

PARADIGMS OF HEROISM: PERSPECTIVES ON EPIGRAPHS IN NADINE GORDIMER

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to study intertextuality in the novels of Nadine Gordimer, specifically in her use of epigraphs. The location of the epigraph at the beginning of the novels provides the reader with a framework from which to view and judge the text and offer an interesting platform for the exploration of meaning in Gordimer. Epigraphs and titles may be considered a new voice that contributes to the “recentering” of the narrative perspective; it adds powerful meaning to the whole novel. As such, the epigraphs acquire the category of “voices” that claim, describe, point out or argue relevant issues of both literary and political importance. An analysis of the quotations selected demonstrate how these are closely and directly related to the content of the novels themselves and express the mood in which the books are written. This paper will analyze Gordimer’s choice and use of epigraphs as an approach to a more profound understanding of her narrative technique: as a signifying tool for the development of meaning. More specifically, it will attempt to present the use of epigraphs in Gordimer’s novels as the appropriation of new voices that contribute to the “recentering” of cultural context, theme and narrative perspective. On the one hand, most of Gordimer’s epigraphs are quotes from major European writers. This signals a link between the European cultural background and the South African present, as it serves as a discourse of translation of their meanings into new South African ones. These intertexts play a central role in the novels, as they allow for the creation of a specific South African literary identity. On the other hand, Gordimer also incorporates native texts, that may represent the African voice trying to come to terms with the new realities of life in South Africa.

Epigraphs, more than mere ornamentation, serve to interact decisively with the main text: "To quote is not merely to write glosses on previous writers; it is to interrogate the chronicity of literature and philosophy, to challenge history as determining tradition and to question conventional notions of originality and difference. Consequently, to read an explicitly quoting text is not to engage in a simple play with and of sources but to recognize and establish criteria of significance" (Worton 12). These criteria are produced in the relationship between the intertext and the text proper: in the reciprocal play of meanings created and developed. Though formally presented on different levels, epigraphs are part of the textual discourse and their influence on the rest of the text is essential for a proper understanding of the total narrative act.

The extended use of epigraphs by Nadine Gordimer appears to support this claim. A consideration of the significance and meaning of the epigraphs employed by this South African writer leads to an appreciation of deeper dimensions in her novels. The choice of quotations, or even the decision to use an intertext, is never arbitrary. And Nadine Gordimer, a master of the craft of fiction, is known to pay as much attention to her title pages as to any part of her manuscripts, all epigraphs being selected with great care: "Invariably the epigraph points to the motive or attitude that directs Miss Gordimer's shaping of her material and the conception of experience it dramatizes" (Ogungbesan 121). An analysis of the quotations selected demonstrate how these are closely and directly related to the content of the novels themselves and express the mood in which the books are written. This paper will analyze Gordimer's choice and use of epigraphs as an approach to a more profound understanding of her narrative technique: as a signifying tool for the development of meaning. More specifically, it will attempt to present the use of epigraphs in Gordimer's novels as the appropriation of new voices that contribute to the "recentering" of cultural context, theme and narrative perspective.

Gordimer's emphasis on epigraphs is irrevocably and intrinsically linked to her narrative aims; a manifestation of Susan Greenstein's claim that she creates a new "form of fiction adequate to contain the South African experience" (227). To fulfill this Herculean task, the writer has to deal with the binary oppositions that arise between her European cultural background and the South African reality around her; the former being a constitutional part of the latter. The criteria of significance produced by the epigraphs relate to a certain extent to the gap between these two cultures. As intertextual strategies, the epigraphs Gordimer utilizes signal both the distance and the link between Europe and South Africa, and doing so, they, in a way, validate the South African cultural voice. Through the use of both European and African intertexts, Nadine Gordimer formally illustrates the necessity and possibility of assimilation between cultures. The process of assimilation exposes a conflict, an interference between codes, which nonetheless will contribute to the South African literary identity. Moreover, this identity crisis is also often present in those characters that struggle to find a commitment and a role in their country. The epigraphs she employs, to a great extent, highlight the often isolated perspectives that prevent the heroes and heroines in the novels from committing fully to any defined political or social cause. Thus, the author reveals the process of the protagonists from an initial search, to the possibility of commitment, and to a final sense of failure.

An epigraph may be simply defined as the word, sentence or group of sentences placed at the beginning of a novel or a chapter that usually posits a specific reading of the text. This device has been a common practice in the development of the novel. In

19th century fiction, an epigraph was a fairly usual practice not only in the title page but in the chapter headings as well.¹ New notions of intertextuality have forced a revision of the role and function of epigraphs, and has increased an awareness of the various relationships that can be established between parts of the text, and between the text and its context. Thus, the concept of intertextuality may broaden the understanding of the extent of the influence of an intertext, such as the epigraph, on the text proper. Gérard Genette has investigated the implied reciprocity between paratext and text, and between these and the reader; he points out that the obligation felt by a reader in relation to a paratextual item is less than the obligation the reader feels toward the text: "The paratext, in all its forms, is a fundamentally heteronomous, auxiliary, discourse devoted to the service of something else which constitutes its right of existence, namely the text" (269). The epigraphs, with their ironic and enigmatic relation to the text, foster a distrust of verbal surfaces and emphasize the power of context. Thus, although a textual threshold, the paratext may be, by its suggestiveness, in control of the interpretation of the whole text (Bowen 69).

