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SURVIVING MURDER: OSCILLATION AND TRIANGULATION IN NADINE GORDIMER'S *THE HOUSE GUN*

Stephen Clingman

> "He, she—twitch of a smile, he got himself up with languor directed at her and went to lift the nearest receiver. Who, she half-heard him say, half-listening to the commentary following the images, Who."
>
> —Nadine Gordimer, *The House Gun*

These, the opening two sentences of the third paragraph of Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun* (1998), introduce a sequence which appears to be, in narrative terms, fairly accessible. The setting, though it begins to stage a moment of shock and incomprehension, is clear. Claudia and Harald Lindgard, secure in their middle-class professions (she as doctor, he as well-placed business executive) as well as secured for physical safety's sake within the confines of their small but comfortable townhouse in Johannesburg, are faced with a sudden and unexpected entry. The caller at the door, whom Harald has risen to question through the intercom before admitting, turns out to be Julian, a friend of their son Duncan, who has arrived at their home to tell them that someone has been shot and that Duncan has been arrested for the killing. The couple has been interrupted while watching evening news of disasters elsewhere (the television images Claudia is still half-following in her mind), to hear an

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account of a sudden and intimate disaster close at hand. The remainder of the novel is an investigation of what the fact of this murder means in the lives of those who surround it, not least in the lives of Harald and Claudia, who must come to terms with it. The immediate and disturbing effect is one of dislocation. The couple, perfectly ensconced in their relationship and respective identities, find themselves occupying a different place within their place, knowing suddenly and without preparation some of the realities that, for instance, have attended the lives of black South Africans. They experience a loss of authority; a certain helplessness in the face of fate; a struggle between speechlessness and speech as they confront a different picture of their lives and legacy; and dependence on the help and power of others. Most directly they depend on Hamilton Motsamai, the lawyer they hire to represent Duncan, who, having risen from the world of impoverishment and exile, is now the figure of wealth and authority whose presence and voice they must come to trust.

On one level it appears to be a reversal, but reversal is not simply what this novel is about. In many ways, on the contrary, it is an attempt to see beyond reversal, and how and why this occurs is of some larger significance. *The House Gun* is not a novel that tackles its postapartheid setting directly, in the sense that one might consider it a social or political work. Indeed, in focusing on a murder mystery, it may seem to have turned away from the characteristic issues that have preoccupied Gordimer in her previous fiction—the presentiments of historical revolution in *The Conservationist*, the response to the Soweto Revolt of *Burger's Daughter*, the overt setting of the politically apocalyptic moment of *July's People*, the explorations of transition in *My Son's Story*. Instead, *The House Gun* is much quieter, more intimate, more introspective, and it might appear that Gordimer has at last been freed from the constraints of writing within and against the context of apartheid to explore a wholly different genre. The fact that the book is on one level a murder mystery, even a thriller of sorts, may account for its wider appeal among Gordimer's novels. But in its very intimacy, its turning away, it may also be turning *toward* something. What that something might be, how it is constituted, will be the task of this article to address.

For a preliminary indication, it is worth noticing again those two sentences and asking certain questions that at first might seem insubstantial. In what style, or combination of styles, are they written? Where is the awareness within these sentences located, or is there more than one awareness, complexly located? What sorts of movement or flow

occur within them? And—though it may appear an odd question for something so slight or inevitable—is there any significance in the fact that, besides Harald and Claudia, there is an unseen third at the door in this scenario? In putting such questions it may seem that we are asking relatively ethereal matters of stylistics and structure to bear an inordinately heavy load. Yet the patterns they reveal are replicated in different ways throughout the novel, ultimately taking on a larger significance. Why this is so is a narrative mystery, in the end inseparable from the mystery of the murder, which I shall attempt to unravel in the pages that follow. To begin to understand elements of the answer, we should turn to Gordimer's earlier work for contrast.

The patterns I want to distill from Gordimer's earlier work are those of binarism and—related to this—certain kinds of closure. The generalizing eye is in danger of missing nuances, but nonetheless, if we take Gordimer's great triad of the 1970s and early 1980s, *The Conservationist*, *Burger's Daughter*, and *July's People*, some of these patterns will be clear.

