

NADINE GORDIMER



WRITING AND BEING

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Nadine Gordimer

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藏书章

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1

ADAM'S RIB: FICTIONS AND REALITIES



What writer of fiction has not been affronted, when faced with journalists asking on which living personage this or that character is based? What writer has not read, in a review of her or his book, that so-and-so is clearly a portrait of such and such, and what writer has not been subjected to the curiosity of friends, acquaintances and even total strangers who would like to have their prurient guessing-game confirmed, a bull's eye scored on the writer as target?

By inference the very designation, 'writer of fiction', is perceived as itself fictitious. Literature is a tatty disguise to be gleefully unmasked; an intellectual cannibalism to be exposed. The writer's imagination is the looter among other people's lives.

Even writers themselves sometimes play the game with the work of other writers. And, of course, schools of criticism have flourished and fattened on it, in their day. Among non-profes-



sionals (critics are professionals; writers, like readers, are not; pen or word-processor has no tenure) it is not necessary for the player to know personally, have even the slightest acquaintance with, the supposed personage the writer has looted.

Looking back at my own youth, the radiant reading days of adolescence, I am puzzled to remember how, deep in D. H. Lawrence, I went through the local library in fervent pursuit of his circle as real-life counterparts of his characters. I pored over every publication of the Lawrence industry—from Frieda's *Not I but the Wind* through Middleton Murry to those to whose canon Lawrence didn't belong but who 'took him up' between two fingers, the Bloomsbury group.

Of what possible significance could it have been to me, a sixteen-year-old autodidact living in a small gold-mining town in South Africa, to be told that the mother and Miriam, in *Sons and Lovers*, were Lawrence's own mother and his first love?

What could it matter to me that a rich bohemian eccentric, bizarrely named Ottoline, was rewarded for the house-party hospitality she granted the coal miner's genius son by appearing unflatteringly in one of his later novels?

What could be added to my understanding of, let alone pleasure in, the Lawrence novels and stories by my becoming privy to the gossip of men and women a world away, not only in distance but also in time, since I was eavesdropping during the Second World War, when the real personages who were purported to be the fictional ones I was familiar with were silenced by death or old age?

Perhaps the restricted context of my own burgeoning, the small variety of people I knew, and the boredom of lives treading the inevitable round of births, marriages, pregnancies, deaths, births, made me yearn to connect thrilling fictions as a



realizable possibility with people who actually were alive once, as I now was, outside the transports of reading which ended with the turning of the last page.

Another explanation to myself is that, beginning to write before I had really lived (the great source of childhood is ready to be tapped, like a rubber tree, only after a certain stage of growth is reached), I was fumbling to find out where fiction came from, and how. I was looking for *the* methodology, presupposing a general one distinct from the imaginings going on, distrusted, in my own head.

Last year I was sent the gift of a 418-page biography of none other than Ottoline Morrell. I couldn't get beyond riffing the chapters. The personages Lawrence made have remained with me all my life; the once-living woman of flesh and blood is of no interest, vis-à-vis *Women in Love*, disappeared into whatever fiction she may have suggested to the writer.

Yet the game persists. The I-spy includes as prey the writer her- or himself.

What is it these impertinent interrogators want from us, the writers?

An admission that your Albertine was actually gay Albert? That Malone was Beckett's neglected grandfather? That Nabokov alias Humbert Humbert didn't chase only butterflies?

The writer has to recognize that the guessing-game, the prying and prurience and often absurdity, is merely a vulgar expression of a mystery that the relation of fiction to the appearance of reality is, to those who are not writers. And because that relation is part mystery to writers themselves, and what we do know we fully expect to be disbelieved or misconstrued—you have to be a performer of the mystery to understand it, as has been said of love-making—we are of-



fended by the crass approach of curiosity and turn aside the presumptive question with a flat denial.

No—so-and-so is not you-think-you-know-who; then where has he come from? Is he, so life-like, supposed to be some sort of ectoplasm foaming from the writer?

Which is what we writers imply when we snap back that he is *imaginary*.

It is beyond dispute that no character in fiction, even if conceived as an ape, a beetle, a phantasm, is without connection with real persons experienced by the writer within contact of sight, sound and touch, or second-hand through experience recorded by others in one medium or another, and whether or not the writer is always aware of this.

