

Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*: A Touch of Death

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Nadine Gordimer's latest novel, *The Conservationist*,¹ displays more conscious virtuosity than any of her earlier books. There is a greater use of symbolism and a more deliberate employment of set prose rhythms. In this novel, which is more like a prose poem, there are passages in which the technique is almost that of symbolist poetry, and Nadine Gordimer is in firm control of the poetic devices. As the carefully balanced structure unfolds, the complete pattern of meaning emerges cumulatively.

Whereas in her earlier novels Gordimer had been content only to communicate human experience, in *The Conservationist* she strives to discover and record life. Consequently, she rejects the conventions she had used in her earlier novels, primarily by eliminating narration and comment. Here, she presents the texture of consciousness as it is woven by the individual's response to life which—according to her—is an omnipresent horror of death.

The subject of *The Conservationist* is the land of South Africa, just as the land of England is the subject of E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*. The characters are locked in a fight over who shall inherit the South-African earth. Like the house in Forster's novel, the farm is here the concrete symbol of reality and an integrating factor; it permanently occupies the thought of the conservationist, Mehring.

Mehring, who belongs to a class that has "a hankering to make contact with the land" (p. 30), is "not a farmer although there was farming blood somewhere, no doubt" (p. 20). In fact, he is deeply afraid of truly communing with the earth, for this fills him with a premonition of death. On one occasion, after a week's absence in Japan, he returns to his farm and in a sudden moment of blankness—"perhaps he has dozed"—he is filled with horror when he discovers that he has kissed the earth. "There is sand on his lip. For a moment he does not know where he is—or rather who he is; but this situation in which he finds himself, staring into the eye of the earth with earth at his mouth, is strongly familiar to him. It seems to be something already inhabited in imagination. At this point his whole body gives one of those violent jerks, every muscle gathering together every limb in paroxysm, one of those leaps of terror that land the poor bundle of body, safe in harmless wakefulness" (p. 37). Mehring reacts violently towards people and events because they fill him with intimations of his own mortality. "It is fatal to fall asleep in the afternoon" (p. 42), he tells himself after the episode above; and for a long time he is disturbed by "that curious awakening down at the reeds," which had taken him out of "the ordinary plane of existence" (p. 45). What Mehring fears most is to make a true contact with the earth; instead, he wants to exploit the earth, as he does everyone and everything with which he has to deal.

In *The Conservationist*, both characters and events are, by the manner of their presentation and the role they play in the total pattern of meaning,

¹All page references in this essay are to Nadine Gordimer, *The Conservationist* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974).

imbued with symbolic significance. An unidentified black man found dead on the farm is the most haunting symbol in the story. At first, Mehring refuses to have anything to do with this "intruder": "It is a sight that has no claim on him" (p. 12). He prefers to leave its burial to the proper authorities. The police, however, bury the man in a shallow grave on the spot where they find him. This incurs Mehring's derision and anger.

Half-buried in Mehring's subconscious, the dead man is his secret sharer, disputing his claim over the land and turning into a nightmare that peace of mind which Mehring seeks on his farm. Through all the vicissitudes that the farm undergoes, Mehring's thought is linked to the dead man. After the farm was scorched by fire he is drawn to his secret sharer: "He feels the stirring of the shameful curiosity, like imagining what goes on behind a bathroom door, about what happens under a covering of earth (however shallow; you can be sure it was done carelessly) when a fire like this one comes over" (p. 104). Even after the farm recovers from the effects of the fire and the earth is covered with a new growth of reeds, at least eight inches high, Mehring is unable to rid himself of this other self. If anything, the body seems to have been driven deeper into the conservationist's subconscious. During the harvest season the dead man draws Mehring with the concreteness of a physical pull. Walking about his farm in the satisfaction of a prospective magnificent harvest, Mehring's left leg plunges into a hole, and he cannot pull himself out, as if someone has both arms tightly round the leg. When the flood exhumes the body of this other self, Mehring abandons the farm.

