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The Desire of Nowhere– Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter* in a Transcultural Perspective

Abstract

The article marks an attempt to read the book *Burger’s Daughter* by Nadine Gordimer through the idea of the “desire of *nowhere*” addressed by the author in one of her early essays and conceptualized here in a transcultural perspective. Gordimer is one of the most famous South African novelists and an active anti-apartheid activist. Although the local political situation of South Africa is an important background for her book, the article’s main focus is to rethink the possibility of creating a space of individual freedom located beyond cultural and societal attachments. That effort resembles a transcultural endeavour, yet it introduces a slightly different approach, conceptualized in the article as the “desire of nowhere”.

Expression of the space beyond culture is a problematic venture, as the primary tool of a literary text – language – is firmly embedded in human cultural experience. Thus, transcultural literature, just entering the sights of literary research, displays creative strategies of undermining language in literary creation, i.e. the pluralization of narrative voices, the introduction of the unreliable narrator, extensive use of irony, multinational settings of the storyline. The article tries to

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detect other literary strategies for creating space beyond words and culture. The analysis of the book *Burgers's Daughter* underlines how the use of visual strategies helps to decentre the narrative voice and to actuate the text into the transcultural movement. It also exposes the performative process of distancing from oneself – appearing to the self as “a place where things happen”. Finally, the article detects the crucial gestures – moments of increased narrative tension that lead beyond the text to the experience of “life itself”, using the motifs of blood, agony, and death.

Keywords: transculture, transcultural novel, Nadine Gordimer, narrative strategies, South African literature.

“Where do whites fit in the New Africa?” – asked Nadine Gordimer in her early essay (Gordimer, 1988, p. 31). The answer was grim: “Nowhere, I’m inclined to say, in my gloomier and least courageous moods; ...”. The question, although posed when South Africa was still struggling with apartheid, is about the future. Will the “New Africa”, the land finally freed from colonial powers, be able to accommodate the descendants of its colonizers? The author of *Burger's Daughter* reflects from the position of a white person who does not feel belonging to “Old Africa” and who does not believe anymore in the “multi-coloured, any-coloured society, freed both of the privileges and the guilt of the white sins of our fathers” (Gordimer, 1988, p. 32). Thus, the sombre mood of Gordimer is a negative of the utopian dream, non-place (*ou topos*) extended to the very limits. As she continues in a catastrophic overtone:

Nowhere is the desire to avoid painful processes and accept an ultimate and final solution (which doesn't exist in the continuous process that is life itself); the desire to have over and done with; the death wish, if not of the body, at least of the spirit (Gordimer, 1988, p. 31).

The desire of *nowhere* is an endeavour to escape suffering which makes the present a fight between a future (utopian illusion) and the past (the guilt inflicted by the sins of ancestors). It shows a desperate need to find another option, another space vector that emerges from the struggle. What is more, although this fight may be political, its battlefield is of an inner nature. To enter into nowhere is a death wish of the spirit, an inclination to lose ‘the self’ that suffers. What is more, Gordimer also distinguished another sphere – “a continuous process that is life itself”, indicating living as an incessant process where there is no final solution. Those two elements – the desire of *nowhere* and realization of the everlasting quality of the fabric of life – serve

as an important frame for my reading of Nadine Gordimer's work.

Burger's Daughter (1979), Gordimer's relatively early book, quickly became one of the most famous. It was first published abroad and almost immediately banned in South Africa, which sparked a global discussion and support for the writer. *Burger's Daughter* and Gordimer's other novels and essays of that time consolidated the writer's position as an anti-apartheid activist, which after the fall of the regime in South Africa raised the question of the relevance of her work (Dimitriu, 2016). However, although the political situation of South Africa and Africa in general is the usual background of Gordimer's books, filled with numerous historical cross-references to real facts and people, the anti-apartheid struggle does not exhaust them. A contemporary reading of the author's novel, free of any political determination, can expose their astounding relevance. This phenomenon is the most visible in the case of *Burger's Daughter*.