As a typology is created through the superimposition of transparencies of many individuals so that the features that recur predominantly become the identikit, so for the individual fictional character—the very antithesis of a typological collective—the writer selects and mixes *differences* in what the roving imagination seizes upon to its purpose.

That is the half-truth that makes the denial a half-lie.

For this creature formed from the material and immaterial—what has breathed upon the writer intimately, brushed by him in the street, and the ideas that shape behaviour in his personal consciousness of his time and place, directing the flesh in action—this fictional creature is brought into the synthesis of being by the writer's imagination alone, is not cloned from some nameable Adam's rib or Eve's womb. Imagined: yes. Taken from life: yes.

What do we writers have to work on as looters in that fragmentation of the possibilities of observation, of interaction,



of grasp, in the seen and unseen, constant flux and reflux, the conscious and unconscious defined as 'life'?

Even if one wanted to replicate, there is no seeing, knowing, the depth and whole of anyone, and therefore no possibility of so-and-so *being* you-know-who, even if someone's prepared to sue to assert this. Damages may be gained because of ugly motives or actions attributed by the author to a fictional character that the complainant avers is himself or herself; the odd fact is that the acceptable characteristics by which the complainant *chooses* to identify himself with the personage are no less fictional than the ones that are *rejected* as untrue and offensive. Of course, no libel law recognizes this . . .

The writer in relation to real personages is more like Primo Levi's *metamir*, which, 'a metaphysical mirror, does not obey the law of optics but reproduces your image *as it is seen by the person who stands before you*' (my italics).

This comes to me as one of the closest definitions of the process of the imagination upon actuality.

The writer is that person who stands before you.

What he or she finds in the individual is not a working model to be dragged off and wired up to a book but a series of intimations the individual does not present to the ordinary mirror of the world.

Of these flashes—an always incomplete series of *what the individual is* (for the *metamir* image receives what she is *not* saying as she speaks, the anger in his eyes that *belies* his smile, the *echo* in her silences, the gagged messages signalled by gestures; what the writer remembers of *him* from a previous encounter, has heard recounted of *her* by others, etcetera)—of these flashes the writer retains one or two, perhaps, for future



use in the personality of a quite different personage. For one of the few sure things the writer knows is that inconsistency is the consistency of human character.

There simply is not enough *there*, of what can be grasped in a single individual to make a fictional character.

To be 'life-like' a character always must be *larger than life*, more intense, compounded and condensed in essence of personality than could exist materially. The abstract medium of the printed page must be overcome. The fragments of ultraperceptive knowledge are stowed away in the facility for which 'filing system' as a convenient description will not do, because what the writer has within is a system that is both storing and working on, at the same time, material that is being added to, often over years.

This is more than memory; memory is random, does not categorize.

This facility or faculty means that the images of the metamir are collected, here, there, at intervals or in a sudden rush, and some day transformed by the writer into one of his characters, called up in imagination in answer to a theme or giving rise to one.

If writers need justify this subconscious process morally—although we assert the right to have no tendentious purpose, no message, the right to declare with Ibsen that 'a book is not about, it *is*'—we lack no means to do so.

Graham Greene has a snooty Olympian answer on his existential journey: 'When I came to write I was handing out alternative destinies to real people whom I had encountered.'

For Joseph Conrad what the writer does is 'rescue work carried out in darkness . . . this snatching of vanished phases of turbulence.' 'What is a novel,' he asks, 'if not a conviction of



our fellow-men's existence strong enough to take upon itself a form of imagined life clearer than reality.'



In my own life as a writer I have had the strange experience of pre-empting the moves of the prying game.

In the 1970s I wrote a novel in which one of the central characters was a revolutionary hero. It was unique in my fiction in that it did have an element of the tendentious—it was, for me, something of a coded homage paid to such a man, an anti-apartheid activist, who had died serving a life sentence, his ashes withheld from his daughters by the prison authorities of the day.