In *The Conservationist*, for instance, the central binary pattern emerges in the relationship between Mehring—the industrialist who owns a farm just outside Johannesburg—and the black body buried shallowly, by the police, on his land. These two figures, one live, one dead, become the central antagonists of the novel, not least because the improperly buried body comes to inhabit a realm of Mehring's unconscious where its significance becomes increasingly palpable. Indeed, an historical allegory is developed that works on three levels. Buried shallowly beneath the surface of the farm, the body poses the question of *possession*—a question answered toward the end of the novel when a storm sweeping in from Mozambique resurrects the body, and it is given a proper burial by the black community that has taken hold of the farm. At the same time, it represents a political version of the return of the repressed insofar as Mehring, confronting the risen body, is driven to mental breakdown: relations between his unconscious and consciousness have been inverted in this crisis, the net result being Mehring's surrender of the farm. There is also an element of *textual* inversion in that Mehring, whose dominance has been embodied in a rampantly imperializing monologue, experiences a lexical breakdown equal to the psychic breakdown. This is paralleled in the novel by the subversive presence of excerpts from Zulu mythology,

which come obliquely to prophesy Mehring's end, and in that sense take possession of the narrative.[1] This all works in the symbolic realm, of course, but it is the binarism that I wish to isolate, given perhaps its emblematic moment as Mehring is about to confront the risen body: "He doesn't move and the other doesn't move; it's as if each presence (himself and the sound of his own breathing) waits for the other, as concealment. Again, he's almost tempted to speak, the sense is strong; to make an ass of himself, saying aloud: —You're there. It seems to you that it is to you that thoughts are being addressed [. . .]" (227). Mehring, in such a moment, is all but glued to his opposite, to the extent that it has taken up residence in himself, inside his voice, inside his being; in these circumstances it is impossible that there should be any escape, one from the other.

The binarisms of *Burger's Daughter* are multiplied as Rosa addresses various "you's" in her mind, to the extent that one might think of the novel, in part, as a second-person narrative.[2] The emblematic announcement on this score comes from Rosa early in the novel: "And if I were really telling, instead of talking to you in my mind the way I find I do. . . . One is never talking to oneself, always one is addressed to someone, [. . .] even dreams are performed before an audience" (16). Thus Rosa addresses in her mind her father, Lionel Burger; her friend and sometime lover, Conrad; her father's first wife, Katya, living in France; and, ultimately most desperately, the young black man Baasie (real name Zwelinzima Vulindlela), who had once been taken into the Burger household. It is Baasie who phones Rosa in the middle of the night in London, after a party where she has not recognized him, to be an inner voice ringing in her mind, full of loss, recrimination, and anger. And it is after this phone call that Rosa determines to return to South Africa and her ultimate confinement of the prison cell, where she is, as before, addressed to her father. As for *July's People*, though it is in some respects more complex from this point of view, here the critical binary relationship is between Maureen Smales—fled with her husband and children in the apocalyptic breakdown of revolution—and her servant July. These two circle one another with an increasing antagonism, incapable of abandoning the roles of the past, a history of the past so embedded in their relationship that its outcome can only be destructive. Once again there is a culminating moment of dialogue as, in this case, July vents his anger at Maureen in his own language, a language she cannot understand in literal terms, but the import of which is all too clear. As Gordimer writes, "She

understood although she knew no word. Understood everything" (152). It is in the aftermath of this that Maureen abandons her family and flees, in a fashion to set all the critics of the novel at odds.[3]

We might say that such binary patterns have been in Gordimer's work virtually from the beginning. I have suggested elsewhere that "Is There Nowhere Else We Can Meet?," an early story from the 1940s, stands as something of a blueprint for Gordimer's fiction; as such it is instructive in this context.[4] Here we find a young woman, crossing territory between veld and town—what we might call Gordimer's characteristic fictional "border-country"—who is confronted by the figure of a black man coming towards her. Though (or perhaps because) the man is identified only in symbolic terms, the woman feels a strange mix of fear and compulsion as she approaches him. The result is less than the dreadful event she fears, but complex nonetheless: a tussle over her handbag, from which the woman emerges into the town in a state of regret, confusion, and an inability to put the experience into any articulate frame. Once again the structure is a binary one, as the two figures approach one another as if through a magnetic field, and yet there are other elements of note. One is that, just as in *July's People* Maureen runs through veld and river (with its symbolic overtones of transfiguration) toward her ambivalent rendezvous, so in this early story the young woman escapes through veld, a ditch, and barbed wire to what may or may not be the safety of the town—since it is entirely the meaning of the latter that has been put into question by her displacing encounter. But the key point here is that, faced with the presence of a third element—the white people of the town—the young woman recognizes the impossibility of explaining the complexity of her experience; and so she retreats into silence. It is the *third element* in the triangle that shuts the experience down, that provides an impermeable closure—closure in particular for the young woman whose life might otherwise find a different location and opening out. It is the implicit gaze or look of this third element—the white world with its ready certainties—that provides no options for the young woman.

