

NADINE'S WORLD OF STRANGERS

A Review of *Some Monday for Sure*, by Nadine Gordimer, Heinemann, 1976.

by Colin Gardner

With this volume, which consists of thirteen of the short stories that appeared last year in her **Selected Stories (published by Jonathan Cape)**, Nadine Gordimer becomes one of the very few whites to have figured in the Heinemann African Writers Series. The stories are certainly not out of place in the series: they tell of Africa, they belong to Africa.

It used sometimes to be said of Nadine Gordimer that, whereas most South African writers (both white and black) were partisan and 'political' in their treatment of people and society, she wrote with an observant detachment which enabled her to portray real human complexities. My impression of these stories is in several respects a distinctly different one. Ms Gordimer's literary skill seems to me to make her a remarkable commentator on—and evoker of—some crucial aspects of South African social and political life. But her creation of people, and her insight into people, subtle and impressive as it normally is, often lacks profundity and compassion.

To talk first of the important virtues of the stories. Some of the formulations in Ms Gordimer's short introduction are pertinent:

Stories and novels are works of the imagination; they embody—implicitly—psychological, sociological and political truths. These often are not representative of the personal point of view of the writer himself; in fact, he must set himself to be a kind of medium through which the attitudes of the society he lives in come to light. This is true of my short stories. They reflect the attitudes of various kinds of whites towards blacks in South Africa, and sometimes the attitudes of blacks towards white, and various relationships between black and white . . . Making this selection of only thirteen stories from the five short story collections I have published in twenty-five years, I find that the changing subject-matter and even the changing vocabulary in these books reflect the changes in relationships between black and white over these decades, against the background of political events. This came about subconsciously in my work . . .

She then proceeds to give precise brief accounts of the atmosphere and the main implications of each of the stories.

There can be no argument about her capacity to observe South African society in its varied and changing manifestations and moods. Like a highly imaginative journalist (I

don't use this word in any derogatory sense), she is capable of catching the phrases, the faces, the gestures, the movements, the dress even, which express the ever-contradictory thrusts and tendencies of South African humanity—and hypocrisies. But she does not deal only, or even mainly, with ordinary complacent or unthinking South Africans, either white or black: her attention is very often focused on people who are (or who regard themselves as being) fairly 'enlightened', people who try, with intense or with mild enthusiasm, to change society, to 'make things better'.

For these reasons, these short stories ought to be compulsory reading for South Africans of almost every sort. Ms Gordimer's attitude and tone tend to be astringent, ironical, disenchanted. All of us need the challenges that she provides.

Let me offer two almost random examples of Nadine Gordimer's quality. First, a passage from 'Six Feet of the Country' (1956). The narrator, an ordinary though fairly sympathetic white employer, is about to tell his servant Petrus of the cost of getting back from the authorities the body of his brother from Rhodesia who had been living illegally with him in the servants' quarters and had suddenly died of pneumonia:

. . . I found out that, with the undertaker's charges, it would cost twenty pounds. Ah, I thought, that settles it. On five pounds a month, Petrus won't have twenty pounds . . . and just as well, since it couldn't do the dead any good. Certainly I should not offer it to him myself. Twenty pounds—or anything else within reason, for that matter—I would have spent without grudging it on doctors or medicines that might have helped the boy when he was alive. Once he was dead, I had no intention of encouraging Petrus to throw away, on a gesture, more than he spent to clothe his whole family in a year. When I told him in the kitchen that night, he said, 'Twenty pounds?'

I said, 'Yes, that's right, twenty pounds.'

For a moment, I had the feeling, from the look on his face, that he was calculating. But when he spoke again I thought I must have imagined it. 'We must pay twenty pounds!' he said in the faraway voice in which a person speaks of something so unattainable that it does not bear thinking about.

'All right, Petrus', I said, and went back to the living-room.