Other characters haunt Mehring with the terror of death. Both his liberal mistress who now lives in exile in London, and Terry, his son, who makes only one brief appearance, occupy Mehring's consciousness because they dispute his right to the farm. They constitute the liberal and radical challenges to the conservative establishment.

Some critics have seen Mehring's mistress as representing Nadine Gordimer's unflattering portrait of the liberal.² After all, they argue, in spite of her different political views she has intercourse with Mehring; she is unable or unwilling to reconcile her personal and her political worlds. In addition, her willingness to benefit from the privileges of a corrupt system as well as her unwillingness to enter into a real confrontation with the system by using Mehring's money to escape the country and avoid prosecution, are cited as an evidence of why liberals have proved so ineffective in subverting the system.

More than this indictment of the liberal posture in South Africa is involved in Nadine Gordimer's portrayal of the relationship between the conservative Mehring and his liberal mistress. Behind the relationship one can see a clear pattern of a dialectic opposition.

Mehring and his mistress are not simply a man and a woman, but Man and Woman. They represent two clearly opposed truths in competition for the world, the future, as represented specifically in their attitudes to the blacks. His is the truth of things as they are; hers is the truth of things as they should be. The stress between them symbolizes the tension within South Africa between imposed evil and cultivated idealism. In one of her "dark political warnings," she spells out Mehring's "historical destiny" in apocalyptic terms: "That bit of paper you bought yourself from the deeds office isn't going to be valid for as long as another generation. It'll be worth about as much as

²See, for example, C. L. Innes, rev. of *The Conservationist*, *Ohike*, 9 (December 1975), 107-08.

those our grandfathers gave the blacks when they took the land from them. The blacks will tear up your bit of paper. No one'll remember where you're buried" (p. 168).

It is his son's rebellion that constitutes, for Mehring, the more fundamental threat, because the seventeen-year-old boy's rebellion is both political and personal. Terry's hatred of the system translates into his lack of sexual interest in anyone who seems intellectually barren, and a complete indifference to his father's most precious possession—the farm. Mehring notes with foreboding: "The farm—who else is a farm for, but a son—doesn't interest him" (p. 94). By not taking the least interest in the only reality his father knows, Terry threatens Mehring with annihilation.

Terry represents a continuity in blood and is symbolic of the white conservatives' attempt to fashion what is to all intents and purposes a dynasty. In one of his reveries, Mehring fiercely lays claim to his son: "I notice on the phone you always leave out—avoid using—any form of address that establishes your relationship to me. You don't call me anything. But that doesn't change who you are" (p. 209). Dynastic succession must always make a distinction between the man and the role. Terry rejects his father partly because of the latter's selfishness and weakness, but he also rejects the values embodied in the traditional definition of the conservationist, a definition which, in theory, assumes responsibility for the lives of others, but in practice, denies the multiplicity of reciprocal obligations in which all mankind partakes.

As a political philosopher Mehring is a straw man. His thinking is the type that is good enough for making a success of working the farm, or in any endeavor in which the object is simply to "get things done," but which is utterly ineffectual when it comes to the fundamental problems of existence. "The farm," he tells himself, "to justify its existence and that of those who work on it, must be a going concern. These are the facts" (p. 76). Mehring's exploitation is all sentimental pretence, and lacks the redemptive values of moral ideas of any sort. Instead, he possesses greed and total cynicism.

Miss Gordimer portrays Mehring's sexuality as an evidence of capitalist exploitation. The farm had appealed to him partly as a hideout to which he could bring his mistresses. His view of sex is, like that of everything else, materialistic: ". . . there's a special pleasure in having a woman you've paid. Now and then. I can't explain it" (p. 71). His liberal mistress rightly condemns this attitude as "Sexual fascism. Pure and simple" (p. 96). Mehring's predatoriness is shown in its most aggressive form when he assaults a Portuguese girl in a plane. The incident becomes firmly locked in his imagination and he is repeatedly haunted by the girl, "one immigrant girl in a city full of girls, she can hardly make herself understood, she is there somewhere all the time" (p. 184). Mehring is aware of the dangers of his own extreme sexuality: ". . . it's as if he must be eternally waiting, eternally expecting, eternally dreading. The excitation is suffocating" (p. 184).

