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NADINE GORDIMER'S LATE STYLE: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED STORIES FROM *LOOT* AND *BEETHOVEN WAS ONE-SIXTEENTH BLACK*

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ABSTRACT

Nadine Gordimer frequently emphasized that style is closely connected to subject matter, which, in her case, derived in large part from national and global politics. Her late short stories are only a partial testimony to this truth insofar as their style is shaped both by Gordimer's political views and by her approach to deeply personal topics, including love, desire, loss, mourning, and death. While the literary criticism of Gordimer's works tends to concentrate on the political dimension of her writing, the aim of this discussion is to explore late style in the context of personal topics recurrent in Gordimer's late short fiction, especially the topics that have been mentioned above. The article begins with a brief discussion of Gordimer's views on literary style and goes on to examine theoretical perspectives on the phenomenon of late style, including the works of Theodor Adorno, Edward Said, Linda and Michael Hutcheon, J.M. Coetzee, and Graham Riach. The main aim of the theoretical part of the article is to draw a clear distinction between *Spätstil* and *Altersstil*, and, in this way, to lay the foundation for the analysis of *Altersstil* (defined as a characteristic individual style that comes with advancing age) in Gordimer's stories. The analytical part of the article, devoted equally to Gordimer's late style and to the thematic preoccupations of her late short fiction, concentrates on six stories selected from Gordimer's last two volumes: *Loot and Other Stories* (2003) and *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* (2007). In both these collections, Gordimer's style is characterized by her experimentation with narrative perspectives, as well as the adoption of the autobiographical and confessional modes. Gordimer's late writing is also distinguished by intertextuality, self-reflexivity, and its interest in the workings of memory.

Keywords: Nadine Gordimer; short stories; late style; South African literature.

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1. "No such thing as a style"

When Nadine Gordimer, in her article "Witness: The Inward Testimony" (2010), argued that "literature has been and remains a means of people rediscovering themselves"[2] (2010: 692), she was referring to the South African nation, but the statement can just as aptly be applied to herself. Gordimer was 83 when she made this comment and by that time was entering the seventh decade of her writing career, which would continue until the publication of her last novel in 2012, two years before her death. Throughout those decades, Gordimer reinvented herself as a writer and public intellectual by exploring different political stances, from liberal humanism in the 1940s and the 1950s, through a period of disenchantment with the promise of multiculturalism, to her period of political radicalization, which began in the late 1960s. It was at that time that she embraced the role of the writer as a politically committed intellectual, who describes socio-political change and participates in it – a role that she continued to fulfill after the democratic transformations in her country.

In Gordimer's conception of politically involved writing, literary style is shaped by subject matter. In a 1986 interview, she argued that "to me there's no such thing as a style for a writer. Each book requires a different approach, and the style is dictated by the theme" (Bazin & Seymour 1990: 243). It is worth adding that Gordimer's view on style did not change after the fall of apartheid: in the lecture "Our Century" (1995), she observed that literature is written "inescapably *within* the destined context of politics" (1999: 224) and went on to define literary style as emerging out of "the identification between the author and this destined political context" (1999: 224–225).

Despite Gordimer's insistence on the primacy of the political in the forging of the writer's individual style, it is important to note that her late works were shaped not only by her political views but also by her prodigious experience as a writer and – not least of all – by her life circumstances. The aim of this article is to explore Gordimer's late style in the context of such intensely personal topics as love and desire, ageing and death, memory and mourning, as well as reflections on the afterlife. It will be shown that in her late stories, she sought new insights into these topics through stylistic innovation, including experimentation with narrative perspectives, the increasing tendency towards syntactical fragmentation, and the adoption of the autobiographical and confessional modes. All the three mentioned characteristics of Gordimer's stylistic innovation point

[2] Gordimer's notion of literature is reminiscent of Njabulo Ndebele's view that South African literature should focus on "rediscovering the ordinary". In his analysis of short stories by Michael Siluma, Joël Matlou and Bheki Maseko, Ndebele defines the ordinary as "the opposite of the spectacular". He goes on the claim that "paying attention to the ordinary and its methods will result in a significant growth of consciousness" (Ndebele 1994: 53).

to one overriding feature of her late stories, namely the strong and unifying persona of the narrator who, while not always closely resembling Gordimer, often points to her presence in the text. Indeed, reading the stories in her two last collections, we may have the impression that Gordimer inscribes herself into these works, making them considerably more autobiographical, reflective, and – in many cases – solemn than her earlier stories.

At the center of this discussion are Gordimer's last two collections: *Loot and Other Stories* (2003), published when she was 79, and *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* (2007), which came out when she was 84. Six stories have been selected for this discussion: "The Diamond Mine", "Visiting George", "Karma" from *Loot*, "Mother Tongue", "Safety Procedures" from *Beethoven*, and "Afterlife", published in *Salmagundi* in 2008. While other stories will be mentioned in passing, the six enumerated above will be analyzed in more detail, with the aim of showing the characteristic features of Gordimer's late style. These literary works will be discussed on the level of syntax, analyzing their fragmented, at times convoluted, sentences, and on the level of narration, exploring the first-person monologues which probe the topics of death, loss, memory, and metaphysics. These new developments in Gordimer's late short fiction will be considered in the context of the critical studies that address the topic of late style.