This sort of structure is paralleled in a number of Gordimer's other stories. In "The Train from Rhodesia," the triangle is formed by a young white woman, her newly married husband, and a black artist at a rural railway station trying to sell a carving of a lion. When the white man gloats over how he has beaten the black man down in price in order to obtain the lion for the woman, she stares as if into a mirror of colonial

hollowness and entrapment. In "The Catch," a young white couple on holiday at the beach befriend—and exoticize—an Indian fisherman; but it is in the company of others that the man, and the huge fish he has caught, become an embarrassment: there is no path through this triangle to any kind of authentic encounter. In "Six Feet of the Country"—an early rehearsal of *The Conservationist*—the triangle is formed by a husband and wife on a farm and their black worker, Petrus. Here it is the husband, the first-person narrator of the story, who as white male authority represents the cultural superego, so to speak, the element in the triangle that provides a paralyzing closure. The story ends—as so many of Gordimer's early stories do—in a lacerating self-irony, precisely because of the unavailability of any other options. Of course there are inflections here that should be noted. Thus, it is not as if the female characters in these stories are somehow pristine and untrammeled, prior to their experience, by the crippling effects of the certainties of white authority; it is partly because they have already *absorbed* the inhibitions of these certainties that they find themselves so compromised in the first place. Nor is the husband in "Six Feet" wholly identified with white power; at some level he too (like Mehring) realizes his lack of authenticity. Yet one way or another these triangular structures supervene, and they seem to be sealed and confining; it is part of the weight of Gordimer's fiction that at key moments she has recognized their force.

In *The Conservationist* and *Burger's Daughter* triangles of this sort are less intensively present, but active nonetheless. Mehring is "triangulated" in various directions: between the body and his mistress, Antonia, whose liberal objections to his regime he ventriloquizes with thoroughgoing contempt in his monologue; and between the body and the police, to whom he serves as interlocutor. Likewise, his overseer Jacobus is triangulated between Mehring and the body, and if there is hope of any way out in the novel it is on the prophetic level, as Jacobus and the farm workers rebury the body and (symbolically) take possession of the farm. In *Burger's Daughter*, Rosa enters into various triangles: between her parents and her lover, Noel de Witt; between her father and Conrad; between her father and Baasie; between South Africa and France, as she decides where to live out her destiny. But none of these triangles offers her a way out of what she (re)turns to with conviction: the ultimate enclosure of her prison cell. *July's People* may be even more interesting in that, supplementing the binary relationships, the primary triangle in the novel is so decisively ingrained, constituted by Maureen, her husband

Bam, and July. Here, as each must work out a new role in entirely unexpected circumstances, any shift of one of the apexes in relation to another is accompanied by a shift in relation to the third. In effect, Maureen, Bam, and July slug it out to see if this triangle can be transformed; but it can't, and this is one working definition, within the novel, of apocalypse. The past cannot produce alternative relationships for the future, and this is why, on one level, Maureen takes off, abandoning her previous life in the only hope that she can fashion, of a transfigured future arriving from "outside."

Such triangulations are not confined to Gordimer's fiction. In J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*, triangles abound—between the narrator Magda, her father, and the servant Hendrik; and between the father, Hendrik, and the latter's wife Klein-Anna. But it is well known that there is no escape within this novel either. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, there are the Magistrate, Colonel Joll, and the Barbarian woman, but this is not a triangle that produces any escape or transforming future, for the Magistrate in particular. Michael K's singular achievement, in *Life & Times of Michael K*, is not only in avoiding absorption within either of the opposing camps in the war, but also in unsettling the usual pattern by refusing to become an identifiable third term between them.

Are triangles inevitable? Is one simply reciting the obvious, providing a list? And what then of *The House Gun*? Let us return again to its opening moment, with that young man, Julian, at the door. Julian, as suggested, will initiate shock and displacement; for some while, as they absorb the fact that their son has killed someone, Claudia and Harald will not know where and who they are; their lives will open up into a domain of non-definition. At the opening of *July's People*, Maureen and Bam are also wholly displaced—perhaps even more than Harald and Claudia, as the trauma of their escape from Johannesburg has left a surreal sense of time and space in their minds. Someone also appears at the door of their hut—an already open one, in this novel. It is July, but what he offers is a cup of tea, and at some level merely the replication of the reality none of them can leave behind. An open door closes in *July's People*; in *The House Gun* a closed one may open. Is there a difference between productive and unproductive triangles? How will we tell?

"He, she—twitch of a smile, he got himself up with languor directed at her and went to lift the nearest receiver. Who, she half-heard him say, half-listening to the commentary following the images, Who."