Although the main difference between the epigraphs and other intertextual markers is their placement before the body of the text, they are in fact part of the construction of the fictional text. Often referred to as "extratextual" or "extrafictional" voices, these new voices are certainly in a different diegetic level than the rest of the text, but they are not strictly speaking "extra" textual, but simply exist at a different and previous level. Their peculiar position thus makes them carry a specific sense of proximity between the fiction and history, as they can be seen as establishing a link between the story and the authorial voice. Genette calls the paratext a "zone of transaction" that is "defined by the intention and responsibility of the author" (262). This is a fundamental part of their function of codifying the text proper. This textual level provides the epigraph with its special power to influence, codify, and focus the text that it precedes. Several purposes may be attributed to epigraphs, most of which are due to that privileged position: "Epigraphs may be used to apologize for or defend some element of the story's plot or theme, to clarify the purpose of the text; to establish the relationship between the story and history; to indicate a tie between this text and the literary tradition; to enhance the status of the text; to communicate point of view; to communicate an image of the appropriate audience; or to bring a particular textual theme to the foreground" (Lanser 125). Their different functions make it clear that they are part of the text, in the sense that, from their inception, their qualities influence and interact with those of the rest of the story.

The use of epigraphs springs from a tradition that arose with the creation of the novel. It is therefore easy to establish a relationship between Gordimer's use of the technique and its use, for example, by 19th century novelists. On the one hand, as Wolfgang Iser has pointed out, titles and mottoes in 19th and 20th century literature are used as a "device for gentry and nobility" (133). He highlights the fact that many authors draw their epigraphs and titles from important writers and sources, such as the Bible or Shakespeare, attributing these paratexts the pragmatic purpose of legitimizing and ennobling a new text, in that it links it with a highly recognized tradition. On the other hand, as Deborah Bowen points out, "the epigraph has become widespread in late twentieth-century plural texts, where its transgressive potential may be realized in meanings that exceed or even contradict those of the text" (69). Epigraphs thus offer the possibility of revising that previous tradition as they reproduce or challenge the literary canon, genre hierarchies and social ranking (Karrer

133). In this sense, the fragmentary nature of an epigraph and the quality of its voice, redirect the narrative that follows it: "Inevitably a fragment and displacement, every quotation distorts and redefines the 'primary' utterance by relocating it within another linguistic and cultural context" (Worton 11). Therefore, the placement of epigraphs "relocate" the analysis of context, theme and perspective by compelling the reader to discover the links between the intertext and the narrative frame.

These three levels of epigraphic discourse (context, theme and perspective) are manifested in all Gordimer's novels, and it can be argued that a genuine understanding of the narratives require a detailed examination of these intertexts. A sense of heroism pervades Gordimer's narrative, and much of her fiction is an exercise in definition of this term, an experiment highlighted by the content and perspective of the epigraphs. As introductions to or as insights into the different lives portrayed in the novels, the epigraphs work in diverse manners to affect the theme and perspective of the stories, as well as the narrative's empowering relationship with a socio-historical and literary context. Most of Gordimer's epigraphs are taken from major European writers, with a few notable exceptions, such as some extracts from Zulu mythology, a Japanese poet, a Chinese revolutionary and one from South America. Thus the voices in the epigraphs create a new universe made of European, African or Eastern voices, a whole much greater than the sum of its parts. They create the background of the situation, a background the protagonists are not always aware of. In many cases, it is the process of acknowledging that background what draws the characters closer to a commitment and which marks the different paradigms of heroism in each novel. In analyzing the different epigraphs it is also possible to trace the different notions that define the journey undertaken by Gordimer's heroes: search, risk, commitment and failure.

In the first place, aspects of both historical and literary context are made evident by the epigraphs: "Every quotation is a metaphor which speaks of that which is absent and which engages the reader in a speculative activity" (Worton 11-12). By pointing to an absent previous source, epigraphs invite the reader to interact with that historical reference, the voice that originally uttered it. Moreover, they establish a new relationship with the new text in which it is immersed, and the new context in which it is read. This Janus-faced design is evident in Gordimer's epigraphs, which usually look back to a European framework and, at the same time, foreshadows a new South African discourse. This new chain of discourses therefore validate the South African identity as both a perpetuation of and a departure from Western influence. Gordimer's epigraphs fulfill the purpose of revalidating her texts as she appropriates epigraphs from the Western canon. Nevertheless, the author also manipulates these European sources as a way to create multiple cultural centers that correspond to the true literary background of South Africa.