2. Critical perspectives on late style

One of the most insightful discussions of late style can be found in the article "Late Style(s): The Ageism of the Singular" by Michael and Linda Hutcheon (2012). As they observe, one of the reasons why the notion of late style is so diffuse is that it is, in fact, an amalgam of two terms: *Spätstil* and *Altersstil*. *Spätstil* is characterized as "an extremely vague term … to describe the last works of artists, no matter the age at which they died" (Hutcheon & Hutcheon 2012: 1), while *Altersstil* is defined as a characteristic individual style that comes with advancing age. Unlike *Altersstil*, *Spätstil* is perceived as a transcultural phenomenon that yields insight into the works of writers, artists, and composers, from the Renaissance to contemporary times. Critical towards the reductive, universalizing tendency of finding one late style characteristic to all great artists, Hutcheon and Hutcheon observe that *Spätstil* is given radically different meanings, depending on the theoretician: while some claim that old age brings "serenity", "withdrawal", and "a consolidation of themes and techniques", others claim that the years preceding one's death are a time of "rage and resistance, of innovation and experiment" (Hutcheon & Hutcheon 2012: 2). This latter perspective was adopted by Theodor Adorno, who in his famous study of *Spätstil*, writes about "tears", "fissures",

and "sudden discontinuities" (Adorno 2002: 566–567) in Beethoven's works. In his essay on late style, Edward Said, inspired by Adorno's essay, poses the question of whether it would not be more productive to consider "artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction?" (Said 2007: 7)

The notion of *Altersstil* in Gordimer's late prose is not a new topic for writers, reviewers, and literary critics. In his article about her novel *The Pickup* (2001) and the collection *Loot and Other Stories*, J.M. Coetzee argues that Gordimer's post-apartheid fiction shows a tendency to explore new grounds, but he goes on to add that her late style is "somewhat bodiless, somewhat sketchy by comparison with the writing of her major period" (Coetzee 2003). In her late prose, Coetzee adds, Gordimer is "content to gesture toward what she means rather than pinning it down in words" as if she was reluctant to undertake "those Herculean labors again" (Coetzee 2003). Coetzee's lukewarm review of Gordimer's fiction is one of many points of reference in what is so far the only critical study of late style in Gordimer's short stories: Graham Riach's illuminating article "The Late Nadine Gordimer" (2016). Concentrating on her last three collections, *Jump* (1991), *Loot*, and *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, Riach enumerates three main features of Gordimer's late style, among them "syntactical complexity, self-reflexivity, and intertextual allusion" (Riach 2016: 1084). Self-reflexivity and intertextual allusion are closely connected in Gordimer's stories insofar as the references to Beethoven and Kafka are made in the context of her reflection on the act of writing (this is the case especially in "Gregor", included in *Beethoven*). It is worth adding here that self-reflexivity is not invariably connected with intertextuality: metafictional comments are also a part of Gordimer's meditations on the workings of memory (as we will see in the discussion of "Visiting George" from *Loot*). Moreover, it can be argued that, to some extent, the narrative strategies adopted by Gordimer in her late stories have a self-reflexive dimension insofar as their autobiographical and confessional qualities direct our attention to the act of writing.

It is worth adding that intertextuality in Gordimer's prose has also been discussed by Rita Barnard. In her article "Locating Gordimer: Modernism, Postcolonialism, Realism", published in 2019 as part of the collection *Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalism: Anglophone Literature, 1950 to the Present*, Barnard enumerates three main features of Gordimer's writing in general: "the response to a particular locality, the emphasis on accuracy and truth telling, and the future orientation" (Barnard 2019: 107). Barnard argues that

Gordimer's prose can be described as "a situated postcolonial modernism",[3] showing the influence of such writers as Kafka, Hemingway, and Proust.

Riach's and Barnard's contributions to the literary criticism of Gordimer's works have one feature in common: they both concentrate on the issue of political engagement in her works. Riach's article – an important point of reference in this discussion – explores in detail the eponymous stories of *Jump*, *Loot*, and *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* while mentioning other stories in these volumes to give context to his discussion. His aim, stated clearly at the beginning of the article, is to adopt an approach that reads style and form in political terms, doing so to "elucidate how her fictional texts articulate political content in specifically literary ways" (Riach 2016: 1078). Without contesting the effects of Riach's engagement with Gordimer's works, it should be noted that a politically focused reading, however engaging it may be, does not exhaust critical perspectives on Gordimer's stories. By devoting more attention to the personal nature of her characters' experience (the personal is understood here as that which is not inextricably connected to politics[4]), this article aims to create a counterbalance to the overriding tendency among Gordimer's critics to focus on the political dimension of her works. Apart from discussing different stories from those considered by Riach, this article also puts more emphasis on the autobiographical and confessional characteristics of Gordimer's late writing, exploring these features in a detailed analysis of passages taken from her late stories.