In Mehring, acute self-consciousness is so persistent that he is completely overset by his own imaginings. He has approximated a too precarious equilibrium which cannot sufficiently withstand the stresses of contemporary white-black relationship in South Africa. The novel opens on this note of threat to a delicately-wrought balance:

Pale freckled eggs.

Swaying over the ruts to the gate of the third pasture, Sunday morning, the owner of the farm suddenly sees: a clutch of pale freckled

eggs set out before a half-circle of children. Some are squatting: the one directly behind the eggs is cross-legged, like a vendor in a market. There is pride of ownership in that grin lifted shyly to the farmer's gaze. The eggs are arranged like marbles, the other children crowd round but you can tell they are not allowed to touch unless the cross-legged one gives permission. The bare soles, the backsides of the children have flattened a nest in the long dead grass for both eggs and children. . . .

He asks a question of the cross-legged one and there are giggles. He points down at the eggs but does not touch them, and asks again. The children don't understand the language. He goes on talking with many gestures. The cross-legged child puts its head on one side, smiling as if under the weight of praise, and cups one of the eggs from hand to hand.

Eleven pale freckled eggs. A whole clutch of guinea fowl eggs (p. 8).

The eggs, as an assurance that the ecological balance of the land will be safeguarded, symbolize the survival of Mehring's role as conservationist. The depth of his anguish at finding the black children toying with the eggs can only be explained in terms of the symbolic value he attaches to them: "A whole clutch of guinea fowl eggs. Eleven. Soon there will be nothing left. In the country. The continent. The oceans, the sky" (p. 10). When he contests with the black boy's "pride of ownership" of the eggs, Mehring is asserting his self-appointed duty as the preserver of the land from what he considers as the ravages of the blacks. This is why the eggs take such a hold on his imagination. Indeed, his vision of reality is colored by the shape of an egg. To Mehring, all the world is an egg. The autumn days when the story opens are "as complete and perfectly contained as an egg" (p. 12).

As with every symbol in this story, the egg soon becomes a nightmare to Mehring. It is the symbol of his loss of his son's affection to the boy's mother, now living in New York. From his trip to Namibia, the only gift Terry brings is for his mother, "an egg. A semi-precious stone in the shape of an egg" (p. 146). Politically, the egg is also the symbol of the second generation's rejection of their parents' ways of life. The seventeen-year-old Indian boy, Jalal, wears the peace sign dangling on a chain round his neck: "The outline of an egg standing upright, was divided inside by four lines" (p. 204). Jalal paints the sign in red on his family's water tank, but Mehring does not pay much attention to it until in his flight from the farm this symbol of the lost generation's assault on the conservative establishment allies with the other terrors driving him towards a final recognition of his own mortality.

The farm symbolizes Mehring's yearning to escape death. His beloved isolation on the farm is an attempt to escape from the stress within his society. At the beginning Mehring spends only the weekends on his farm. But as the story progresses he increasingly spends his time there, and often would take off from his office for the farm although he had not planned to go there at all. On one occasion towards the end of the story, he thinks of leaving the country altogether in order to escape attending the funeral of a close friend who has committed suicide, but finally settles for the farm: "Just as well be Melbourne. No one will ever know" (p. 190). Symbolically he spends the week between Christmas and New Year on the farm, reveling in his isolation. On Christmas Eve, while his servants celebrate rebirth in the traditional way, Mehring rejoices in having the farm to himself, because the blacks do not know he is there.

He congratulates himself for having escaped also from his friends in the city. Mehring's feeling of safety in isolation and his pride of possession contrast with his black servants' lack of consciousness and their complete adjustment to the rhythm of life on the farm. They keep the farm going from day to day while he visits only on Sundays; that is, when he is not out of the country on business. They deal with whatever emergency arises on the farm. When he finally visits the farm, Mehring acknowledges the durability of the blacks: ". . . they were here when he came, they were squatting God knows how long before he bought the place and they'll expect to have their grandchildren squatting long after he's gone" (p. 192). The roles have been reversed—they own the farm, he is merely an overseer.