This may be seen in the use of Shakespeare in the epigraph for *My Son's Story* which redirects the narrative concern to literature itself, and to the creation of the writer: "You had a father, let your son say so" (Sonnet XIII). Will, who is destined to write the story of his family, is named after Shakespeare, by far the most emblematic representative of British literary heritage: "He quoted Shakespeare to me and wanted me to bring him glory by growing up to be a writer just to please him" (MSS 78). Political activism prevented Sonny from becoming the man of culture he wanted to be; that dream becomes his son's legacy. Circumstance will make Will a writer, in spite of his initial rejection of his father's wish. In this manner, Will is the continua-

tion of the struggle Sonny began. Moreover, there is a clear link between the European tradition and the creation of this new writer in the new South African terrain. The very title of the novel mentions that it is a “story”, an act of narration. This is significant in the light of Will’s final revelation as the imaginative writer of his family’s story: “In our story, like all stories, I’ve made up what I wasn’t there to experience myself... I’ve imagined ... the frustration of my absence, the pain of knowing them too well, what others would be doing, saying and feeling in the gaps between my witness” (MSS 276). Thus, as a writer, Will gives his voice to the struggle: “I’m going to be the one to record, someday, ... what it was like to live a life determined by the struggle to be free” (MSS 276). To relocate Shakespeare in a South African context provides a ground for a contrast, as well as the creation of a new tradition. More than simply serving as a link between the European cultural background and the South African present, it acts as a discourse that translates classical meanings into new South African ones: as such, these texts will acquire new significance and enhance the narratives created from them.

In this manner, Gordimer’s works sanction the creation of a specific South African literary identity. This concern is manifested also in her first novel, *Lying Days* (1953), where Helen Shaw, the protagonist, by writing her own story, provides herself with, not only a better understanding of her situation in South Africa, but also the cultural identity she is searching for. Until she writes her story, she had been more an spectator than an actor in her life, as the epigraph from Yeats illustrates: “Through all the lying days of my youth / I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun; / Now I may wither into the truth”. She is now ready to build a meaningful life in South Africa. This novel is therefore converted into part of that literary tradition of South Africa that is longed for at the beginning of the novel, when Helen complained that her life was not recognizable in any book she read (LD 10). At the end there is no mention of these books at all. Helen has become the writer herself, and the story is that of her life. The epigraph points to a positive manner of reading: in those days of youth, the poet is like a tree, with many leaves and flowers idle in the sun, but “Though leaves are many, the root is one”, and Gordimer appears to demonstrate that to perceive that root is to fathom life. The title thus refers to that journey from the outside events (the leaves and flowers) to feelings, the root of life. After experiencing those days of idleness and lies, and, perhaps, in spite of them, Helen is able to write. So, by recounting her days of youth, Helen will be able to arrive at the truth about her identity. Also, the roots may refer to the return to what in those days many people in South Africa would still consider home: Europe. The fact that the poem is by an Irish poet emphasizes the idea of returning to European roots, from where Helen’s ancestors came. This poet also deals with artistic identity in depth in his work. Moreover, the poem is a parallel voice to Helen’s and therefore easily attributed to her. The direct first person voice suggests that it is a personal quest that she will undertake alone. This solitude will be a constant feeling in Gordimer’s protagonists as they long for a personal commitment.

In addition, Gordimer also incorporates native texts as epigraphs to represent the African voice trying to come to terms with the new realities of life in South Africa: “At the very moment that the narrative is invaded by an intertext from a different centre... the focus shifts from a fixed centre and its satellite system to a multiplicity of centres in the culture itself” (Mishra 403). *The Conservationist* (1974) makes use of several intertexts to reveal obscure but essential aspects in the novel. However, as

Michael Thorpe points out, they have often been overlooked in the different critical approaches to the novel (117). The ten excerpts from *The Religious System of the Amazulu*, gathered by the Reverend Henry Callaway² precede different sections in the novel. These mark a harsh contrast between Zulu mythology and Mehring's story. *The Conservationist* takes on significance in relation to the Black Consciousness Movement of the 70s, which strongly emphasized a return to black cultural roots and traditions. It is the story of a white industrialist, Mehring, who represents white dominion over a land inhabited by blacks, a land that becomes the subject of the novel. In South Africa, since the Native Land Act in 1913, Africans were prevented from acquiring land outside their reserves, so the situation the novel presents must be read against this historical background of injustice. The epigraphs, by contrast, posit the fundamental questions of the novel: Who shall inherit Africa? How shall it be conserved? From the beginning, there is an ironic relation of the epigraphs to the central narrative. The story, which appears to be Mehring's and of the whites in South Africa, finally reveals itself as emblematic of the blacks. Each quotation introduces or reinforces an event in the novel, surreptitiously at first, later more explicitly until Zulu voices take control of the direction of the main text.