3. The personal dimension of Gordimer's late short fiction

In her introduction to *Selected Stories* (1975), Gordimer notes that the principle underlying her short fiction is that of recurrence: "there are some stories I have gone on writing, again and again, all my life, not so much because the themes are

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[3] Barnard's notion of Gordimer's "situated postcolonial modernism" is reminiscent of David Attwell's understanding of "situational metafiction", as discussed in his study of Coetzee's novels. Attwell defines "situational metafiction" as "a mode of fiction that draws attention to the historicity of discourses, to the way subjects are positioned within and by them, and, finally, to the interpretive process, with its acts of contestation and appropriation" (Attwell 1993: 20). The emphasis on the regional specificity of Gordimer's and Coetzee's writing is evident in the approach of both critics, though it should be added that while Attwell pays more attention to the self-reflexive aspect of Coetzee's writing, Barnard concentrates on the intertextual dimension of Gordimer's fiction.

[4] I am aware that the domains of politics and personal life are closely connected in Gordimer's fiction, or, as Coetzee pithily observes in the context of her story "Mission Statement", Gordimer's oeuvre "works at the intersection of the private and the public" (Coetzee 2003). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the personal dimension of Gordimer's stories should be explored solely in the context of politics. As I have set out to prove in this article and in the forthcoming book *Enactments of Life: The Short Stories of Nadine Gordimer*, her stories also explore intensely private dimensions of their characters' experience.

obsessional but because I found other ways to take hold of them" (1975: 10). While Gordimer makes this comment in the context of her first five collections, the logic that she described governs the stories that she published throughout her life: many of them show Gordimer insistently returning to certain topics, the two most recurrent ones being the impact of politics on the lives of South Africans and the relationships between men and women.

Despite their social and cultural differences, Gordimer's female protagonists often have one feature in common, namely, they tend to see sexuality as a means of attaining self-fulfilment[5] and freedom, the latter understood as an escape from social conventions.[6] Nevertheless, it should be added that this promise of liberation is mostly an illusion insofar as it does not lead to self-assertion; on the contrary, it makes women economically and emotionally dependent on men. Women's submission to the needs and desires of their partners is visible both in Gordimer's earlier[7] and later short fiction. In "The Second Sense" and "Mother Tongue", both published in *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, she explores male-female relationships which, despite the seeming equality between the partners, are based on the conservative premise of the wife's submissiveness to the husband, specifically the idea that a woman's life is shaped primarily by the decisions, private and professional, made by the man. This skewed balance of power is especially clear in "Mother Tongue", which tells the story of a relationship between a German woman and a South African man. The relationship between the two is forged in moments of passion between them and it is the intimacy of these encounters that convinces both to enter into marriage, despite their linguistic and cultural differences. Gordimer makes it clear that it is the woman who takes the greater risk, leaving her home in Germany and choosing the life of an expatriate in South Africa:

> Her parents: how did that church's marriage ceremony put it? An old biblical injunction along with many of the good precepts she had learnt at the Lutheran Sunday school they had sent her to as a child. 'Leave thy father and thy mother and cleave only …' Something like that. The emotional parting with the parents,

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5 As Dorothy Driver writes, through sexuality Gordimer reveals to her female protagonists "the fullness of life, the revealed and the hidden" (Driver 1990: 187). Driver is quoting here from Gordimer's first novel, *The Lying Days*.

6 Kathrin Wagner observes that sex in Gordimer's prose serves two broad purposes: "Throughout the ten novels Gordimer's female protagonists similarly seek both to integrate themselves through a sexual connection and to find in the expression of their sexuality an escape from stultifying social pressures" (Wagner 1994: 88).

7 For example in "The Talisman" (from the first collection, *Face to Face* (1949)), "The Hour and the Years", "The End of the Tunnel" (both stories from Gordimer's second collection, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* (1952)), "The Life of the Imagination" (from her sixth collection, *Livingstone's Companions* (1971)), "You Name It" (from her eight collection, *A Soldier's Embrace* (1980)).

> handed from the arms of one to the other, each jealous to have the last embrace of the daughter, was not a parting but an arrival in the embrace of a beloved man.
> (*Beethoven*, 79)

The passage quoted offers us a brief but revealing glimpse into Gordimer's late style, which combines third-person narratorial report and summary with passages of focalized narration and free indirect discourse. The result of this intricate weaving of narrative modes is that the reader is forced to constantly alternate between the perspective of the narrator and the character, with no clear dividing line between the two voices. The first sentence, which seems to report the thoughts of the protagonist, is followed by what appears to be – due to the difference in registers – narratorial commentary in the second sentence, which once again merges into the voice of the protagonist. The passage from the Bible (quoted imperfectly[8]) is followed by the last and longest sentence, with the narrator reporting briefly on the emotional farewell before finally offering us insight into the woman's state of mind. The phrase "an arrival in the embrace of a beloved man," which clearly belongs to the narrator, conveys the woman's love for her husband, but it also references the religious upbringing of the woman, with her religion's insistence on the submissive role of the wife. It is this ideologically conditioned inequality, leading to the wife's wholesale concentration on her husband's life, which – by the end of the story – leaves her with a sense of alienation: since she considers herself merely an addition to his life, she marginalizes her cultural background in a futile attempt to adjust to his lifestyle. "Mother Tongue" is about the illusions of understanding created in and through desire; equally importantly, the story explores the entrapments of unequal relationships, in which it is the woman, not the man, who is at a disadvantage.