The blacks finally lay claim to the land in a symbolic ceremony which makes them true inheritors of the dead man who has become completely integrated into the earth. Although their leader Jacobus had readily disowned the dead stranger, they never forget him, and have forbidden their children to play where his body lies buried. Then Jacobus discovers another body on the veld, also near the river, the body of Solomon, Jacobus's assistant, who had been set upon in circumstances which suggest the manner of the stranger's death. (It was Solomon who had discovered the corpse of the unknown man.) He is taken to the hospital unconscious, which the other black workers take to mean that he had actually died, although Solomon had not told them of his own thoughts, "that he had lain in the veld (how long?) with that other one down there who had never been taken away, never buried by his own people. For—how many hours?—there had been two of them dead there instead of one" (p. 161).

On Christmas Eve they celebrate, in a traditional ceremony, Solomon's resurrection. Mehring's servants and their relatives from miles around gather to feast and dance. In their merriment they obliterate all thought of Mehring's existence (to them he is safely out of the way in town, although ironically he is on the farm, rejoicing in his isolation) and behave as if they own the farm. Soon it all becomes theirs, with the help of nature.

Because the farm occupies the center of Mehring's consciousness, his development is linked to events that take place there. The dry winter months are the busiest time for him: "On the farm it is the time for conservation—buildings to be repaired, fire-breaks cleared, he must go round all the fences with Jacobus . . . His energy rises in inverse proportion to winter slackness" (p. 68). But a fire which began on his neighbor's farm becomes, in Mehring's consciousness, an apocalyptic event. On seeing his farm after the ravage, Mehring suffers the anguish of total loss: "It's all done. Smoking faintly. Quite cold. The whole farm stinks like a dirty ashtray" (p. 89).

With his psyche scorched by this fire in winter, Mehring expectantly looks forward to the rains in summer, when "it will be as if nothing ever happened down there" (p. 105). True, with the onset of rain the devastation caused by the fire seems fully obliterated; and in a finely-tuned balance, Mehring's spirit rises with the increasing rains. But soon the balance is tilted. What begins as "one of the three-day rains that, in a good year, mark the beginning of the end of summer and ensure that the grazing will last out well into winter" (p. 160), soon becomes a deluge causing a devastation even greater than that caused by fire. A smell of death pervades the air (pp. 231-32).

The fire and the flood are symbolic representations of universal elements in Mehring's relations to the natural world. So they are clearly relevant to the

main implications of the narrative and contribute to its larger meanings. They have their parallels in Mehring's psychology; their alternating rhythm is the equivalent in the natural order of his blighted perspective. He had bought the farm as a place to get away from the city. When the farm is scorched by fire or covered by flood, the solicitation of the most extreme forms of inertia, death, pervades his consciousness. Through the inverted rhythm of fire and flood, Mehring experiences an unforgettable reminder of man's precarious exposure to the unpredictable power of the natural order as a whole.

From the moment of Mehring's flight from the farm it becomes difficult to take the story on the literal plane, to abstract events from the dream-sensation conveying them. The literal journey is accompanied by another journey on the psychological plane, which takes place in the waking dream of Mehring's profoundly disturbed mind. And it is the inner journey which explores something truer, more fundamental, and distinctly less materialistic than its literal counterpart; the journey into the unconscious finally leads to a confrontation with an entity within the self. It doesn't really matter what name—in terms of psychological symbolism is given to this double, or what it is considered to represent. The important thing is that the introspective plunge seems convincing and is, therefore, inevitably moving; in fact, so convincing and moving that several of the book's first reviewers concluded that Mehring died and one of them said that he got a decent burial.³

Mehring abandons his farm rather than go to see the remains of the black stranger exhumed by the flood. As he races past the location, home to a hundred and fifty thousand blacks, he becomes more fully aware of the danger posed by the unknown body on his farm, "one of them," the symbol of Black Danger. "A hundred and fifty thousand of them practically on the doorstep. It was something that should have been taken into consideration from the beginning, before the deed of sale was signed" (p. 235). He recalls the prophecy of his liberal mistress, that the blacks will "plough down palaces and thrones and towers" (p. 168). The blacks, Mehring finally understands, have only devised a way, by their obsequiousness, of killing their white masters (p. 246).

