vision, noting that "*Without Utopia . . . there's a failure of the imagination — and that's a failure to know how to go on living*" (187).¹⁶ He says he hated them because he "expected them to have solutions but they only had questions" (317). When Sasha later returns to revolutionary activity, we are told that "nothing in the advantages of his youth had prepared him for" his circumstances (335).

If Gordimer demolishes the conservative, hedonist, and liberal pre-revolutionary white stances, she has considerably less success

moving beyond them. She has been searching for an alternative to liberalism which would be more efficacious in promoting change, but which would preserve the humanistic elements that have given liberalism its appeal. Yet she has failed in her search, once on each side of the equation. Rosa Burger's post-liberal alternative preserved humane values but seemed unlikely to be efficacious in contributing to needed change. Hillela's alternative is efficacious, but may not preserve humane values.

Hillela is drawn to participation in the South African cause because of her love for Whaila. She moves through love for one man to love for a people and eventually to the cause as a way to express that love. In the end she finds an efficacious means of promoting change. But Gordimer's ambivalent and often sardonic treatment of Hillela suggests that Gordimer is apprehensive about the sacrifice of humane values inherent in Hillela's approach.

Hillela's love for Whaila transforms her from her old hedonism. Whaila asks himself "What am I to you, that you transform yourself" (181)? And after his death Hillela asks herself "*What am I without him? And if, without him, I am nothing, what was I?*" (215). Hillela reads the revolutionary doctrine she had earlier ignored (180). She participates in political discussions which before left her daydreaming (183-6). She comes to terms with the necessity for violence, including the possibility that "innocent" people may be killed (207). And she worries about the role of whites in the revolution, maintaining that she herself has "given up being white" (186). When she has their black child she is delighted *not* to have reproduced herself with all the advantages of her whiteness (195).¹⁷

Much of Hillela's transformation is derivative, a deference to the ideas of others. She defers to the exiles: "teach me, she said" (180). When Nkrumah dies, she "assum[es] instinctively from observance of those with whom she lived the appropriate attitude" (190-91). And when she tells Whaila that she cannot imagine the deaths of innocents "he was aware of her waiting for him to tell her what she should be feeling about the unimaginable" (207). "The ideas of others worked in Hillela's blood like alcohol" (183).

But Hillela's most important change is not derivative: it involves the utopian vision which her love for Whaila gives her. The vision is of a time when love between white and black can be free and natural, a time in which it will make sense for a black and a white to say that their child is "our colour" (178-9), a time in which a "rainbow family" (207) will be possible. Hillela's vision arises from her refusal to pay attention to categories among people, the most attractive characteristic of her hedonistic youth. In naïve innocence which echoes the delusions of liberalism, she lives in the utopia as if it were the reality, at least until Whaila's assassination awakens her from her delusion. Although Whaila finds it an attractive vision, it does not originate with him. When Hillela first announces that she wants their child to be "our colour," Whaila's reaction is one of "doulour" about this "creature made of love, without a label; that's a freak" (178-9). And it certainly does not originate with Pauline. When she hears that Hillela has married Whaila, her reaction is that "it solves nothing. . . . Feeling free to sleep with a black man doesn't set him free" (187).

Gordimer celebrates Hillela's vision. When Pauline denigrates Hillela's marriage, Sasha (perhaps the only character who has Gordimer's complete confidence) writes in reply:

Instinct is utopian. Emotion is utopian. . . . Without utopia . . . there's a failure of the imagination — and that's a failure to know how to go on living. It will take another kind of being to stay on, here. A new white person. Not us. The chance is a wild chance — like falling in love. (187)

We hear of Hillela's "sign in her marriage" (199). Whaila too saw their own closeness as a sign; the human cause, the human identity that should be possible, once the race and class struggle were won. With her, it was already one world; what could be. (208)

Hillela's love for Whaila leads her to identify with his cause, symbolized by their handclasp when he tells her about a raid into South Africa: "He was lover and brother to her in the great family of a cause" (210). But her identification has hardly begun before Whaila is assassinated.