Reading the passage quoted from "Mother Tongue", it becomes evident that the syntactical complexity that Graham Riach identifies as one of the features of Gordimer's late style need not manifest itself in long, complex (at times convoluted) sentences – although they are also present in her late prose – but it may also involve shorter units that are difficult to process because of their frequent changes of narrative perspective. This feature is emphasized by Rachel Holmes in a review of Gordimer's penultimate collection, *Loot and Other Stories*. Holmes compares the stories collected in this volume to "messages [transmitted] on an analogue telephone network": "They are fragmented into tiny units of consciousness, experience and human emotion, and delivered to the reader for careful reassembly" (Holmes 2003). The fragmented passages in Gordimer's

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[8] The passage to which she is referring, taken from *Genesis* 2:24, reads differently: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (*King James Version*).

late prose do indeed necessitate the reader's involvement, creating the impression that she is calling attention to the dynamic thought processes of her characters. While Gordimer's earlier prose puts more emphasis on a rapid and often heated exchange of views through dialogue, her later work tends to concentrate on the private thoughts of her protagonists. The intimate dimension of this writing is also evident in its form: passages like the one just quoted resemble notes written in the privacy of the writer's journal – they convey a sense of immediacy and urgency that is present in Gordimer's manuscripts, especially the notebooks in which she wrote down her ideas for short stories.

What can be described as the sketch-like quality of Gordimer's late stories is emphasized by frequent contrasts between simple and complex sentences, sometimes occurring in the space of a paragraph. At times, this transition is sudden, taking the reader from one word, signaling the main topic of the passage and the starting point of a longer reflection, to a convoluted sentence that is difficult to process. One example of such a syntactical contrast can be found in "The Diamond Mine" (*Loot and Other Stories*), whose main topic is a short-lived relationship between a girl called Tilla and an unnamed young soldier, eight years her senior, about to be sent to fight in the Second World War. In one scene, Tilla, eager to know the man better, learns about his passion:

> Fishing. It opens the sea before her, the salt wind gets in the narrowed eyes conveying to her whole nights passed alone on the rocks. He walks from headland to headland on dawn-wet sand, the tide is out—sometimes in mid-sentence there's a check, half-smile, half-breath, because he's thinking of something this child couldn't know, this is his incantation that shuts out the smart parade-ground march towards killing and blinds the sights the gun trains on sawdust-stuffed figures where he is being drilled to see the face of the enemy to whom he, himself, is the enemy, with guts (he pulls the intricately perfect innards out of the fish he's caught, the fisherman's simple skill) in place of sawdust.
>
> (*Loot*, 125–126)

Beginning with focalized narration, the passage (part of a longer paragraph) opens with Tilla's attempt to supply – by means of imagination – what she lacks in knowledge about the man. The sentence describing her romantic notions of solitary nights spent by the sea swiftly flows into the next one, where the question of attribution is considerably more problematic. The opening of this long and complex sentence seems simple enough (the narrator continues to relate Tilla's romantic fantasy about the man walking along the coastline), but then, characteristically of Gordimer's late stories, the boundary between the perspective of the protagonist and that of the narrator becomes blurred; indeed, the words "this child" – a reference to Tilla – signal that we have crossed over from focalized narration to narratorial commentary. What follows is a brief description of the man's military training; again, characteristically of Gordimer's

late short fiction, the narrative is distinguished by its focus on the image (here the figures used for military training) and by its sudden change of narrative perspective from the soldier to his enemy. The parenthetical comment gives some unity to this complex, long-winded sentence insofar as it once again alludes to the topic of fishing, signaling to the reader what was the starting point of the passage. Sentences like the one just discussed put a sudden stop to the free flow of the narrative, forcing the reader to attend for the second and third time to the whole passage, putting emphasis on the presence of the narrator and creating the impression that the level of events serves as a background to narratorial commentary and to the act of narration. This tendency is not so pronounced as to consider the mentioned story an essay, but it is significant enough to distinguish it – and many other stories in the two last collections – from Gordimer's earlier works.

The prominent narratorial presence in Gordimer's late prose is often connected with its autobiographical dimension or, to be more precise, with its enactment of the autobiographical. This is evident in "The Diamond Mine", which opens with the following paragraph:

> I'll call her Tilla, you may call her by another name. You might think you knew her. You might have been the one: him. It's not by some simple colloquial habit we 'call' someone instead of naming: call them up.
> It was during the war, your war, the Forties, that has sunk as far away into the century as the grandfathers' Nineteen-Fourteen.
>
> (*Loot*, 123)

The self-reflexive gesture of creating – "calling up" – the protagonist is not without ambiguity: it is unclear whether the narrator is addressing the reader or a person once known, who is in the unique position of seeing through the veil of fiction into the creative impulse that inspired the story. Indeed, it seems that the narrator is moving from the fictional into the autobiographical: while the "you" in the first paragraph is situated on the boundary between generality and specificity, the sentence that opens the next paragraph (that in which the narrator refers to the Second World War as "your war" (*Loot*, 124)) unambiguously references a particular person, creating a distinct narratee, who emerges once again at the end, when the narrator addresses a person she once knew: "Is it still you; somewhere, old?" (*Loot*, 132). Insofar as it is addressed to a particular though unclearly defined person, relating an intimate moment experienced by fictional protagonists, the story has a confessional dimension, straddling the border between fiction and autobiography.