With these paratexts, Gordimer establishes a link with the precolonial past, stressing the theme of the forgotten or neglected ancestors. The ancestor motif in the novel pivots around the figure of the unknown man who is found murdered on Mehring's farm. Moreover, the intertexts show how among the Zulus in South Africa the relationship between the living and their ancestors was particularly intimate. Therefore, these references to the native religious beliefs mark very specific contrasts with Mehring's lack of a belief system and, therefore, by the lack of historical or meaningful attachment of Mehring to the land. This contrast can be appreciated when comparing the very first epigraph, "I pray for corn, that many people may come to this village of yours and make a noise, and glorify you" (TC 39), with Mehring's idea of the farm: "He was possessed only by the brilliant idea of the farm-house as a place to bring a woman" (TC 42). By contrast, the epigraphs suggest how the blacks conserve their beliefs, and, reciprocally, how these beliefs conserve and regenerate the land and its people. Zulus had a higher and more collective idea of possessing the land, so they could not comprehend the attitude of the white man:

So we came out possessed of what sufficed us, we thinking that we possessed all things, that we were wise, that there was nothing we did not know... We saw that, in fact, we black men came out without a single thing; we came out naked; we left everything behind, because we came out first. But as for white men ... we saw that we came out in a hurry; but they waited for all things, that they might not leave any behind. (TC 213)

The perspective in the novel is ostensibly enriched by these voices which bind sections of the text through a superbly resonant commentary. At those points where the rhetoric of Zulu culture intersects with that of the foreground action the perspective of the text is changed. The reader is uncertain as to which action is primary, which background. Throughout the narrative there is a central concern: the replacement of a framework of reality. Towards the end of the novel, Mehring's perception of reality literally breaks down as he loses touch with what is real. An interior monologue shows us how he is completely lost in his own life: "The sub-text of Zulu myth

comes to control and appropriate the surface narrative of Mehring's stream of consciousness, and take possession of the text as a whole" (Clingman 163). By taking possession of the text, it implies a possible re-possession of the land. The final quotation widens the historical perspective to suggest the enduring occupation of the land by the blacks as they continue living the myth of Uthlanga:

When this earth and all things broke off from Uthlanga... Uthlanga begat Unsondo: Unsondo begat the ancestors; the ancestors begat the great grandfathers; the great grandfathers begat the grandfathers; and the grandfathers begat our fathers; and our fathers begat us.' —'Are there any who are called Uthlanga now?' — 'Yes... It is I myself who am an uthlanga. (TC 247)

Through Zulu myth Gordimer gives formal shape to the novel, articulating a consciousness that is very different from that of South African public rhetoric. But the novel does not present a revolution of black people in South Africa claiming their rights of property. What Nadine Gordimer does is make manifest different perspectives and narrative voices in such a way as to make that global perspective the viewpoint of history (Smith 178). All in all, the fictional problems of the novel are precisely the problems posed by South Africa —lack of shared language or vision. To be true to a political situation, Gordimer has to avoid translating events into the realism of a materialist society, so she appropriates Zulu myth as a way to convey the aspirations of natives in South Africa. In this manner, Gordimer illustrates how the South African cultural background is, in its essence, a mixture, and there is no point in claiming solely a European or African center.

Epigraphs also serve to highlight the South African historical context; such is the case of the epigraph to *July's People* (1981), a novel that depicts a revolutionary future change in the country. A white family, the Smales, have had to take refuge in their servant's village after the country has been taken by black revolutionaries. However, the impossibility of their adaptation to black rural life is clear as the novel unfolds. The epigraph, by Antonio Gramsci, points to the underlying issue of the story and the situation of South African politics at the time: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms". The novel interweaves a puzzling combination of revolutionary optimism and uncertainty, which can be accounted for by Gordimer's understanding of the historical moment within which she was writing the novel. For the author, the notion of interregnum —a moment between two states of affairs, in which outcomes are not only unclear but cannot yet come into being— seems to capture the central features of the historical juncture. What Gordimer then describes are those morbid symptoms as they are expressed in the Smales's life; living a meaningless existence in July's village. Unable to relate to the local people, and with communication breaking down within the family structure, their isolation is complete. Maureen, the main character, is presented as a possible heroine who must overcome the difficulties of her new situation and adapt herself to a new kind of life. However, she cannot even communicate with her husband or her children. The family is also deprived of visible symbols of accepted white power such as their gun and their car. Finally, Maureen makes a desperate attempt to escape from this situation by running towards a helicopter that has just landed, ignorant as to whether the passengers are revolutionaries or rescuers. Her instincts drive her to succumb to a wild impulse to leave all responsibilities behind. The nihilistic ending points to a very pessimistic view

of the future, already announced in the epigraph, with the categorical assertion that “the new cannot be born”.

In *Sport of Nature* (1987), Gordimer also deals with the future of South African political situation from a negative perspective. It portrays the life of Hillela, a woman without a past who reinvents her identity: she is defined in the novel as a ‘*lusus naturae*’. The intertext of the Latin word from the Oxford English Dictionary highlights the essence of this character: “*Lusus naturae* -Sport of Nature. A plant, animal, etc., which exhibits abnormal variation or departure from the parent stock or type ... a spontaneous mutation; a new variety produced in this way”. By defining her position through the use of Latin words, we comprehend how Western culture attempts to understand South African future. Through an imaginative effort, the discourse on the need for adaptation on the part of whites is portrayed: “Hillela is the only white in the novel who can adapt, mutate so to speak, and therefore find a place in Africa” (Temple-Thurston 181-82). A white heroine without some kind of “abnormal mutation” does not seem possible and Hillela thus stands as a link between divided cultures. She must both adapt and mutate spontaneously in order to create a new order of beings in South Africa.