As a clue to this homage, as well as for the purposes of using the authentic rhetoric of the time for the public statements of my character, I did something I had never done before and have not done since: I reproduced an existing document, part of the speech made in court by an actual personage, a South African Communist, when he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

There was an additional complication, by the way: the publication of the words of a convicted prisoner, whether Communist or not, alive or dead, was then a treasonable offence under the law of my country.

I had known the man and his family, and had been awedly fascinated by the extraordinary condition of danger and self-discipline in what was openly evidenced as their close-knit life. I was not a casual acquaintance but had been by no means an intimate in their house, neither, although I was committed to the Left, was I a member of the revolutionary group which was more than their home.



I was the metamir standing before them.

The novel itself found its opening paragraphs from a single moment like that; I was waiting outside a prison to visit a friend detained for political interrogation, and there was the schoolgirl daughter of the man, presented to me, as it were, in the group of prison visitors, that strange assembly in whom social association is reduced to connection with the outcast: the offenders against the edicts of the social order, criminal or political, indiscriminately put behind bars.

What was she thinking?

What was her sense of a family obligation that *chose for her* to stand there among the relatives of thieves and murderers?

She was in gym frock and blazer of a conventional private school for young ladies; how did her genteel bourgeois teachers and classmates receive a girl whose father was in prison for treason against the State that protected their white privilege?

Of course, the writer in me quickly eclipsed the renderer of homage.

From that mystery, the facility that works upon while it stores fragments of perception, the snatched phases of turbulence that is existence both lived and observed by the writer, came the alternative lives of the man and the schoolgirl, created in the imagination but touching, here and there, perforce, the actual, since these imaginary lives, by the nature of my story, were contained in time by aleatory real events of politics and history.

An act of homage, just as well as any other, can be construed by curiosity as proof that so-and-so surely is you-know-who. Although my novel—to adapt Piaget's definition of the history of intelligence—was not an 'inventory of elements' that homage per se is limited to be, but the 'bundle of transformations' he cites in opposition, I knew that the guessing-game would buzz over the published book.



The fact that I as surely knew it would be banned because of the points at which it was anchored to real events of outlawed political movements, from liberal to left, bothered me less. Bans, along with the governments that impose them, do not last forever. (And indeed, the novel was both banned and eventually released.)

But the effect that the guessing-game might have on the schoolgirl, now adult, subject to it, who would remember my presence in hers outside the prison that day, concerned me.

Her father's name certainly would be attached to my fictional character; the persona I had created in place of her father would be attributed to him. The complex family relations I had created would be attributed to her and her family. The ontological conflicts within unquestioned political faith imposed by parents upon children with the rigour of a religious one would be seen as their own conflicts.

Worst of all, for the novelist: would the girl's finding be that *I had understood nothing*; that the metamir had failed to discover what the silver-backed mirror of the apparent cannot reveal?

So in place of waiting for the question to be thrust at her as well as at me, I sent my answer. I sent her the manuscript of the novel before publication, before anyone else had read it. With it I enclosed a letter. I have kept that letter for fifteen years. It has been my secret, and I open it here because I suppose it belongs, at least, in this discourse as one writer's answer, in respect of fiction, to the mystery behind the ignorant superficiality of the guessing-game.

I began with the proposition that this was the strangest letter I should ever write and might be the strangest she would ever receive. I told her that for the present the novel was hers and mine; only she and I, as she read it, knew of its contents.

But I was a writer and it was meant to be, would be, read



by whoever wished to do so; soon it would be open to anyone. Even if it were to be banned in our own country it would be read elsewhere.

Then people would come to her and say, This is your father, this is you, as they would come to me and say, This is so-and-so, this is his daughter. She had to be the first to read the fiction because she would be the one to know, as they never could know, that although the man lived for the same political convictions and human ideals and suffered for them the same imprisonment and death as her father, he was not her father, could not be.

I could not 'know', have known, her father in the private and personal moments that became the dimensions of my character, I could not have 'known' the hidden motives behind the public interactions I observed performed, and the interactions I was privy to, occasionally a bit player in, his relations with his family, political comrades and friends.

I could not have known the clandestine connections that must have existed between hidden cause and observable effect in many of the events staged in her family's life that were apparently inexplicable.