Characteristic of Gordimer's late fiction, "The Diamond Mine" uses the autobiographical mode to explore the workings of memory. The beginning of the story, with its creation ("calling up") of the protagonist and the narratee,

reads like the recollection of a distant memory – the act of making present what was absent from conscious thought for many years. This notion of remembering as making present has a thematic parallel in the brief but intense relationship between the protagonists: throughout the story, love and desire are presented in terms of presence ("She was there" (*Loot*, 126), "There. There he is" (*Loot*, 128), "She's found, he's found her" (*Loot*, 132); moreover, the protagonists' embrace is described as belonging to "the urgent purity of this present" (*Loot*, 130)). If the act of recollection has the power to create a sense of presence, the ending gestures towards loss and absence: the story concludes with the parting of Tilla and the soldier (about to be sent to war), described as a gradual blurring of detail and the loss of specificity (the narrator describes the man as steadily merging into a crowd of his fellow soldiers).

The use of the autobiographical mode to explore the workings of memory is even more visible in "Visiting George", a short sketch published in *The New Yorker* in 2001 as "Memory by Nadine Gordimer", later included in the collection *Loot and Other Stories*. As is the case in "The Diamond Mine", "Visiting George" begins with the creation of the narratee – a spouse, partner, or close friend of the narrator – and includes frequent references to this person, leaving the readers with a strong impression that the narrative is, above all, an imagined, one-way exchange with a loved one, who is now absent. The conversational quality of this text is evident in passages like the one quoted below, in which the narrator, claiming to recall a visit to their mutual friend in his apartment in London, addresses her absent companion with the following question:

> You don't remember what we talked about? Neither do I. Not really. There he still is, walking out of the weave of people; for us. The apartment: well, as we knew it. But she didn't appear.
>
> (*Loot*, 70)

Failing to recall the topic of their conversation, the narrator resorts to the central memory – the image of their friend emerging from a crowd of people – around which the entire sketch is created. Apart from enacting the workings of memory, the quoted passage is also characteristic of Gordimer's late style, the short and fragmented sentences resembling what has been described as the sketch-like quality of her writing. This feature is not consistent throughout the story; rather, passages like the one just quoted are intermingled with longer, more complex sentences, for example, one evoking the atmosphere of a bustling London street. This contrast emphasizes the 'unfinished' quality of the story, which reads like a draft of a memory, with some elements already developed but others merely outlined, as if they were ideas waiting to be worked into a longer, more cohesive narrative.

At the end of "Visiting George", the narrator – taking the readers by surprise – undermines the accuracy of her memory, revealing that she has not visited their long-time friend but only found his apartment, only to learn of his death. It is at this point that we are given the context of the narrator's recollection: as she walks down the streets of London, she gives herself over to the flow of thoughts, memories, and impressions, all of which form a continuum, shaped not only by her subjectivity but also by the existence of other people:

> If I dreamt this, while walking, walking in the London streets, the subconscious of each and every other life, past and present, brushing me in passing, what makes it real? Writing it down.
>
> (*Loot*, 72)

The image of pedestrians passing each other on a London street – reminiscent of Woolf's writing, which Gordimer deeply admired – becomes a symbolic representation of memory as an intersubjective phenomenon in which images and impressions are exchanged subconsciously, some of them interpreted as fantasies and others considered as recollections. In this sense, what is seen as a distortion of memory (such as that described in the story) is proof of its dynamism and intersubjectivity. Writing down a particular recollection is an attempt to instill it and, consequently, make it more tangible ("real"). As the story shows, the vividness of a given memory – its "realness", as it were – is effected through the staged interaction with the addressee, who, in his silent presence, constitutes an important point of reference in the process of recollection.

In the creation of their silent narratees, "Visiting George" and "The Diamond Mine" conjure up a silent, vaguely defined presence, which points to loss and absence. In "The Diamond Mine", the considerable lapse of time between the narrated event and the act of narration makes it likely that the man whom the narrator addresses is no longer alive. In "Visiting George", the autobiographical dimension of the story, stemming from the fact that the narrator is South African (as was her absent partner), brings into focus the fact of death and loss, which remains in the background of the entire volume, not least because the book is dedicated to Gordimer's late husband Reinhold (the dates of his life and his marriage to Gordimer are provided underneath the dedication – Reinhold died in 2001, two years before the publication of this collection). It is worth adding that the themes of death and loss are also visible in "Dreaming of the Dead", perhaps the most autobiographical example of her stories, in which Gordimer, recalling a reunion with her friends, now dead (Anthony Sampson, Edward Said, and Susan Sontag), makes the following prediction about her husband: "You[9] will not come. Never" (*Beethoven*, 41).

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[9] As Riach notes, Gordimer identified the "you" in the sentence as referring to "my man, my dead husband" (quoted in Riach 2016: 1089).

4. Style and the political context

While she continued to explore the topics of love, desire, loss, and memory in her late fiction – doing so from an intensely private perspective – Gordimer saw writing as shaped by a given political situation, both national and global. This point was made by her in the lecture "When Art Meets Politics" (1999), in which, addressing her audience, she argued that all people are dependent on their country's politics and – beyond that – on "the flux and reflux of the globalisation we are beginning to live through. That is why original expression is inexorably linked to politics" (2010: 550).