Let us begin with the issue of the binary relationship, in this case between Harald and Claudia. This opening is not, on its face, wholly distinctive when compared with Gordimer's other fiction. "He, she": in *July's People* Bam and Maureen turn into a "he" and "she" for one another, the trappings of previous identity reduced to their radical essentials, and so they begin to face one another in opposition. Yet, though Harald and Claudia will go through a period of disjunction, this is not exactly what occurs here, and one can see it even in these sentences. For there is not so much opposition but a different kind of movement that occurs between the two figures, and it is because of this that Gordimer has adopted a style that can render it. "He, she"; the place of the narration is outside both characters, yet rather than simply expressing antithesis between Harald and Claudia, it seems also to inhabit both of their minds and reverberate between them. Following Mieke Bal, we may say that the *focalization* of this mini-narrative moment—in the sense of its presentation through a specific agent or point of perception—shifts back and forth. We then find, as we look at the sentences, that nothing occurs that is not relational: Harald's twitch of a smile is a form of communication with Claudia; his languor—a personal condition or gesture—is "directed at her," perhaps in opposition, but also in community. There follows a moment of unlocated narration: "Who." The speech is Harald's, though it is registered in Claudia's consciousness; the style is free indirect discourse as an element of external narration also enters in. Though we then enter the third-person again (with some resonances as if in Claudia's mind), the last word is "Who," in that same mode, that same resonance of multiple focalization. In short, instead of some fixed locus of narration, or some locked binary opposition, we find instead an *oscillation*, a form of wave motion through the sentences as the point of consciousness shifts and the meaning of relational gestures flows back and forth. We note in passing other oscillations—between the indicative and the interrogative moods for instance in that "Who"—and from a different angle there is no fixed narrative "grammar" to the moment. The style registers as if to suggest not only that Harald and Claudia have already entered into a life where the old syntax—rules of combination, association, and sequence—might not apply, but where there is also no fixed point of observation.

Again, this is not wholly different from Gordimer's previous fiction: Mehring projects his "dialogue" with the black body, or with Jacobus, in a way that must register some degree of countervocal "flow," even within the dominance of his projections. Part of the ice of Maureen's gathering

understanding is the awareness of how far she and Bam, or she and July, have constructed their identities within the bounds of one another, not least in language. To this extent, Gordimer's current practice clarifies its seedling presence within her earlier fiction. But there is also a difference here, for what is distinctive within the sentences is the flow of consciousness, and it takes up a range of forms in the novel. What Bal would call the external narrator intervenes baldly and crudely, to say, for instance, "Why is Duncan not in the story?" (151). But far more interesting, and where Gordimer has understood stylistically the real import of her tale, is where voices and focalizations shift or echo. Harald and Claudia visit Duncan for the first time in prison: "Signals fly like bats about the room. Don't ask me. We only want to know what to do. I need to see you. If you don't tell us. I don't want to see you [. . .]. You can't know. At least how did it" (30). Here there is a rapid movement of voice and countervoice; again indicative and interrogative modes are transposed; fragments appear to reverse their original order, and the focalization, while shifting, is unlocated. Variants of this shifting occur elsewhere. Duncan, within his cell, cannot escape the reverberations in his mind of his girlfriend Natalie James's accusations against him. Who, we might ask of this extract, is voicing whom, and from what point of enunciation? "She had him cornered there. The most articulate being he had ever known, a kind of curse in her. You dragged me back you made me puke my death out of my lungs you revived me after the madhouse of psychopath doctors you plan you planned to *save* me in the missionary position not only on my back good taste married your babies [. . .]" (153). Bal has given us a technical language for mapping such shifts, but that does not mean the mapping is simple. If this short passage moves from an external narrator or focalizor at a primary level of narration (EF1) through a form of free indirect discourse to inhabit Duncan's mind as a secondary character-bound focalizor (CF2), then Natalie's voice, inseparable from his, is also in the narration, and our formula can only become something like the following: EF1/[CF2(Duncan)↔ CF3(Natalie)].[5]

Notable in some of these exchanges—but particularly between Harald and Claudia—is the absence of speech markers or demarcations. This is understandable in the episode already mentioned, where the two of them visit Duncan in prison: here Gordimer wishes to represent the sheer, unmediated jumble of voices in the air. It also makes sense when we inhabit Duncan's mind as Natalie's voice echoes within it. Yet the usage is more pointed, and again we can suggest it by contrast. Thus, in

The Conservationist Gordimer first adopted the continental or Joycean system of marking speech not by inverted commas but by dashes, and where voices were unattributed the effect provided some difficulties for readers who were sometimes not sure who was speaking or who was being addressed. The style was appropriate, however, insofar as it represented a more fluid view of consciousness or speech, where boundaries between characters (and narrator) were more permeable. It also invoked a Bakhtinian version of dialogue, in that voice and countervoice not only resonated within one another but also sometimes crossed without evident attribution. In this novel, however, while there are dashes for most of the characters, or even when Harald or Claudia address other characters, it is significant that even these are not present when the two of them address *one another*. Here is an exchange chosen (almost) at random:

> In the car, Harald speaks.
> He didn't answer you.
> About what?
> But he knows she knows.
> Faith. God.
> It was pretty clear, wasn't it. If "nothing is irrelevant" to Motsamai, this—question, whatever—is something irrelevant to Duncan, doesn't exist in his life. (101)

Harald and Claudia have been again to see Duncan in prison, where Claudia, with some interest, had reported that Motsamai had asked them about Duncan's belief in God. Harald has an even deeper interest in this question, because he is struggling with his own belief, but Duncan had not given any answer. Claudia's motivation in raising the point in the first place—since she does not believe in God, and she and her husband are quietly blaming one another for Duncan's predicament—is now at issue between them as they leave. One notes in this moment some familiar patterns: though Harald's first words are attributed, there are shifts in level between (apparently) spoken and thought words, between reported speech and free indirect discourse, between referential shifters ("he"), and between interrogative and indicative moods. Most obvious, though, is the absence of speech markers. Are these words then spoken or thought? Are they perhaps both? How far do Harald and Claudia's words/thoughts occupy different spaces or times of enunciation? How far, in short, do the two of them occupy one another's minds, even when they are in some degree of conflict?