The next morning before I went to town, Petrus asked to see me. 'Please, Baas,' he said, awkwardly handling me a bundle of notes. They're so seldom on the giving rather than the receiving side, poor devils, that they don't really know how to hand money to a white man. There it was, the twenty pounds, in ones and halves, some creased and folded until they were soft as dirty rags, others smooth and fairly new—Fran's money, I suppose, and Albert's, and Dora the cook's, and Jacob the gardener's, and God knows who else's beside, from all the farms and smallholdings round about. I took it in irritation more than in astonishment, really—irritation at the waste, the uselessness of this sacrifice by people so poor. Just like the poor everywhere, I thought, who stint themselves the decencies of life in order to insure themselves the decencies of death. So incomprehensible to people like Lericé and me, who regard life as something to be spent extravagantly and, if we think about death at all, regard it as the final bankruptcy.

What is caught admirably is the point of collision between two different ways of life, two different philosophies. The white man is sympathetic, pitying, 'knowing' in his recognition of the ancestral absurdities of 'the poor' (one notes that he makes his own contribution to the fact of poverty), while Petrus is humbly, doggedly sure of his own intuitions. Petrus believes passionately in what the narrator half-ironically calls 'the decencies of death'; the white man's enlightenment consists, we notice, of a 'humanistic' and sceptical materialism which seems to have the effect of reducing life, ultimately, to the very medium—money—that Petrus is forced to back his beliefs with.

The vision that permeates this passage is very humane. The author like any good writer, is attempting to define, to understand—to depict differences and discordances so that the gaps and gulfs may be viewed. For it is only when that has been done that the possibility of closing the gaps and filling the gulfs can be properly envisaged. And clearly mental and emotional processes of the sort that Nadine Gordimer encourages here are what South Africa deeply needs if the country is ever to have peace.

My second example comes from 'Africa Emergent', a story of the early seventies. Here the narrator is a liberal-radical white man:

I'm an architect and the way I was usefully drawn into the black scene was literally that: I designed sets for a mixed colour drama group got together by a white director. Perhaps there's no urban human group as intimate, in the end, as a company of this kind, and the colour problem made us even closer. I don't mean what **you** mean, the how-do-I-feel-about-that-black-skin stuff; I mean the daily exasperation of getting round, or over, or on top of the colour bar laws that plagued our productions and our lives. We had to remember to write out 'passes' at night, so that our actors could get home without being arrested for being out after the curfew, we had to spend hours at the Bantu Affairs Department trying to arrange local residence permits for actors who were being 'endorsed out' of town back to the villages to which, 'ethnically', apparently, they belonged although they'd never set eyes on them, and we had to decide which of us could play the sycophant well

enough to persuade the Bantu Commissioner to allow the show to go on the road from one Group Area, designated by colour, to another, or to talk some town clerk into getting his council to agree to the use of a 'white' public hall by a mixed cast. The black actor's lives were in our hands, because they were black and we were white, and could, must intercede for them. Don't think this made everything love and light between us, in fact it caused endless huffs and rows. A white woman who'd worked like a slave acting as PRO-cum wardrobe-mistress hasn't spoken to me for years because I made her lend her little car to one of the chaps who'd worked until after the last train went back to the location, and then he kept it the whole weekend and she couldn't get hold of him because, of course, location houses rarely have telephones and once a black man has disappeared among those warrens you won't find him till he chooses to surface in the white town again. And when this one did surface, he was biting, to me, about white bitches' 'patronage' of people they secretly still thought of as 'boys'. Yet our arguments, resentments and misunderstandings were not only as much part of the intimacy of this group as the good times, the parties and the love-making we had, but were more—the defining part, because we'd got close enough to admit argument, resentment and misunderstanding between us.

That paragraph describes illuminatingly an experience that many white liberals will know: the interest, the tension, the unsatisfactoriness, the necessity of black-white relations. The necessity is clear: we live in one society, and must learn to know, help and love one another. But the present unsatisfactoriness is clear too; it is caused by the inhuman laws of the land, the variously dehumanizing effects of these laws, the cultural misunderstandings (themselves exacerbated by the facts of apartheid), the constant state of emotional restlessness. And yet, there are paradoxical consolations: 'we'd got close enough to admit argument, resentment and misunderstanding between us'. Any close relationship needs to reach this condition—the point of real honesty, of confrontation and commitment. And yet again: can people, however well-intentioned, get the true value from such moments when they are not free, when it is not within their power to resolve fully the arguments and resentments? Can the 'creative minorities' within a nation get anything creative going when they are imprisoned by the fears and repressions of those who at present dominate almost all of the processes of society?