Secondly, epigraphs relate to the text mainly by providing a key for the reading, as they point to the thematic core of the narrative. Their strategic position before the body of the text grants them authority with respect to the meaning and motifs of the novel. Furthermore, their status of independence with regards to the fictionality of the rest of the text provides them with a link to verifiable history or to the authorial consciousness separate from the fictional act of creation. As Susan Lanser has claimed, “because much of the extrafictional material is encountered before the fiction begins, and because the extrafictional voice carries the ontological status of history, it conventionally serves as the ultimate textual authority. All the other voices that the text creates are subordinate to it, less directly related to the historical transaction between author and audience, and weaker in diegetic status” (128). A false promise of direction can be seen in the epigraph to *A World of Strangers* (1958):

I want the strong air of the most profound night
to remove flowers and letters from the arch where you sleep,
and a black boy to announce to the gold-minded whites
the arrival of the reign of the ear of corn.

This oneiric image reflects clearly the idea of liberation of oppressed blacks. However, the announcement of the “coming of the ear of the corn” is rather naively portrayed. This Western naiveté shows another perspective on heroism. High ideals are put in contrast with the slow process of awareness on the part of Toby Hood who comes to South Africa from England to take temporary charge of a family publishing company. He seeks a kind of identity, the sense of an overall meaning to his life. Starting off as a neutral observer, he moves closer and closer to commitment as South Africa acquires more meaning for him than his own country. The poem foreshadows this transformation. From the beginning, the novel reveals two completely separated worlds: that of the “gold-minded” whites who live opulently and carelessly, and the sordid world of the townships. Toby is familiar with and often visits both places, standing emotionally neutral. He enjoys a privileged although isolated position, one condemned to doom. Progressively, the different events, such as the killing of his

black friend Steven Sithole, make him aware of the need to commit. This novel shows the extended belief on multiracialism, in which, the Forsterian “only connect” would be the solution to the racial differences. Thus the voice in the epigraph guides the reader’s expectation for a way out of these separate worlds, as it announces in a poetic way that liberation and peace will finally come to this land.

Epigraphs thus point to ways of reading the text, often highlighting one interpretation over other ways of understanding: “The epigraph becomes a particular kind of writerly comment upon the whole enterprise of the book, a palimpsest that holds out a false promise of direction to the reader... while it unfolds into the text its own prior context” (Bowen 69). As we have already shown, the epigraphs in Gordimer’s eleven novels demonstrate a stress on the theme of heroism, as a process invariably related to the struggles her characters must undergo. This evolution includes a compelling search, the necessity for commitment, the appreciation of risks, but, often, an overwhelming awareness of failure. This leitmotif is common as well to South African literature in general. As Kenneth Parker has pointed out, “one characteristic difference that continues to demarcate the writing of white South Africa from that of their black counterparts in the past quarter-century is that the former still concentrate upon individuals—individual heroes, individual heroines, who achieve their status because they challenge the dominant ideology; they are the mutations, the variations from the norm that is white South Africa” (212-13).

In *Burger’s Daughter* (1979), Gordimer returns to the area of political commitment and to a more heroic character. In a way, Rosa Burger is the opposite of Mehring: she is immersed in the public realm he eluded. Rosa has inherited a tradition of family commitment to politics, as her father was a famous Communist and anti-apartheid leader. There is gradual acknowledging of herself and her mission, and this evolution can be traced through the epigraphs that point to the main steps in her process: search, risk, commitment. The novel is divided in three parts: in the first part, after the death of her father in prison, Rosa tries to come to terms with the legacy of having had a hero for a father. She wonders what it is that is expected from her. The epigraph to this first part, —“When they saw me outside prison, what did they see?”— sums up her initial quest. This “auto-textuality” focuses the problem of the search of an individual identity and role in her country. This image of a girl standing outside prison projects the meaning of loneliness and difference from the very beginning regarding Rosa. Though she is offered different versions of what people think about her, it is imperative that she seek a position for herself.

In the second part of the novel, the sense of the need for commitment grows, the epigraph being: “To know and not to act is not to know”. But still Rosa does not take any definite action. She simply travels to France, perhaps in an unconscious attempt to avoid this commitment. There she discovers an easy-going world, one in which she begins to believe she could live for ever. But the epigraph projects the idea that, inside herself, there is still something calling her back to her roots. She travels around Europe and meets other people as the internal process of search goes on. In a party in London she meets an old black friend, Baasie, exiled, who blames her and her race for all the problems in South Africa. This radical and violent reactions against whites are a reflection of what was happening in the 70s in the Black Consciousness Movement, that proclaimed a sort of racism against whites. Rosa is shocked by his hatred and she finally decides to return to South Africa, at the risk of being detained. So, in this manner, Rosa Burger reconciles herself with South Africa and her father. The epi-

graph to this part, the ANC slogan “Peace. Land. Bread”, strongly projects the idea of ineludible commitment to the struggle against apartheid.