What we see here, then, is something distinctive. Rather than the binary polarities commonly represented by dialogue, rather even than the kinds of antithesis between Mehring and the black body represented within his monologue, we have here a degree of separation between characters in space and time, yet with something more like a wave motion, or flow, or oscillation of communication between them. This must also be the significance of the fact that Harald and Claudia are rendered at crucial moments of perception and decision in the novel as "he/she"—the slash mark suggesting the extent to which they exist on either side of a permeable boundary of consciousness. Of course, all stylistics (or stylizations, as Bakhtin would term them) embody conventions, but that does not mean they do not have an effect. Here the effect is to represent, as if by mimesis at a different level, a particularly nuanced and delicate version of consciousness and relationship. Even when Harald and Claudia are in conflict, the result is more humane than Mehring's relationship with the black body or Maureen's with July. The implication is that Harald and Claudia are in this situation together, must make sense of the impossible together: that awareness is distributed, collective, and collaborative, even when different. *Oscillation* becomes a less sharp, in its essence a more *forgiving,* mode of representation; for Gordimer's work it becomes a different version of perception and—in its deepest sense—communication in South Africa.

This aspect becomes multiplied when we add the dimension of triangulation in the novel, for its primary relationships are not in fact binary but triangular. This is true even of Harald and Claudia, for the third apex of their triangle is everywhere and always Duncan, even (perhaps especially) when he is behind bars, physically absent or removed from his place in their previous relationship. Harald or Claudia never act without this third presence in mind, and Gordimer accentuates the point by reference to Duncan's profession as an architect: "it is as if with the sureness of his architectural draughtmanship he has drawn lines confining the three of them in a triangle" (100). Even when Harald and Claudia are physically together with him, their perception and observation becomes, in its essence, triangulated, so that each is aware, simultaneously, of two others: "When Harald was there, she and Harald had between them sensors invisibly extended, like the raised hairs on certain creatures that pick up the impulses of others towards them, which distracted from perception of their son. Each was tense to what the other's reactions to him were; there was static interference with the reception com-

ing from the son" (81). Static interference: the implicit metaphor, interestingly, is of electromagnetic wave motion or oscillation in the triangular arrangement. Again, communication seems subliminal as much as overt, and, though it is neither easy nor unobstructed, the implication once more is that making sense within this predicament can only be done in the collective—in this instance triangular—form. Leaving the prison, Harald and Claudia find themselves surveyed by a camera, a "mirrored box" capturing "their private images from all angles" (117); it is not for nothing that mirroring is one of the primary images in the novel, enhanced here by a sense of its geometric replications.

Indeed, it is remarkable how many triangular relationships there are in *The House Gun*. The very event which sparks the action, the murder, comes about through such a relationship: Duncan, caught between his girlfriend, Natalie, and his sometime lover, Carl Jespersen, shoots the latter the evening after he has found the two of them making love. This particular ménage à trois is a version of the "eternal triangle," though the essential complication is a homosexual rather than the more usual heterosexual entanglement. There is another figure, Nkululeko ("Khulu") Dladla, in the extended household that Duncan and his friends have constituted, and he too becomes both a triangulated and triangulating figure. With a more tender compassion, he stands somewhere between Duncan and the (nefarious) pairing of Carl and Natalie. He also enters into a relationship of friendship and support with Harald and Claudia, becoming a kind of "son" out of prison to them—mediating between them and their real son, with whom he stands in a partly reversed, partly mirrored relationship. Black and gay, he counters Duncan's more troubled sexuality and identity. During the course of the novel it becomes apparent that Natalie is pregnant (indeed, she makes no attempt to hide it). Who is the father in this "family": Duncan or Carl? In some respect, towards the end, it is Khulu who, communicating between Duncan and his parents, takes over a "fathering" role for the child, making sure that Harald and Claudia care for it financially, taking care of its future. These triangles grow out of one another, therefore, and in each case it is notable that the implications of each are displacing as well as "placing." How are they to be interpreted, not least by the figures who occupy them? These triangles suggest a world of new relationships growing out of the old; though they in some sense replicate previous social structures, they do so through significant differences or accents, requiring new forms of codification and understanding.