I could not have known what sort of arcane curriculum of parental love (for it had been clear to me in my contact with the family that the father was a loving and loved one) allowed the grim determinism of a way of life that inevitably would land a tender schoolgirl outside prison gates as if she merely had been sent down to the local shops.

I had a critical as well as a hagiographical conviction of her father's and her existence strong enough to take on a form of imagined life. I was aware of the risk that the conditioning of my own subconscious—that conditioning to which I had been



subjected by the conjunction of apartheid and capitalism in the formation of ideas about personal Communist mores—might distort that conviction.

I had made my snatch of the phases of turbulence of that existence I shared with them in a particular country in a particular era. In the vision of the metamir I had invented alternative being.

I explained to her that this was why, during the four years I was writing the novel, I had avoided contact with her and other surviving members of the family. I deliberately had allowed friendship to lapse. Perhaps it seems naïve, perhaps it was my quaint notion of authorial morality, perhaps it was my eccentric methodology—I had the idea that there must be no evidence, in the test of creation, that I was ‘studying’ her in order to inform my fictions, measuring the progression of her life in the to-and-fro of past and present that delineates personality.

Before I left her to the novel itself, I concluded my letter by reminding her that although the I-spy game would be played and might disturb her, the players could be positing only yet another alternative—to mine, yes—an alternative life for her and her father, her family; they could not touch what she knew to have been their own.

There was silence from her for several weeks.

Strangely, although I had been fearfully apprehensive about giving her the manuscript to read, I was tranquil. It was as if the three of us, the schoolgirl waiting to visit her father in prison, my fictional character and I, together had a dimension of immaterial existence to be privately occupied for a while.

This is easier to write than to say. I have always thought bunkum the coy romantic claim of some writers that their characters take over, write themselves, etcetera. It was nothing



like that. The temporal and the eternal, Lukács's duality of inwardness and the outside world, between which a writer is always precariously spreadeagled, attained an equilibrium. Life and fiction became whole.

One afternoon she walked through my gate carrying the manuscript.

So that was what it was, after all, a package of paper; we sat and exchanged the usual generalities and then, in a gap, there it was between us, the novel.

She said, 'This was our life.'

And nothing more.

I knew this was the best response I should ever have to that novel. Perhaps the best I should ever have in respect of any of my fictions. Something I should never receive again.

No critic's laudation could match it; no critic's damning could destroy it.

For she was not speaking of verisimilitude, she was not matching mug-shots, she knew that facts, events, sequences were not so; she was conceding that while no one can have total access to the lives of others—not even through means of the analyst's case-book, the biographer's research, the subjectively-composed revelations of diaries and letters—by contrast, on her or his vision the novelist may receive, from the ethos those lives give off, a vapour of the truth condensed, in which, a finger tracing upon a window-pane, the story may be written.

Milan Kundera once told an interviewer 'there is a limit beyond which the novelist can theorize no further on his own novels and whence he must know how to keep his silence.'

I have reached that limit.





I turn away to a perception of the origin of character in fiction less subjective in the person of the inquirer but even more subjective in the sense of the interpretation.

By this I mean where the thesis is not that of a writer defending his own work from the charge of predatory realism, but of a literary critic studying that writer's work on the premise that not someone else's filched life but the writer's own is the story—the *work itself* is totally subjective.

I take as example a study by Edward W. Said, since with its title, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, he boldly stakes this premise.

Here he sees the novel as essentially 'a discrete analogy of the mechanism' of the writer's life, mainly on the evidence of the writer's letters. 'To put forth the secret of one's imagination,' Said says, 'is not to enact a religious event, but to perform a religious rite; that is, the rite implies but withholds the actual event.'

So far, no novelist could have formulated more elegantly a remarkable definition of the ontological relation of fiction to reality. But the conclusion that follows does not 'withhold the actual event' at all: I quote: 'In this manner the life of the novelist *in its totality* is given the episodic structure which, while not revealing the whole of the writer's life, is a discrete analogy of the mechanism of that life. To the reader this can be made intelligible through the action (or plot) of a fictional work' (my *italics*).

Broken up piecemeal or not, mechanism or not, the author's life is the 'actual event' of the making of the book. On this premise, not only is the writer embalmed in his own words, his work is seen as determined by the limits of his own life. Every man, his metamir.