Rosa is imprisoned at the end of the novel. This development can be interpreted as a passive acceptance of a heritage of heroism against apartheid. Moreover, this attitude was hinted at in the passive connotations of the epigraph that precedes the whole novel: “I am the place in which something has occurred” by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The multiple perspectives in the novel govern the way we read *Burger’s Daughter*, as a journey from outside to inside Rosa Burger, from an external heritage to an internal commitment: “The epigraph to *Burger’s Daughter* indicates the extent to which place and time —both historical context and specific places and times— become determinants of who one is or, more accurately, whom one can be perceived to be” (Johnson 122). Throughout the narrative, she has been a passive receiver of the process as she was convinced that it was just unavoidable: “No one can defect” (BD 332). She is the place where the new changes have taken place, and therefore cannot avoid that commitment. However, Rosa Burger symbolizes the creation of a new order in South African society as she creates her own paradigms of heroism in committing herself to working with children. The background of the epigraphs thus points to a multiplicity of centers, which stem from European thought and develop towards an African discourse of a personal experience. From Lévi-Strauss’ abstract quotation there is a final specification in the ANC slogan, as peace, land and bread are what the people demanded. From an “abstract” Western ideology, such as Communism, Rosa moves to a more concrete commitment to suffering and to real demands from people:

I don’t know about ideology:

It’s about suffering.

How to end suffering.

And it ends in suffering. Yes, it’s strange to live in a country where there are still heroes. Like anyone else, I do what I can. I am teaching them to walk again, At Baragwanath Hospital. They put one foot before the other. (BD 332)

By working in a Children’s Hospital, teaching crippled patients to walk, Rosa comes to terms with the reality of her country not by getting involved in “abstract” politics, but by collaborating in bringing her country a little closer to that “peace, land and bread”. But her active collaboration in a good cause does not last long: “She was detained without charges. Like thousands of other people taken into custody all over the country, she might be kept for weeks, months, several years, before being let out again” (BD 353). Rosa has proved herself politically committed to a general resistance against apartheid politics. Her ideological resistance can be seen inhabiting the same place as her father’s heroic figure.

In the specific circumstances of a country oppressed by apartheid, Gordimer presents a collection of characters who depart from the usual norm. They are heroes, not in the sense of outstanding human beings, but in that they are ordinary people who live in extraordinary times. Unfortunately, they frequently find themselves lost on how to proceed. Gordimer’s protagonists are always, in one way or another, related to movements or groups that try to overcome, or at least palliate, the colour-bar and apartheid system. They are individuals who are offered the possibility of doing something politically revolutionary and dangerous. Living in a completely fragmented society, they are confused about the role they must play. In general, they limit them-

selves to observe rather than to act, as isolation prevents them from true commitment. Both isolation and fragmentation are formally given shape by the play of perspectives in the epigraphs and in the narratives. In that one book that, Gordimer asserted, writers write throughout their lives —“for a writer your work is your life and it’s a totality”— she definitely points towards a story on heroism, although it is written “piece-meal, from different points of view ” (quoted in Morris 26).

The compulsion to commit is thus portrayed in the epigraphs as an urgent need. It is no longer possible to hold certain political ideas and stand fully apart. Politics have invaded privacy: “In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms”. This affirmation by Thomas Mann, epigraph to *Occasion for Loving* (1963) reveals the breakdown of liberal ideas, as points to the main axis in the character’s lives in Gordimer’s novels: the inevitable intersection between private lives and the public events. Apartheid politics invaded the private sphere in its legislation of even personal relationships, deepening the isolation of characters. In this context, Jessie Stillwell is portrayed as a liberal white who does not know where she should stand as her ideals prove useless and unsatisfying. The second epigraph appears to emphasize the more personal sphere, a quote from Boris Pasternak that claims: “We have all become people according to the measure in which we have loved people and have had occasion for loving”. However, this possibility may be interpreted ironically as the love affair between Jessie’s white friend, Ann, and a black man, proves to be a complete failure. The attempts to love across the colour-bar are futile as the constant obstacles and necessary deceptions destroy the lovers’ enthusiasm. This epigraph also points to apartheid as a barrier to sentiment, because it prevents people from building relationships and therefore not being fully “people”, with the result of dehumanization of society. Only when Jessie realizes that “she herself could have been Ann once, somewhere” (OL 249) does she come to the end of her own personal journey towards a grasp of the true nature of her situation as a South African. Her heroism has gone no further than resisting ideologically the predominant politics of apartheid, but she comes to realize that this is futile unless she takes some definite action.

In a similar way, the urgent need to commit exerts certain pressure on the protagonist of *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966), the story of one day in the life of Elizabeth van der Sandt. In the morning, she learns of the death of her ex-husband, implicated in revolutionary groups. By the end of the day, offered the possibility of collaborating with her husband’s group, she remains indecisive. In the meantime, she gradually acknowledges the need to commit but also her isolation in her society. The epigraph, “There are possibilities for me, certainly; but under what stone do they lie?” by Frank Kafka, underlines how much of the novel is concerned with Elizabeth’s search for a mode of action that will be an authentic response to her late husband’s activism. The first-person voice in the epigraph permits identification with Liz’s inner quest, but also stresses the isolation she lives in. She is the narrator of the story and we can see how there is no real communication with the world outside herself. She is alone to make up her mind and it is precisely this isolation that prevents her from committing. The great ideal is expressed in the second epigraph: Maxim Gorky’s “The madness of the brave is the wisdom of life”. On the one hand, this epigraph seems to imply that taking risks is a necessary part of commitment. However, the epigraph also hints at the ambiguity of Max’s legacy to Elizabeth, for none of the three terms madness/bravery/wisdom, appears to collocate with the other two. Max apparently died as a hero, but Liz knows that most probably he committed sui-

cide and that his commitment was not total. The dominant mood in the novel is of frustration and bitterness “at the very threshold of commitment” (Green 553). The open ending leaves a proposal to collaborate in the air. Liz does not respond to the invitation and she lies in bed listening to the ticking of the clock. Time seems meaningless as she still has not, and cannot, come to terms with her responsibilities as a South African.