It is this conjunction of issues of interpretation and triangulation that becomes embedded in the forensic issues explored by the novel. At its essence a murder investigation and trial are society's attempt to understand the evidence and make determinations based upon it following on a moment of traumatic rupture. As such, every aspect of this in the novel is cast in triangular form—and sometimes multiples of such forms. Natalie—also thought of "doubly" by Duncan (and then Harald) as Nastasya, from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*—enters Hamilton Motsamai's office to be met by two sets of eyes (Harald's and Motsamai's) that separately evaluate her every gesture as she self-consciously presents herself to them. Though Claudia is not there, Harald imagines *her* response in a further triangulation. In the courtroom during Duncan's trial, the effects are correspondingly more intense, for a court is also a spectacle, a venue—as Harald and Claudia understand—for performance. At issue is not just fact but interpretation—and not only of the facts, but of every slightest gesture as presented by the performers, whether prosecutor, defense counsel, or witness. Here, sometimes accompanied by Khulu, Harald and Claudia find themselves with sensory antennae in hyperextended mode, alert to the ripples of every last nuanced gesture, Harald on occasion aware that he has picked up some signal that Claudia has not. Here Natalie's performance is all the more considered, more abandoned—which Motsamai uses to entrap her. Here every plus for Motsamai against Natalie is also a minus to Duncan, who is still attached to her. Here Duncan is somehow both subject and object to Harald and Claudia, as they watch him being analyzed by psychiatrists for both the prosecution and the defense. Here words mirror and reverse each other: did Duncan, in shooting Carl, suffer a "blackout" or "blankout" (*blank*, in Afrikaans, meaning "white," in contrast to "black," the shift of just a letter suggesting opposed versions of reading his actions) (246)? When Duncan enters the witness box, Harald and Claudia feel themselves almost in the space of his enunciation: "[They] hear his voice coming as if Duncan is talking to himself. To them; they are overhearing their son" (206). They watch their son watching Motsamai arguing with the judge on his behalf, feeling his interior gesture of dissent: "Duncan's presence interrupts, *it was not that, it was not exactly like that*. Nobody here knows. Perhaps there really is a frequency, coming from him where he is seated, turned away from them in the well of the court" (236). The narration shifts location, and the image, again, is electromagnetic: wave motion, oscillation, triangular.

In this setting it is of course the judge who will provide the ultimate "reading" and official meaning of Duncan's actions. That means all those in court are also busily engaged in an attempt to "read" *him*, and in this regard Gordimer's rapid refocalizations suggest the staccato reverberations and shifts of observation around the room: "No-one—Harald, Claudia, Khulu—Duncan?—what was Duncan looking for in him—no one could have any idea of the judge's reactions from [his] face" (247)—for the judge too is performing, a kind of implacability. At this point, though, it might be worth stepping back from the novel for a moment and asking why this kind of trial is present in the book in the first place. For, although there are all sorts of echoes between this book and Gordimer's previous fiction—Claudia, early in the novel, vomits in bodily dread after visiting Duncan the first time, much as Rosa does after her call from Baasie; Duncan bears more than a passing resemblance to Sasha (who also loves Russian literature) in *A Sport of Nature*—this must be the first time a trial in a Gordimer novel is not a political trial. Is this simply a turn away from the political, as suggested earlier, a form of fictional liberation? It may be a liberation of sorts, but not in the way it first appears. For what, we might ask, is learned from this trial in the novel? What is the meaning of the murder at the heart of it? What significance is there in the fact that the judge emerges with a verdict and sentence which is just without being right (for his summation is both a reading and a misreading), or for that matter right without being just (for who can really understand the true mystery of the murder)? What significance in the fact that Duncan is sentenced to seven years in prison: Jacob's seven years of Biblical toil, we might say, for Rachel; or, with our triangular formulas in mind, two threes plus one?

In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Jean-Paul Sartre presents an account which, though it was criticized upon publication (and continues to be criticized) for its representation of Jewish culture and self-consciousness, nonetheless presents a remarkable portrait of two things: first, the origins and pathologies of anti-Semitism; and second, the response of what Sartre calls the "inauthentic Jew"—the one who has acquiesced before the representations and hegemony of the anti-Semite. It is in this book that Sartre offers his classic formula, that "it is the Anti-Semite who *make*s the Jew" (69). Here he points to the way in which the anti-Semite constructs the Jew as an "object," but his explication also has a particu-

lar resonance for the inauthentic Jew who is prepared to respond to, and in some dialectical fashion even take on, the image of that objectification. In this regard, there is a crucial sequence in the discussion where—perhaps drawing on the analysis of the "Look" in *Being and Nothingness* (published closely before *Anti-Semite and Jew* was begun)—Sartre outlines an implicit triangular formula by introducing the idea of the "witness." In this account, it is the presence of the non-Jewish witness that turns the inauthentic Jew into an object in his own eyes, and then makes him redirect that (critical) gaze towards other Jews. "He is so afraid of the discoveries the Christians are going to make,'" observes Sartre, "that [. . .] he becomes himself an anti-Semite" (103). In this triangulating gaze of subject-object-witness, we might say, the witness turns the subject into object, who then turns his co-subject into object, and reinforces (helps create) the power and identity of the witness. Expressed differently, there is a pattern of focalization and refocalization through the eyes of the witness that provides only closure and replication. Under the conditions Sartre describes, it is triangulation that fixes and reinforces identity; or, to give a slightly more nuanced version, inauthentic identity is fixed and multiplied through triangulation.[6]