The shortcoming of Hillela's approach, of course, is that she is living in a "*time that hasn't yet come*" (233). She has deluded herself by ignoring the realities of power, symbolized by the assassination of Whaila. Her love for her rainbow family, she realizes, "*can't be got away with, it's cornered, it's easily done away with in two shots*" (232). She now expresses her love in terms of revenge for Whaila's death, in an identification with the rainbow family defined in broader terms, and in an attempt to carry on the cause symbolized by the handclasp. She understands that

the handclasp belongs to tragedy, not grief. . . . A tragedy . . . is when a human being is destroyed engaging himself with events greater than personal relationships . . . tragedy is a sign that the struggle must go on. (215)

Hillela's dedication to the cause goes through stages broadly paralleling the foreign policies of the regions in which she finds (or places) herself. In Eastern Europe she attempts to dedicate herself to the weapons for liberation; in the United States she seeks humanitarian aid for those harmed by the liberation wars; and in Africa she searches for African levers of power.

Hillela's first reaction to Whaila's death is a fanatical dedication. Her old friend and lover Arnold notes both the change and the fanaticism, thinking that "she was part of the preoccupation she once had disrupted so naturally" (218) and telling others later that "she was the type to have become a terrorist, a hijacker. . . . It wasn't that she was undisciplined; no discipline was demanding enough for her" (219). She so submerges herself in the cause that "no history of her really can be personal history, then; its ends were all apparently outside herself" (225). She reflects that "the handclasp is the only love made flesh. Learn that. Read the handclasp, learning the kind of love in the calibre and striking power of hardware" (233).

Why Hillela abandons this phase is left unclear, and even deliberately confused, by Gordimer. But it seems likely that it is because the activities she is allowed do not satisfy her fanaticism. For all her dedication to "the calibre and striking power of hardware" her activities hardly go beyond typing, translation, and giving occasional speeches. She condemns herself as she once con-

demned Pauline and Joe: “now I’m getting like them . . . I’m talking, talking” (223). And her Russian friend Pavel comments that she is too much the individualist to be merely a functionary: “You got your own talent” (230).

In the U.S. she turns her talent to an able use of bureaucracy and academia to benefit the liberation movements and the Africans damaged by the liberation wars, which she now sees as her real rainbow family (251). She tells her old friend Udi “I am not a bureaucrat, I have to use bureaucracy,” and says she is using it “looking for ways to free Whaila” (249). She says later “I wanted to get rid of the people who came to the flat and shot Whaila, . . . [all South African whites] because all of them, *they let it happen*” (267). But she gets sidetracked into a preoccupation with the suffering caused by the wars:

now it’s soup powder I’ve been doling out. When you see everything reduced to hunger . . . [y]ou only want to find something to stuff in those mouths. You lose all sense of what you wanted to do. (268)

But Hillela rejects this approach as well, and in having Hillela do so Gordimer emphasizes the weakness of the position in which she left Rosa Burger. Although Hillela never gives reasons for “moving on” once again, it is not hard to find them in comments made by her old friend Udi and by the General. Of her work with the bureaucracy Udi asks:

what can that sort of thing achieve. It will be the big powers who’ll decide what happens to blacks. And the power of other black heads of state influencing the big powers. A waste, yes . . . it’s *this* that’s a waste of your life — (249)

And Reuel (the General) comments of her “doling out soup powder” that “that’s not *getting rid*” (268). He has earlier explained “they send us guns and soup powder, êh. Some get the guns. That’s the important thing, to be the side that gets the guns. You will never come to power on soup powder” (267).

In the General, soon to be President, Hillela recognizes a means of placing herself on the side that gets the guns, a means of obtaining influence through a black head of state. “She must have had a pretty good inkling he was sure of getting back into power”

(269). She sees in him one who will not die, one who knows how to use weapons in the cause, one whose handclasp "is on recognition, irresistible" (281). And, in fact, when the General becomes President he and Hillela help the South African liberation movements:¹⁸

safe houses were provided and the experienced lobbying ability and growing prestige of the President were brought into play in the world to obtain increasing support for those who temporarily occupied the safe houses. . . . [Hillela] was always present at these negotiations. . . . (332)

When the South African revolution arrives the President (now Chairman of the OAU as well) "was part of the negotiations that continued outside the country concurrently with undeclared civil war there," and he later is "an extremely useful adviser to the black liberation leaders" in their negotiations with the corporations. "So, in many ways, he can be regarded as a brother who has been part of the South African liberation struggle in accordance with the old Pan-African ideal" (337).