Mehring, convinced of the eventual annihilation of everything that he stands for, loses control of himself, in spite of his determination to get a firm grip on "the commonplace and ordinary reassurance of what are the realities of life" (p. 247). He dwells on things he had always taken for granted, especially his business preoccupations, in spite of the fact that the road on which he is fleeing to the city is "commonplace and familiar enough to bring anyone down to earth" (p. 248). His mind finally fixes on the immigrant girl he had assaulted once on a plane and so many times in his imagination. This time, his body thrills with the vicarious sensation: "It's more like warmth coming back to a body numbed by cold or shock. Subliminally comforting" (p. 249). The girl leads him—half-willing, half-resisting—off the road to the old mine dumps which Mehring peoples with the terrors of his life: the dead man who has appropriated his farm, his son who is tied to his mother, and his liberal mistress who prophesied black violence, but is now safe in London; "it is the sort of place people might dump a body" (p. 245). Finally, he thinks he sees some gangsters behind the trees. These gangsters, too, are linked to the dead stranger who had robbed him of the only reality he knew: "These are the bastards who shovelled him in as you might fling a handful of earth on the corpse of a rat, just to cover the stink" (p. 248).

³See, for example, A. F. Bellette, rev. of *The Conservationist, A Review of International and English Literature*, 6 (July 1975): 108.

Mehring flinches before the exhumed stink of his own life. Believing that the girl is a trap, he is afraid he may be robbed, perhaps castrated. He fears, even more, exposure; a public scandal will destroy him completely. To prevent this, he is ready to surrender his most precious possession, the farm: "They can have it, the whole four hundred acres" (p. 250). But nothing will save him from an irredeemable death. "Come and look, they're all saying. What is it? Who is it? It's Mehring. It's Mehring, down there" (p. 250). Thus Mehring finally glimpses directly what all the symbols of the novel have suggested—the bitterest of all the lessons of conservacy—the reality of death.

At last, the dead man can be buried properly, by his own people. A coffin is made by one of them. When contacted by phone in town at his office, Mehring agrees without questioning to pay for the wood, bought from the Indian store, but does not want to be bothered by the details. "He was leaving that day for one of those countries white people go to, the whole world is theirs" (p. 251). When the dead man, "one of them," is finally laid to rest, the blacks come to their own: "The one whom the farm received had no name. He had no family but their women wept a little for him. Three was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him. They had put him away to rest, at least; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them" (p. 252).

Not only this paragraph, the last in the novel, but indeed the thrust of the book's message is prophetic. And like all prophecies, it is based, not only on the evidence of things seen, but on the evidence of things dearly hoped for. To say that "*The Conservationist* is not a political allegory"⁴ is to miss the novelist's intentions. For Nadine Gordimer, in South Africa, society is the political situation. The novel has the deepest political and moral implications. It is fundamentally historical and sociological, representing South Africa in the 1970's and tracing the roots of traditional South-African attitudes being subjected to disturbing strains. Characters of the novel epitomize the country's ordeal and future. By entrusting the fate of the earth to the blacks who have always tended it and whose existence depends on it, Nadine Gordimer resolves the racial conflict in South Africa in penetratingly humane terms. The conservatives may delude themselves that they own everything. Actually, their fear of establishing any meaningful communion with anything, animate or inanimate, renders them, to all intents and purposes, irrelevant in the working out of the destiny of the land.

⁴Cherry Clayton, "A Secret Life," *New Nation* (December 1974), p. 19.