The key role of politics in the shaping of Gordimer's style is evident in the stories devoted to the impact of socio-economic changes on people in post-apartheid South Africa and, more widely, in postcolonial Africa (included in this group are such stories as "Mission Statement", "Look-Alikes", "Homage", "Karma" from *Loot* and "Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black", and "Alternative Endings" from *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*). Fewer in number are the stories in which Gordimer explores the effects of globalization without making any concrete references to Africa, among them "Some Are Born To Sweet Delight", published in *Jump and Other Stories* (1991), and "Safety Procedures" from *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black.* In both these stories, Gordimer addresses the political and social implications of economic inequality by exploring the legacy of colonialism and the connections between the global south and the north.[10] In "Some Are Born To Sweet Delight" – the title a reference to William Blake's poem "Auguries of Innocence" – the female protagonist, an eighteen-year-old woman called Vera, puts herself in danger by misguided trust, but it is her identity as a British national and a citizen of the Western world that makes her and many other people the victims of a terrorist organization. The awareness that one can be victimized simply by virtue of one's nationality or more tenuous allegiances is clearly expressed in "Safety Procedures", in which a nervous wife explains to her husband that even a seemingly inconsequential decision, such as the choice of an airline, can put one's life at risk (as she tells her husband, "You don't know whose enemy you are" (*Beethoven*, 66)). Gordimer manages to convey both the determined refusal of her protagonists – and perhaps also of

[10] It is worth adding that Gordimer addressed this topic also in her non-fiction texts, for example in her lecture for the United Nations Development Programme in 1997 "Labour Well The Teeming Earth" and "A Letter to Future Generations" (1999). According to Gordimer, the Western model of liberal democracies, with its global logic of capitalism, perpetuates social and economic inequality. As she points out in "A Letter to Future Generations", one of the most pressing questions facing the modern world is "what role can globalization play in eradicating world poverty?" (2010: 552).

herself – to be paralyzed by fear (as the husband explains, "fear is the real killer" (*Beethoven*, 65)) and a strong realization of one's vulnerability.

"Safety Procedures" broaches several topics that were important to Gordimer at a later stage of her writing career, including globalism, the unequal distribution of wealth, and social injustice. The story is mentioned here because it displays a feature characteristic of Gordimer's late prose: a strong sense of historical and political situatedness on the one hand, and, on the other, a keen sense of detachment from socio-political realities, unprecedented in her earlier works. This curious combination of involvement and detachment is visible in the scene in which the man, traveling on a plane, first browses through international editions of major American and European papers, and then, tired by his work and lulled by the flight, looks out the window, describing the formations of clouds outside:

> Perhaps what I'm saying is that I've half dozed-off, there's an inbetween form of consciousness that's not experienced anywhere else but up here. With nothing. … Nothing. Up there, out there, I do not have within me love, sex, wife, children, house and executive office. I do not have a waiting foreign city with international principals and decisions. Why has no artist – not even the abstractionists – painted this state attainable only since the invention of passenger aircraft? The gaze. Freedom.
>
> (*Beethoven*, 68)

The passage is telling, especially if compared to a similar scene in Gordimer's sixth novel *The Conservationist* (1974), in which the main protagonist, Mehring, flies over the desert landscape of Africa, recalling his frequent journeys over the continent. Even though the topography never gives any indication of where he is located at any stage in his journeys, both the day and night flights are characterized by Mehring's constant awareness of what is beneath his feet. Even when the plane window affords no view because of the time of day or the weather conditions, there is never the sense that Mehring feels detached from the land over which he is flying; on the contrary, the perspective only strengthens his attachment to Africa, reinforcing the clear tendency to romanticize its landscape. By contrast, the air travel in "Safety Procedures" is described as a curious experience, severing – if only for a short time – the protagonist's ties with his family and his country. The protagonist, suspended between wakefulness and sleep, finds himself drawn to the notion of freedom as a state of ultimate detachment from the relationships that have defined him throughout his life.

"Safety Procedures" touches upon a topic that is characteristic of the last stages of Gordimer's later work – a reflection on what lies beyond the world of social commitments and political events. What is also visible here is a tension between her lifelong preoccupation – and fascination – with life seen as an intricate web of human relations, and the contrary pull towards a form of freedom

seen as a forced abdication from all such engagements. Gordimer used this tension as a source of inspiration in her writing, for example, in "Karma", which, as it will now be shown, can be interpreted as her imaginative foray into an otherworldly realm of freedom, understood as non-involvement and non-obligation.

5. Meditations on the afterlife

"Karma", included in the penultimate collection *Loot and Other Stories*, has been described as a novella,[11] but it can more aptly be characterized as a mini-cycle[12] of six untitled stories, most of which are set in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. While the social and political dimension of these stories has been analyzed by a number of critics, for example, Ileana Dimitriu (2005) and Karina Magdalena Szczurek (2008), what remains largely undiscussed is the metaphysical dimension of Gordimer's work, as embodied by the notion of karma,[13] with its principles of reincarnation and ascension.[14] Two of the stories in "Karma" are narrated by souls who have not yet reached ascension and are thus reduced to continuous reincarnations, punctuated by spells in what – to all intents and purposes – resembles the shadowy realm of the underworld. In the third story in this cycle, a disembodied soul addresses the readers, raising many topics that recur in Gordimer's earlier stories, including love and desire, memory and forgetting, literature and creativity, politics and power, suffering and death, all of which are viewed at a distance unprecedented in Gordimer's earlier works; indeed, to read the story resembles looking from a considerable height at the fascinating

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11 Ileana Dimitriu in her article "Shifts in Gordimer's Recent Short Fiction: Story-Telling after Apartheid" (2005) describes "Karma" as a novella, while Karina Magdalena Szczurek refers to "Karma" as "a story about a wandering soul and its many incarnations" (Szczurek 2008: 138).