By attaching herself to Reuel, Hillela has found a way beyond the dead end of Rosa Burger's compassionate wait-and-see, a way to exert leverage in the South African power equation while leaving it to blacks to make the revolution and define the South African future. If her contribution is marginal, it is as large as any South African white in the opposition could hope to make. In fact, it is certainly larger than any but a handful of whites could hope to make, given the limited number of African heads of state and the minuscule number willing to marry white South Africans however dedicated and however sexually imaginative.

If Gordimer intends *A Sport of Nature* to be "inspirational," clearly her message is more about strategy than about tactical details. The point is that love and compassion and the utopian vision they create are necessary but not sufficient in the South African setting, that committed whites must find leverage in the power equation. Such tactical details as are generalizable suggest that the search for levers of power requires a certain rootlessness and ruthlessness, adaptability and survival skill, coupled with a willingness to take advantage of whatever sources of power one

may have. Gordimer strongly emphasizes these characteristics in Hillela, although it is less clear that she endorses them.

The novel opens with a signal of Hillela's rootlessness as she changes her name from the "Kim" used at school to the "Hillela" used with her family, with both names equally meaningless to her (3). Both early and late in the novel we hear of her lack of feeling for her mother; and throughout the novel Hillela is either "some-where about" or "moving on," dropping parents, relatives, old friends, acquaintances, and lovers as she goes.¹⁹ When the President gives her an Igbo version of his name (303), her rootlessness is complete: Olga recognizes her in the newspaper only by her face, there being nothing familiar left of her name (304). Gordimer suggests that such rootlessness is a requisite to being able to "give up being white" and seek out levers of power wherever they may present themselves. But it is not to be celebrated. Whaila finds that "sometimes [Hillela's] lack of any identification with her own people dismayed him . . . there was something missing in her . . . like a limb or an organ" (208). And the President has stronger feeling for the importance of Hillela's kinship to her mother than has Hillela herself (296).

Ruthlessness too may be necessary but is not to be celebrated. Hillela has no difficulty imposing on people. As she flees South Africa "friends who had offered her 'something to wear' had not failed to notice she took the best garments" (119), and she endangers her uncle Joe and his work by asking him to contravene exchange control restrictions for her (122). Later she so overstays her welcome with London liberals (198) that when she reappears several years later they hope she is not planning to stay with them again (288). Hillela treats people as means to an end as she moves through them, dropping them as they lose their usefulness. We hear a number of snide comments that "Hillela has never lost her instinct for avoiding losers" (209). The worst example may well be her casual dropping of her American fiancé Brad to "move on" with Reuel. The commentary virtually links this to military necessity: "she told him with true kindness, the impulse with which her guerrillas cared for some of the homeless and starving in their war" (263). And earlier on the same page Hillela has

said "what else is war? You're a victim, or you fight and make victims" (263).

Gordimer also stresses Hillela's adaptability and survival instincts. They are necessary because of the variety of settings into which the cause takes her, from testifying before the US Congress to drinking contaminated water with guerrillas in the African bush. She makes use of everything in her background, serving tea or African food to visitors as the occasion demands; "there hasn't been anything she hasn't profited by, at one period or another" (205). She is a survivor: Pavel notes "you are too clever for anything to happen to you, Hillela" (231, 232-3). Gordimer's considerable emphasis on Hillela's Jewish background underlines these themes, through a dual evocation of the wandering Jew and the Holocaust survivors. Certainly Gordimer has rarely in the past placed such emphasis on Jewishness in her writing about South Africa.²⁰ The evocation of the Holocaust and its connection with South Africa is explicit when Karel shows Hillela the can of Zyklon B on his bookshelf in memory of the treatment of death as "some ordinary . . . commodity," and Hillela cries — not for Whaila's recent death but for her own lost innocence as she faces "the necessity to deal in death . . . meeting death with death, not flowers and memorials" (227-8).

Hillela is certainly skilled at the manipulation of such limited sources of power as have been given to her. She trades on the death of Whaila as a source of credentials (217; see also 239). Her sexuality passes from being merely a source of pleasure and of truth to being something that can be manipulated: "something new has been learned. . . . One can offer, without giving. It's a form of power" (198). Her sexual attractiveness helps get aid for Africa: "lust is the best aid raiser" (245). Later it is instrumental in establishing her connection with the General (275, 283); his son notes that "this one not only knew the need to move on, but also what she would not reveal to his father: what it was necessary to do, to bring this about" (286), which we understand to mean her trading on her sexuality. Moreover, she is perfectly aware of what she is doing. One of the attractions of her planned marriage to Brad, she thinks, is that there would be "no need to

watch for what can be traded — searching pockets for attributes: martyr's wife, expressive Latin eyes and large breasts" (260).