The question of point of view, the third level of epigraphic discourse, is most related to problems of intertextuality as it is primarily related to voice. Situated within the narrative level, it supposes an addition of voices and can thus affect the whole narrative construction. An epigraph almost always originates with a different writer from the text, thus consciously admitting a polyphony of voices (Bowen 69). The epigraphs, therefore, also communicate point of view as they serve to guide the readers’ perception and interpretation of events. Because it is a prior text, it subsumes the text proper, and selects for it a point of view. This voice and perception will contrast or interact with the main voice or vision in the novel. Firstly, again because of their position in the novel, the epigraphs, together with the title, create the first expectations about point of view in the novel: “Textual expectations—including expectations about point of view—are first set up by the extrafictional voice... All of this historical information conveys a voice and perspective... Without any extratextual sources of information about the author or the book, then, the reader receives at least a rudimentary sense of textual point of view from the extrafictional voice” (Lanser 125). Most epigraphs in Gordimer’s novels convey a first-person voice that can be either identified with the protagonist or that addresses him/her directly. This kind of perspective stresses the isolation the heroes find themselves in. They are principally individuals who, by themselves, have to look for their role and place in South Africa. They are usually given a task in the epigraph that is put in contrast with the one they actually fulfill in the story.

In *My Son’s Story* the textual expectations raised by the title and the epigraphs are essential to the novel. These clues will be explained only at the very end of the novel, though their presence has hovered continuously throughout the narrative development. The title and the epigraph guide the reader’s assimilation of the perspective from which the story is told. The pronoun of the title apparently suggests that the novel is composed by the father in the voice he imagines for his son, but Gordimer plants doubts about this, thus creating ambiguity about who the teller of the tale is and whose story it actually is. Moreover, the epigraph adds to the complexity in that it is a highly effective reflection of the father-son relationship, the central theme of the novel. It can be viewed as an anonymous voice addressing either Sonny or Will. In the case of Sonny, it could apply to his political commitment, one he has proved unable to fulfill. He is abandoned by even his lover, Hannah, who took a better post in the United Nations. In the case of Will, he is advised to reconcile himself with his father’s life and the political commitment. In the context of the sonnet it is clear that a father’s story can only be told by his son, but, paradoxically, this narrative has its origin in the absence of the father. Only the son, who must imagine his father’s life from which he is excluded, is able “to record and validate that life” (Weinhouse 70). Will, as a writer, becomes the interpreter of Sonny’s life. The novel ends with a metafictional turn, that makes Will, the son, the only teller of the story.

On the other hand, the immediacy of a voice in first person draws the reader more into the story, as, in a sense, it narrows the gap between fiction and real South African

society. Moreover, when the narrator in the epigraph and in the story are different voices, the voice that carries authorial consciousness and the ultimate perspective is usually that offered by the epigraph. In *A Guest of Honour* (1971), the epigraphs overcode the novel with layers of meaning, mainly by setting a framework of heroism to Bray's actions in the new postcolonial country he comes to inaugurate. The first one is by Che' Guevara: "Many call me an adventurer —and that I am, only of a different sort— one of those who risks his skin to prove his platitudes" and the second one by Turgenev: "An honourable man will end by not knowing where to live". These epigraphs point to the core theme of heroism developed in the novel's storyline. Colonel James Evelyn Bray is invited back to the African country from which he had been officially ejected ten years before. He was then a colonial administrator, and, because he had been thought too sympathetic to the PIP (People's Independent Party), he was removed under pressure from the white establishment. Now the independence movement has succeeded; the former rebels have become the political masters of the new state; and Bray has been invited as an "honoured guest" of Independence Day celebrations. He wants to meet again his two former friends, Mweta and Shinza. The three of them fought together for independence and now he expects them to be governing together. But he finds that Mweta is in power now and that Shinza is not to be seen. Both his former friends are now divided by two ideals of ruling the country, neocolonialism and socialism, respectively. Che' Guevara's epigraph places Bray's decision of having to choose between the violent response of Shinza and the "legal" work of Mweta in a heroic paradigm.