12 According to Susan Garland Mann, one crucial feature of the short story cycle is that "the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated. On the one hand, the stories work independently of one another: the reader is capable of understanding each of them without going beyond the limits of the individual story. On the other hand, however, the stories work together, creating something that could not be achieved in a single story" (Mann 1989: 15).

13 For a definition of karma, Gordimer quotes *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* on the first page of the cycle: "1) The sum and the consequences of a person's actions during the successive phases of his existence, regarded as determining his destiny. 2) Fate, destiny. … " (*Loot*, 151). A more succinct definition of karma is given by Ruth White in her book *Karma and Reincarnation*, where it is described simply as "the law of cause and effect" (White 2001: 14), with the addition that "the consequences of a man's past decisions condition his present lot" (White 2001: 15).

14 As Ruth White writes in her book *Karma and Reincarnation*, when the individual soul has lived through its various reincarnations and achieved self-perfection, its journey is complete. At that point, the soul is ready to break out of the cycle and – as White writes – "move on permanently to life on other planes. This moving is often called 'Ascension'" (White 2001: 36).

topography of her fiction. This detachment has both a self-reflexive and an autobiographical dimension insofar as it can be seen as Gordimer's attempt to revisit the topics that were important to her throughout her writing career. Equally importantly, the considerable detachment that results from the choice of her disembodied and otherworldly narrator enables Gordimer to write about human existence with the directness and candor uncharacteristic of her earlier fiction. To give just one example, when discussing the topic of memory and forgetting, the narrator offers the story of an elderly man, once a famous mountaineer, who passes his last days with no recollection of his considerable achievements:

> The friends and the journalists find this sad; it depresses them and I'm the one who knows why, because while I'm living their experience *I* accept the meaning within them they suppress: living is growing old on the way to death, losing those faculties they treasure so much, and although they think their lives are choices, there are the two stages over which they don't have any choice – to be born, and to die.
>
> (*Loot*, 195)

As the narrator's commentary on memory swiftly moves into a reflection on ageing and dying, the boundary between fiction – (so evidently signaled in the choice of her unusual narrator) – and autobiography, becomes blurred; indeed, there is the sense that in the latter part of the quoted passage, Gordimer abandons her fictional disguise and begins to speak directly about a truth that she has come to confront. The playful irony that characterizes much of the monologue is suddenly dropped, and the change of tone points to a presence of an altogether different, autobiographical narrator, speaking to her readers from the considerable distance of age and experience.

The autobiographical dimension of "Karma" can be discussed in the context of a later passage in the soul's monologue, in which Gordimer uses the image of passengers on an airplane, signifying – not unlike in "Safety Procedures" – a state of in-betweenness, in which the passengers are suspended between departure and arrival, between the confinement of the airplane cabin and the freedom outside of the window. The fact that the interior of the plane is compared to a hospital ward (with the seats compared to hospital beds and the flight attendant to a nurse) turns this passage into a reflection on ageing and death, the narrow confines of the cabin representing the limitations imposed by illness and old age, and the reference to freedom (presented as "fearful" (*Loot*, 201)) constituting a thin allusion to death. The ending of the story, in which the soul describes simultaneous fear and attraction towards freedom as a state of ultimate disinvolvement, reads like a thinly-veiled personal reflection, addressed by Gordimer to her readers, conveying the tension between the fear and the anticipation of the unknown.

The self-reflexive aspect of "Karma" – the fact that it includes commentaries on the act of writing – can also be considered as a manifestation of Gordimer's presence in the text. As the soul passes time by enumerating the professions it could have chosen for itself had it ever been reincarnated, it mentions becoming a writer – a vocation that involves the well-known state of living "multiple existences that are not the poor little opportunities of a single existence" (*Loot*, 200). Recurrent in Gordimer's non-fiction texts,[15] the idea of writing as inhabiting different subjectivities hints at Gordimer's stance with respect to her unique gift as a writer.

The narrating voice of the third story in "Karma" bears a resemblance to Beckett's narrators – especially those of *The Trilogy* – who are devoid of any stable identity or consistent character, motivated by little more than the ability to utter their thoughts in what seems like a metaphysical void. Also reminiscent of Beckett is the atmosphere of bitterness and disenchantment, which Ileana Dimitriu has aptly called "spiritual exhaustion" and "existential betrayal" (Dimitriu 2005: 102). Dimitriu speculates that the conclusion of the third story is "a hidden cry (from Gordimer) for independence from overdetermined social contexts" (Dimitriu 2005: 103). Taking Dimitriu's observation as a starting point, it can be argued that Gordimer also writes against overdetermined metaphysical contexts. In this sense, the soul's monologues in the third and sixth parts of "Karma" convey Gordimer's skepticism with respect to spiritual and religious systems that reduce the complexity of human life to a single, overarching principle. Gordimer is writing from the perspective of an atheist, who, though not unsympathetic to religion,[16] cannot or will not accept any metaphysical frames of reference.