But if these characteristics are necessary to Hillela's pursuit of power, it is far from clear that Gordimer endorses them.

Doubt about what Gordimer endorses arises from the extreme distance which she establishes from her protagonist. Much of the narration is in shifting third-person voices, frequently that of a biographer largely hostile to Hillela. The biographer often suggests how little is known of her, and casts doubts on her worthiness. Gordimer creates a double distance from her creation, then, by interposing another person, and by having that other person profess ignorance and doubt.

The epitome of this distancing and disapproving may well be the biographer's comment that little is known about Hillela during one period of her life, followed by the observation that

[i]n the lives of the greatest, there are such lacunae — Christ and Shakespeare disappear from and then reappear in the chronicles that documentation and human memory provide. (100)

Gordimer distances herself by interposing the biographer; the biographer creates further distance by telling us how little is known; and the absurd comparison with Christ and Shakespeare creates further distance through its disapproving irony. Neither then nor by the end of the novel does the comparison seem apt.

Nor does the disapproving tone apply only to Hillela's hedonistic youth when a liberal (or post-liberal) author might well disapprove of her creation. The recurring phrase "trust her" and variations on it serve as a litmus. It carries a tone of disapproval which increases over the course of the novel, starting as a comment on her innocence but ending as thoroughly snide. It first appears applied to Rey when he is with a distrusting group of blacks and Hillela thinks innocently "*Trust him! Trust him!*" (115). But we learn that Rey is eminently untrustworthy, abandoning Hillela (129), playing the ANC against the PAC (138), and probably acting as an informer as well (318). For a while the phrase seems a genuine comment on Hillela's trustworthiness, as in the exiles' assessment that they can trust Hillela (135), and Udi's assessment that she can be trusted not to make mistakes by

dancing her life away (152). But it takes on snide tones in the biographer's report that Hillela did well in distancing herself from her white relatives by having a black child and in naming her daughter after Winnie Mandela: "Trust her, as her enemies would remark" (195). Later the phrase becomes increasingly snide as it refers to her success at social climbing and her callousness, to her getting into a position where she can dispense grants (241), to her protecting herself from knowing the pain her letters cause to Brad (301), and to her choosing as husband a president who manages his country well (331).

Other signs of the biographer's disapproval are common. The biographer frequently points out Hillela's callousness in dumping people as she "moves on." The voice also suggests that she lies about her past: the biographer reports Hillela's usual story of how she met Whaila, says "Well, it's not impossible," and then sets about demolishing the account by noting other versions Hillela has told and by citing reasons that the usual version is most unlikely (170-71). The biographer also raises doubts about Hillela's maturity and dedication. When she disappears from Eastern Europe, the biographer offers explanations drawn from the politics of the liberation movement, but ends by suggesting that she may well have left merely on a whim: "Maybe she left as she had hitched a lift to Durban one afternoon after school. That is a judgment that has to be considered. A harsh one" (236).

Why all of this distance between Gordimer and Hillela? There is some small possibility that Gordimer intends the biographer to embody Pauline's lesson to Carole: "When you do what's right, here . . . You have to accept that you won't be popular — with some people" (21). But the disapproval is too unrelenting to bear no more than that as its point. And the point is dulled by the fact that Gordimer establishes no distance between herself and the biographer's point of view. Gordimer herself seems at least ambivalent about her creation and perhaps even disapproving.²¹

Much of what Hillela has to do to achieve her success may well be distasteful to Gordimer. One may well imagine that Gordimer bemoans the diminishment of Hillela's humanity in using people as means to an end and in her glib acceptance of the need to make victims, however necessary that is to the seizure of power.

The distasteful means must be yet less attractive if Gordimer feels there is no guarantee of the end that Hillela achieves through them. Indeed, in a number of Gordimer's recent works we see a sense that the future often betrays one's best hopes for it.