Bray finally commits himself to Shinza's violent group. However, the question remains inconclusive, as the epigraph by Turgenev pointed out at the beginning. Both decisions are, as it were, non-honourable; Bray finds himself caught between Shinza's violence and Mweta's quasi-dictatorship. Again the first-person voice in which epigraphs are phrased guides the reader's perception to the protagonist's personal quest. In this novel, although there is an unknown narrator, most of the story is focalized by Bray. It is his view of the newly independent African country what we see, as it is ultimately the Western attempt to understand what happens in Africa what is being revealed. Bray's perspective may be limited or narrow but his will to help and to 'prove his platitudes' is authentic. At the end, he is murdered when he risks his life by remaining in the country, setting his own personal paradigm of heroism. This novel presents the theme of the role of whites in Africa, ideally as foreign experts, but in fact as having to commit to a specific political cause. Although set in an imaginary country, it applies easily to what the different expectations raised in South Africa about the role of whites in a future black majority rule.

Gordimer's last novel, *None To Accompany Me* (1994), portrays the actual political and social change to the black majority rule, but the negative tone still pervades the story. Gordimer appears to insist on the necessity of the quest for truth as an ultimate goal, as the first epigraph points out: "We must never be afraid to go too far, for truth lies beyond" (Marcel Proust). However, this is in sharp contrast with the reality of the protagonist's life. Vera Stark is portrayed as a white lawyer committed to the struggle for liberation. On a personal level, she seems to have achieved stability in her second marriage and with her two grown-up children. Nonetheless, she has not come to terms with the problems that arose in her first marriage, symbolized by the recurring image of a picture. She cannot cope with that past, and her own personal search for the truth results futile. Vera Stark, at the conclusion of the novel, appears to have surrendered to

the past, to the point of giving in to irrational impulses. The novel presents a very open ending, further emphasized by the contradictory voices of the epigraphs.

Solitude seems to be the starting point of the new era as Gordimer depicts it. Vera Stark has to “get rid of” everything in her life, and by the end of the novel, she points at a new beginning from scratch, after the dissolution of everything. The *haiku* by Basho “None to accompany me in this path. Nightfall in Autumn” seems to invite this manner of reading. The image of the “nightfall in autumn” projects an inevitable sense of doom in the quest for truth that Vera Stark embarks on in her life, both in her family, towards her husband, whom she finally abandons, and towards her children, whom she considers failures. Both her children, and her friend’s children who lived in exile, seem to live alienated from South African political realities. Their concerns are of a personal kind. The generation gap points to the lack of continuity. Moreover, her own professional commitment also cracks. Vera does not seem to have found any positive meaning in her work either, even though she is working in the text of the new Constitution for the new country of South Africa. After the first free elections and the long-expected black majority rule, she is not satisfied with anything. She is the one that focalizes most of the narrative, and the voice of the epigraph can be easily attributed to her. In an attempt to reconcile private and public spheres, Nadine Gordimer seems to arrive again at a pessimistic conclusion, where the search for truth and solitude has come to little more than nothing in Vera’s life. Also, the fact that the epigraph comes from a Japanese poet (explicitly mentioned by Gordimer) broadens the cultural spectrum of the novel, pointing to the fact that the universal quality of the problems posited in the novel: search, truth and a constant sense of failure that seems to be the dominant tone in today’s paradigms of heroism.

As has been shown, epigraphs are valuable guides for the readings of Gordimer’s frequently open-ended stories. By acknowledging their importance, we can appreciate a deeper significance and scope of Gordimer’s novels; the brevity of the epigraphs, their previous position and tradition interact decisively with the main discourse in historical and literary context, theme and perspective. Through this interaction, the notions of search, risk, commitment and failure stressed in different levels clearly point out the path along which most often the characters will travel. Thus, the different paradigms of heroism, as the thread that pulls together the novelistic corpus of this writer, can be viewed as a way to bring together what John Cooke has called all those “separate worlds yoked together by violence” (6): South Africa.

Notes

1. In this respect, Susan Lanser has even launched the suggestive idea that the use of epigraphs is a rather feminist practice. Although it is not the topic of this article, this insight seems interesting and illuminating in the theory of epigraphs, and therefore worth noticing, even if only briefly: “The use of epigraphs at the head of each chapter in some novels by women writers might be a fruitful subject for investigation. My unsystematic research on this topic suggests that women writers of the 19th century tend to use epigraphs more frequently and more copiously than their male counterparts. This may be a compensatory device, a way of “securing uptake” for the text despite its dually suspect status as a novel and as a book by a woman. Most of the 19th century writers who are most revered today, however, —George Eliot being a striking exception— seem to conform more closely to

the practices of men; Austen, the Brontës, Stowe, Schreiner, and Gaskell, for example, do not normally make use of epigraphs. Contemporary feminist writing, particularly radical feminist theory, seems to have already established its own conventions regarding epigraphs. In text by theorists like Sheila Rowbotham, Mary Daly, and Susan Griffin, chapters are usually prefaced not simply by one epigraph but by a series of them. The purpose here, however, seems not to be “securing uptake” but stressing a tradition of feminist thought. In contrast to the novel-writers of the 19th century, these contemporary women are quoting other women, not men” (Lanser 125).

2. First published in 1870 by the Springdale Mission Press, reissued in facsimile by C. Struik, Cape Town, in 1970.

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- *Burger’s Daughter*. New York: Penguin, 1979. Abbreviated as BD.
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