Gordimer returned to the topics of religion and metaphysics in one of her last stories, "Afterlife". Published in *Salmagundi* under the category of fiction, this work is situated on the boundary between fiction and essay. Informal and conversational in tone, it reads like a personal meditation – not without a note of playful irony – on the various scenarios that may await the soul after death. After a short and perfunctory description of the afterlife as it is imagined

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15 In her introduction to *Selected Stories*, Gordimer argued that "fiction is a way of exploring possibilities present but undreamt of in the living of a single life" (1975: 115). The notion of writing as exploring the lives of others is also recurrent in Gordimer's 1994 lecture "Adam's Rib: Fictions and Realities", in which Gordimer made the following comment: "When I came to write I was handing out alternative destinies to a real person whom I had encountered" (1995: 6).

16 Gordimer declared herself an unbeliever who nevertheless saw the value of religion. In a 2005 article published in *Haaretz*, Gordimer is reported as making the following statement: "[I]t is wonderful to be a religious Jew, says Gordimer, or religious in general. It offers an extraordinary comfort for all the things that happen to a person in his or her lifetime. But unfortunately, she says, she cannot make that leap of faith" (Lev-Ari 2005).

by Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, Gordimer goes on to test the idea that "Afterlife is another planet" ("Afterlife", 110). As imagined by Gordimer, the life on this distant planet is orderly, peaceful, and dispassionate, but it is also empty insofar as the otherworldly beings are unable to recall their earlier lives, with their fears and frustrations, as well as their joys and pleasures. Deprived of the memories of an embodied life, the poor otherworldly creatures are reduced to the hope that they may one day "flee eternity" ("Afterlife", 112).

Without denying "Afterlife" its metaphysical dimension, the story can be viewed as a reflection not only on the ephemeral but also on the tangible. The fact that Gordimer's late narrators often have a foot in both worlds – the shadowy realm of the afterlife and the physical domain of the rapidly fading present – is connected with another feature recurrent throughout Gordimer's late work: the constant alteration between the physical and the metaphysical, the particular and the general. In "Karma" and "Afterlife", material detail often signals the narrators' or the characters' attachment to life, as recalled vividly in memory: to give one example, in the penultimate paragraph of "Afterlife", we come across a detailed list of objects (a piece of tile, roofs in Italian and French villages, the painting "Girls at the Piano" by Auguste Renoir), reminiscent perhaps of Gordimer's memories. The story then comes to an abrupt halt – not a conclusion but rather a cutting short of what may have been a longer narrative. Viewed in this way, "Afterlife" reads like a homage to the power of memory – a homage that is nevertheless imbued with a sense of loss, stemming from the awareness that memory too will come to an end.

The sense of an ending, evident in "Afterlife", is also conveyed in "History", published in *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*. A sketch rather than a short story, "History" also includes a detailed list of memories, this time uttered by an old parrot called Auguste, a permanent fixture in a restaurant in southern France. The fact that the restaurant in its present form is about to close – after over twenty years of functioning, – brings in a note of melancholy in the obvious truth that Auguste's memory, "relentless" (*Beethoven*, 110) as it is, will no longer serve anyone's purpose, and consequently all the voices, "faithfully introduced, reproduced" (*Beethoven*, 108) by the bird, will ultimately be lost forever. Much like "Afterlife", "History" has a distant and dispassionate narrator, who seems content to report facts; nevertheless, the general mood of the story is that of melancholy and loss. Read in this way, "History" sheds light on two impulses governing Gordimer's writing: to convey her thoughts and emotions and to analyze them, the former tendency expressed in the atmosphere of the story, the latter in the detached narratorial stance.

6. Conclusion: An interplay between directness and detachment

The discussion of Gordimer's *Altersstil* has mentioned such distinct features of her late style as "syntactical complexity, self-reflexivity, and intertextual allusion" (Riach 2016: 1084), with this last feature – as both Riach and Barnard point out – deeply rooted in Gordimer's indebtedness to modernist writers. While acknowledging the relevance of Riach's and Barnard's insights on the historical and political situatedness of Gordimer's late writing, the chief aim of this article was to explore her late style in connection with personal and existential topics, such as love, desire, ageing, memory, mourning, and death. The critical discussion of her writing emphasized the autobiographical and confessional dimensions of Gordimer's late style, showing that her late stories convey her enduring fascination with life, evident in her exploration of the dynamic of human relationships, and her increasing detachment from the world of human relationships, as manifested in her imaginative explorations of what lies beyond the realm of social responsibilities and political commitments. This interplay between involvement and distance can be found in her late style, which combines a detached narrative perspective, emotional disengagement, and emphasis on reflection (at the expense of dialogue and plot) with moments of autobiographical and confessional insight. Gordimer's late stories point to the author in a way that is altogether absent in her earlier short fiction: their sketch-like passages throw the readers into the midst of the creative process, and the first- and third-person narratives are poised on the border between fiction and autobiography, creating the impression that Gordimer's aim in those last works was to cut as much distance as possible between herself and her readers. If her late style is viewed as "sketchy" and "bodiless", as Coetzee characterized it, it is a sketchiness and a bodilessness that can be seen as a powerful evocation of the moment in which she found herself towards the end of her life – a moment which should not be explored solely in political terms.

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