With the partial exception of the overly facile and unconvincing triumph of the South African liberation movement in *A Sport of Nature*, Gordimer's vision of the future has become increasingly pessimistic in recent years. In *Burger's Daughter* Rosa capitulates to agnosticism about the future which will be designed by the children of Soweto. But her agnosticism is optimistic in a way that has disappeared in Gordimer's later works. When the future that the Smaleses have been waiting for arrives in *July's People*, its reality is so frightening that they flee to a haven in which they destroy both their present and their past, running in the end to rejoin an unknown but almost certainly distasteful future. The collection *Something Out There* (1984)²² is full of tales of "diminishment"²³ and betrayal in which the future turns out to be worse than imagined. The township housewife in "A City of the Dead, a City of the Living" (*SOT* 9-26) betrays the fugitive she and her husband have been sheltering. The holocaust survivors of "Sins of the Third Age" (*SOT* 65-77) remake their lives and plan their future, only to discover when it arrives that it has been emptied by the husband's infidelity. The wife in "Terminal" (*SOT* 97-101) arrives at a future she had tried to avoid when her husband revives her despite their pact to help each other commit suicide in case of terminal illness. The physicist and the writer in "Rags and Bones" (*SOT* 89-96) whose letters show they thought each other Nobel Prize material turn out to have been non-entities. General Giant in "At the Rendezvous of Victory" (*SOT* 27-38) creates a liberated future for his people, only to discover that it is a future in which he has no place.²⁴ Even in *A Sport of Nature* the liberated South African future of "Whaila's Country" seems little likely to become Hillela's utopia. The President who is giving such useful advice to the new rulers and whose country is so widely praised still has "a prison where individuals designated Enemies of the People are held," still sees "the occasional expulsion of a miscreant foreign journalist" and still has a son "feared and known by the designated Enemies of the People

as the President's hit man" (331). And Gordimer indicates that white conservatives and industrialists will do very well, thank you, under the new South African regime (339, 340).

We cannot be surprised if Gordimer is less than enthusiastic about advocating distasteful means justified by ends to be found in an uncertain and probably distasteful future. It is a measure of the horror of the South African past and present that she has brought herself to such advocacy; but that does not mean that she has to like what she advocates. But where then is the influential vision of a role for whites to come from?

NOTES

- ¹ For comments on earlier drafts I am grateful to Susan Kirschner and to the editor of this issue. Remaining errors and weaknesses are my own responsibility.
- ² The point is not a "narcissistic focus . . . on the importance of white involvement . . . [in a] paternalistic posturing [which] . . . downplay[s] the role of black South Africans in the achievement of their own independence," as Jennifer Krauss has it in her "Activism 101," rev. of *A Sport of Nature*, *The New Republic* 18 May 1987: 33. Rather the point is to recognize both that blacks will make the revolution in South Africa and that whites now have the power there. To hope for a white role which shortens the struggle need not be narcissistic or paternalistic, nor need it downplay the role of blacks. See, for example, the role envisioned for whites by Steve Biko in "White Racism and Black Consciousness" in Hendrik W. van der Merwe and David Welsh, eds. *Student Perspectives on South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1972), reprinted in Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 65-66:

Most white dissident groups are aware of the power wielded by the white power structure. . . . Why then do they persist in talking to the blacks? Since they are aware that the problem in this country is white racism, who do they not address themselves to the white world? . . . The liberal must fight on his own and for himself. . . . They must realise that they themselves are oppressed, and that they must fight for their own freedom and not that of the nebulous "they" with whom they can hardly claim identification.
- ³ Nadine Gordimer, *A Sport of Nature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987). Further references to this novel will be incorporated in the text.
- ⁴ Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980). Further references to this novel will be abbreviated as *BD* and incorporated in the text.
- ⁵ For a further development of this argument, see Richard Peck, "One Foot before the Other into an Unknown Future: The Dialectic in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*," *WLWE*. Forthcoming.
- ⁶ This saves her work from the weakness suggested by Diane Johnson: "since there is no defense on [sic] apartheid, it can seem that something obvious is being advanced with great righteousness." "Living Legends,"