But is it the case that triangulation always has this effect? Might it be that, while under oppression triangulation fixes identity, under other circumstances there might be different results? We have certainly seen enough of the oppressive formula in Gordimer's fiction, as all the examples cited earlier will show. But in *The House Gun* we may be seeing another pattern. On the *focal* level, so to speak, we have already observed this. Here there are no final subject-object positions as there are in Mehring's monologue, for all the counter-voices registered within it. Here the binary relationships are not strictly those of inescapable opposition, as exist between Maureen and July. Instead, voices, as in the key instance of Harald and Claudia, exist to some extent superimposed on one another, set beside one another, reflective of and off one another. There is an abiding profusion of voices, hearings and mishearings, movements back and forth that provide a different model. The larger significance of this might be clear. In his essay "Discourse in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin presents an extended discussion of what he calls "hybrid constructions"—utterances that belong to a single speaker but that contain mixed within them "two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two 'languages,' two semantic and axiological belief systems" (304). There is no formal boundary between these manifestations, Bakhtin observes,

but they take place within a single syntactic whole, "often within the limits of a simple sentence" (305). For Bakhtin, as always, the significance of such patterns is not so much individual; rather, these cohabiting voices represent a much larger social and historical dialogue of languages: "a dialogue of different times, epochs and days, a dialogue that is forever dying, living, being born" (365). Moreover, in an era of great change, Bakhtin suggests, such a dialogue becomes all-pervasive and intensely intimate: "the language of an image begins to sound a different way, or is bathed in a different light, or is perceived against a different dialogizing background [. . .]. It can even be said that this process takes place *within the image itself*" (420). With regard to *The House Gun*, we might be wary of grand historical claims or even a straightforward relation to Bakhtin's discussion, but still we can suggest that on the micro-level it captures some of the resonance of his formulation. Here the novel's model of oscillation—often "within the image itself"—represents some of those voices occupying the same space, flowing back and forward, competing, bathed in new lights, living, dying, being born—in much the same way that postapartheid South Africa, going through an era of great change, has and must experience a similar profusion and cohabiting of voices.[7]

The triangular structures in the novel offer their own version of opening rather than closure, some unexpectedly for Duncan, but also for those around him. Duncan, of all the characters in the novel, is represented as something of a singularity: "Duncan is Duncan" (99). A mystery to his parents, even to himself, he refuses to say much about the murder, to give an account of it or explanation. At some level this is because it is mysterious even to him. The difficult thing for him to come to terms with is that when Carl and Natalie made love together on the sofa, in that public space, in the negative sense they were both (as we might put it) "fucking Duncan." Subterranean motives of revenge, humiliation, and escape were embedded in the actions of both of his former lovers. And yet, while this triangle was for Duncan one of entrapment, hidden within the murder that sealed it was a deeper truth that in some sense opens it up. Brooding within his own cottage in the grounds of the house after witnessing Carl and Natalie, the next evening Duncan had returned to the house: "If he had any purpose at all it was to know what whoever was listening to his silence would say. It was Jespersen. Jespersen was lying on the same sofa" (154). In this understanding, Jespersen is the sudden object of his animosity but also Duncan's "secret sharer," his real addressee. The murder comes therefore out of love as much as hate, and it is this too that Harald understands, via a passage from Thomas Mann's

The Magic Mountain concerning the secret bond of the murderer: "Let him die then, for he has gratified his heart's deepest desire" (71). The murder, then, has been an act of desire; this has been a "love triangle," even a love murder in its deepest and most complicated sense. Later Duncan finds that same passage in Mann, and copies it out, apprehending this in some form.

As for his identity, Duncan must accept a reality of himself as neither simply gay nor straight, but composed on either side of the permeable boundary (again the slash mark) in the homo/heterosexual. This too is something Harald and Claudia must, and do, come to accept. At some level they acknowledge that Duncan is not and cannot be simply a "reproduction" in their image: Gordimer, who has a horror of reproduction as cloning whether in the biological, familial, or political arenas, reworks the theme, embedding essential difference in continuity.[8] We see here a mirror image of her previous novel, *None to Accompany Me*, where Vera's daughter, Annick, is a lesbian, setting up a successful relationship and even becoming a mother of an African child by adoption. In the postcolonizing world after apartheid, sexual, familial, and racial identities enter into cross-cutting and simultaneously displaced (replaced) combinations. In *The House Gun* too there is a child, and Duncan is prepared to accept that it is the product of the previous triangle: "Is it a girl, it looks like Natalie/Nastasya. No, it's a boy, it looks like us, Carl and Duncan" (243). Beyond genetics, beyond the usual binary pairings, whatever happens, Duncan will in some sense be the father of the child. As will Khulu, in his way: the triangles, instead of closing down for evil, open up for a kind of good. It is a long time since there has been this imaging of the child as promise in Gordimer's fiction—perhaps not since *A World of Strangers*, published in 1958 before the political closures of the 1960s set in in South Africa. But whereas in *None to Accompany Me* the abiding ethos at the end is one of solitude—the tremendously affecting image of Vera's breath scrolling out before her—here the motif that is being reorchestrated is that of family. Duncan emerged from one version of family to set up another; from those closures yet new patterns of the social family are forming. Triangles that provided no apparent escape are changing shape, transforming, providing new relationships of potential. This, despite its founding theme, is Gordimer's most optimistic novel in a long while.