In such a passage as this Nadine Gordimer gives in a nutshell the tragedy of present-day South Africa.

II

But these short stories seem to me to lack greatness precisely because they fail to embody South African problems in fully tragic terms.

The clue to what seem to me the limitations of the stories is to be found in the Introduction, from which I have quoted already. One of the statements I left incomplete before continues in this way:

(My stories) reflect the attitudes of various kinds of whites towards blacks in South Africa, and sometimes the attitudes of blacks towards whites, and various relationships between black and white, but rarely my

own attitudes, for the simple reason that these would too often represent the exception and not the rule. Few of the white people in my stories belong to that group of white South Africans who visualize and accept freedom for South Africa in terms of a black majority government elected by unqualified franchise.

Few readers of **Reality** will object to Ms Gordimer's political convictions, and if her explanation-cum-declaration seems a little stark and self-conscious one recognizes that she wants to be sure that readers of the African Writers Series will not misinterpret her essential stance. But her statements contain implications that are perhaps a little disturbing from a **literary** point of view: she pictures herself as detached from almost every attitude that she describes and evokes. Now of course it is the fate of the white radical to disagree with most things that are said and done in South Africa, especially by the dominant whites. But it is also (paradoxical as it may seem) both the fate and the task of the creative writer to experience from within everything or almost everything that he or she gives—or hopes to give—life and body to.

Needless to say, the process of imaginative sympathy is not simple: emotion and thought are both fused and in tension; the very act of commitment to one's subject involves a special sort of honest withdrawal. But this withdrawal is not—or it is not mainly—the detachment of the observer who seems to know all the answers.

Nadine Gordimer is by no means unaware of her standpoint:

My approach in these stories, as in many others, is that of irony. In fact, I would say that in general, in my stories, my approach as a short story writer is the ironical one, and that it represents the writer's unconscious selection of the approach best suited to his material.

Irony is a rich and varied literary mode; but only in the greatest writers—in Shakespeare, say, or Conrad—is it compatible with the deepest compassion. Irony has a general tendency to 'make points', even at times to score points, whereas full imaginativeness represents somehow the process of living out, and living through. . .

Ms Gordimer is (it seems to me) good at depicting societies, not so good at creating people—an expert at backgrounds, but rather less happy in her foregrounds. Or to put it in

another way, she seems often to prefer surfaces (which she registers with a coolly loving care) to inwardness (which she frequently fails to animate fully, or leaves largely to our imagination, or brushes aside half-ironically). Most of her stories are about failures of communication; but there is a kind of communication that they themselves don't really succeed in.

The criticisms that I have made cannot be substantiated easily: one needs to consider the whole of a story before one can demonstrate in detail what seem to be its shortcomings. And I do not wish to elaborate here the more 'negative' section of this review. The following short extract from 'The African Magician' (1965), however, seems to be not wholly untypical:

There was a newly married couple, of course—that look of a pair tied up for a three-legged race who haven't mastered the gait yet. The husband was ordinary enough but the girl was unexpected, among the browsing herd setting to over the first meal aboard. She was very tall, the same size as her husband, and her long thin naked legs in shorts showed the tense tendon, fleshless, on each inner thigh as she walked. On the extreme thinness and elongation of the rest of her—half pathetic, half elegant—was balanced a very wide square jaw. In profile the face was pretty; full on, the extraordinary width of her blemished forehead, her thick black eyebrows above grey eyes, her very big straight mouth with pale lips, was a distortion of unusual beauty. Her style could have been Vogue model, or beatnik. In fact, she was a Belgian country girl who had hit naturally, by an accident of physique and a natural sluttishness, upon what I knew only as a statement of artifice of one kind or another.

There is plenty of 'observation' there; but does the woman who is being described really live? She is in some respects like a doll, or even a corpse.

III

That is not the note on which I wish to end, however. Nadine Gordimer is an important writer, who is always intelligent, always interesting, always perceptive. A South African who has not read her is likely to be considerably less aware than he should be. □