- rev. of *A Sport of Nature*, *New York Review of Books* 16 July 1987: 8. Gordimer is less interested in delineating the nature of the problem of *apartheid* than she is in searching for solutions to it, condemning false solutions as she goes.
- ⁷ More worthy of Gordimer's moral vehemence are those who know better but line up on the wrong side. Thus, the only conservative in her recent fiction who receives Gordimer's full vitriol is the slick apologist for *apartheid*, Brandt Vermeulin, in *Burger's Daughter*. On the "merciless dissection" which Gordimer gives to Rosa's encounters with Vermeulin, see Robert Boyers, "Public and Private: On *Burger's Daughter*," *Salmagundi* 62 (1984): 77.
- ⁸ Peck, "One Foot before the Other."
- ⁹ Krauss, "Activism 101": 34.
- ¹⁰ Other examples include those on pages 52-3, 65-70, 89-91, 101, 107, 112, and 114.
- ¹¹ Gordimer's emphasis on Hillela's physical love throughout the novel seems meant to suggest the bankruptcy of ideologies in the South African setting by giving value to the most elemental emotions stripped of the baggage of ideology. Certainly there is much emphasis throughout the novel on the "truthfulness" which Hillela finds in the act of love, a truthfulness greater than that to be found in merely verbal expressions of love. See, for example, 141. On variations of the miscegenation theme in Gordimer's earlier fiction, see Susan M. Greenstein, "Miranda's Story: Nadine Gordimer and the Literature of Empire," *Novel* 18 (1985): 227-42.
- ¹² For a discussion of Gordimer's place in the South African liberal movement and the examination of the crisis of South African liberalism in her fiction, see Irene Wettenhall, "Liberalism and Radicalism in South Africa Since 1948: Nadine Gordimer's Fiction," *New Literature Review* 8 (1980): 36-44.
- ¹³ Nadine Gordimer, *July's People* (New York: Penguin, 1981).
- ¹⁴ Elizabeth Hardwick, "Somebody Out There" rev. of *Something Out There* by Nadine Gordimer, *The New York Review of Books* 16 August 1984: 6.
- ¹⁵ Compare this with page 66, where we are told that Pauline and Joe lack such a sign and cannot feel the tug of history.
- ¹⁶ Compare this with Rosa Burger's defence of the utopia, *BD* 296.
- ¹⁷ This is an old theme in Gordimer's fiction, appearing as early as her *The Lying Days* of 1953. See Rose Moss, "Hand in Glove, Nadine Gordimer: South African Writer," *Moana: Pacific Quarterly* 6.3-4: (1981): 111, on that novel's vision of the future represented in an unborn child whose mother wants not to reproduce herself. Contrast this with Krauss' misreading that "Hillela is happy to have merely 'reproduced herself,' " in her "Activism 101": 36.
- ¹⁸ Krauss is unfair in suggesting that Hillela plays no role during this time other than becoming "involved in preserving and decorating the imperial palace." "Activism 101": 35.
- ¹⁹ She drops Olga (96), Sasha (99), Pauline (131, 199), her political refugee friends (161), her Embassy family (174), her father (202), a committee she was working with when she ran off with the General (276), and her fiancé Brad (300).
- ²⁰ Note, however, the importance of Joel's Jewishness in *The Lying Days*.

Abdul R. JanMohamed argues that he serves as "a critical mirror" for the gentle protagonist, and that "their own internalization of ethnic barriers" between gentle and Jew prevents the consummation of their relationship. *Manichean Aesthetics; The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (Amherst, Mass.: U of Massachusetts P, 1983) 91.

- ²¹ Mark Uhlig reports that Gordimer said "I am completely different from Hillela," and added "that the path chosen by her heroine 'would be quite shocking to moralistic people — including myself.'" Reported in "Shocked by Her Own Heroine" [interview with Nadine Gordimer], *New York Times Book Review* 3 May 1987: 20. For an excellent discussion of irony in Gordimer's treatment of Hillela, see Rowland Smith, "Leisure, Law and Loathing: Matrons, Mistresses, Mothers in the Fiction of Nadine Gordimer and Jillian Becker," *WLWE* 28.1 (1988): 41-51.
- ²² Nadine Gordimer, *Something Out There* (New York: Viking, 1984). Further references to this collection of stories will be abbreviated as *SOT* and incorporated in the text.
- ²³ Merle Rubin, "Gordimer's Stories: A Stark, Harsh View of South African Life" rev. of *Something Out There* by Nadine Gordimer, *The Christian Science Monitor* 9 August 1984: 24.
- ²⁴ That the title comes from Aimé Césaire's statement only makes the point more poignant: "No race possesses the monopoly of beauty, / of intelligence, of force, and there is / a place for all at the rendezvous of victory." *Return to My Native Land* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 85.