And what then of the murder? Why is *The House Gun* founded on murder, and what are the implications of its resolutions? The murdered

man, the novel tells us, lies "under the ground of the city" (261). One of the strengths of *The House Gun* lies in how closely focused it remains on its intimate canvas, but on a larger scale the point is suggested. Murder underlies the foundations of Johannesburg, and in an extended way South Africa is a country that in some sense has been built on murder. The murder in this novel is also the past—an inscrutable past whose essence will not finally be interpreted, understood, or redeemed. Yet the city under which the man lies buried is also (that same sentence goes on) "where this court is the seat of justice." At issue is whether Duncan will receive what he meted out—the death penalty. But at the end of the novel this is abolished by the new Constitutional Court, and Duncan's sentence has already been given as seven years—right without being just, just without being right.

"There is a serenity in justice" (284), as the novel puts it: instead of a life for a life—the binary opposition or (with society's judgment) triangular closure of the past—there is a different version of rehabilitation, a triangle of openness. True enough, there is an element of solitude: Duncan needs the space of his cell (much like the writer) to meditate on and come to understand his experience. Yet unlike Rosa in *Burger's Daughter*, it is an enclosure from which he will emerge. This is also not quite the resurrection of *The Conservationist* (a favorite motif of Gordimer's), but the last tones of the novel are nevertheless ones of rising. Murder can be survived. Identity will be defined not simply by genetics or the hard lines of closure, the rigid orders of location and birth, but through dispersion, relocation, and realignment. Duncan understands that, in a different form from the night of the murder, he must "throw away the gun in the garden" (294). In such a schema—not a triumphalist one by any means—Gordimer figures into this, her first novel set in the postapartheid world, the oscillating profusion of voices that must make South Africa's future, transcending the past by building new relations beyond the fixed geometry of the old, offering a vision of possibility.

Notes

1. For a fuller version of the analysis given here, see Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, chapter 5.
2. This idea was first suggested some time ago to me by Eugene Fester.

3. For a critic who has understood the mythic and apocalyptic references very well, however, see Visser.

4. For my earlier discussion, see Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer* 210–12. The story itself is most easily available in Gordimer, *Selected Stories*, as are the following three I discuss in this segment.

5. In this formula Duncan is CF2 and Natalie CF3 to the extent that they occupy different levels of focalization (the extent to which Duncan is rendering Natalie rendering him). A slightly more radical formulation would be to suggest that they exist on the same level of focalization, so that they are both at the level of CF2. The slash mark in the formula between the external and internal focalizors indicates what Bal terms "ambiguous focalization" or "free indirect focalization" (156–60). Bal offers a range of possibilities in such settings; I have adapted what seems useful here.

6. For this discussion see in particular Sartre 101ff. In remarking on how the "witness" is ever present for Jews, Sartre writes: "Even in their most intimate gatherings the Jews could say of the non-Jew what St. John Perse said of the sun: 'He is not named but his presence is among us'" (102); on a very different level of significance, this is precisely the formula that Harald and Claudia might often apply to their son Duncan. For some of the criticisms of Sartre, see Michael Walzer's preface. It was, in part, Sartre's analysis which Frantz Fanon found so compelling—and also diverged from—in his own examination of black subjectivity and objectification in *Black Skin White Masks*.

7. It is something like this that Elleke Boehmer calls for in "Endings and New Beginning"—also an intriguing discussion of "closure" and "opening" in South African transitional fiction. Again, while I have not done justice to the particularity of Bakhtin's account of "hybrid constructions," on the "macro" scale the potential for using his model in an era of dramatic change in South Africa should be apparent. With regard to Bakhtin's "dialogue that is forever dying, living, being born," one cannot help but notice the coincidental parallel and inversion of Gordimer's famous epigraph to *July's People*, from Antonio Gramsci: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms." In *The House Gun* there appears to be living and rebirth after the dying; according to this formula, the interregnum is over.

8. On the issue of reproduction in Gordimer's work, see Clingman, "Nadine Gordimer: A Writing Life."

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