The novel presents the story of Rosa Burger, starting from the imprisonment and death of her father Lionel – a white anti-apartheid communist activist – and ending with her own incarceration. Historically, it begins during the time of Black Consciousness in the mid-1960s when anti-apartheid movements strengthened among black people, and ends after the Soweto uprising in 1976 – a mass protest against the introduction of Afrikaans as the language of schools which caused many deaths and spread unrest throughout the whole country. The novel in fact uses this event, quite recent at the time, as an essential narrative topic. What is more, as pointed out by Susan Barrett (2004), in the narrative of *Burger's Daughter* Gordimer deliberately employed a variety of intertextual references to existing political personas and even some hidden authentic content – quotes and documents.¹ Thus, the substantial role of political and historical issues in the book is undeniable. As noted by some other critics, the novel “bears the marks of politically ‘overdetermined’ times” (Dimitriu, 2016) and is a sign of the author's “necessary entrapment in both class and historic moment in South Africa” (Wagner, 1994).

Nevertheless, political content is only one side of Gordimer's novel, as its narrative significantly exceeds strict temporal and historical interpretation. *Burger's Daughter* is an example of how Gordimer uses political events, but not stopping at the mere ideological level. Since its publication, the book has been analysed from a variety of angles, as a citizen fight against ideology,

¹ E.g. Barrett indicates that the person of Lionel Burger is a clear reference to Bram Fischer, an activist sentenced to life imprisonment in 1966, not only because of a biographical resemblance but also due to the intertextual passages of Fischer's real defence speech in Lionel's court appearance. The text is not directly “quoted” or distinguished in any visible way, which was a way to avoid censorship. More about this in: Barrett, 2004.

a feminist battle with patriarchy, or a personal struggle for independence from parents.² However, those two levels – public and private or political and individual – seem to work inseparably. As noted by Louise Yelin (1989), the novel does not establish an opposition between the public/political narrative and the private/personal one, but quite the contrary, it destabilizes it. Additionally, blurring the boundary between the political and the personal does not happen only at the plot level but is built into the narrative structure of the novel. Yelin seeks the redefinition of exile in Gordimer's deconstructive poetics, yet the destabilization of various cultural and ideological regimes leads her to return to the issue of gender. However, the reflection on the desire of *nowhere* indicates that the proposed redefinition of exile may go much further.

I propose to read the desire of *nowhere*, which seems a sombre perspective for an engaged anti-apartheid activist and writer, as an essential foundation for the work of Nadine Gordimer. Through “the desire to have over and done with” (Gordimer, 1988, p. 31) the author seeks to highlight and disparage the social and cultural ties imposed on an individual. Yet, it also serves other purposes. The deconstruction of the spirit (understood as a socially and culturally constructed identity) opens the way to rediscovering a different kind of connection based on the body itself. This endeavour to find a new kind of space of being and a new way of relating to the world prompts my attempt to look at Gordimer's book from a transcultural perspective. In order to distinguish and superimpose the desire of *nowhere* and the continuous force of life itself, which are crucial factors of two spheres indicated as key for the novel, it is essential to conceptualize the space of *nowhere* itself in the light of transcultural philosophical and literary research.

Where can *nowhere* be?

Transcultural literary studies focus on writing that attempts to communicate the experience of overstepping the cultural attachments of individuals. Instead of focusing on notions of difference and conflict (along the lines of colonizer–colonized or centres–periphery) it seeks to conceptualize the space situated beyond a limited cultural and national habitat. Thus, transcultural literary research is based on two central assumptions. First, the existence of a unique sphere of individual experience that exceeds the realm of culture, regardless of nationality, race, religion, ethnicity or gender (Epstein, 2009). Second, the potential possibility of

² One great example of the variety of possible interpretative keys imposed on *Burger's Daughter* is the Oxford University Press monograph collecting different analyses of the novel: Newman, 2003.

expressing or even facilitating this kind of individual experience by literary creation (Dagnino, 2015; Helff, 2009).

The definition of the transcultural sphere of individual experience situated beyond culture, thus also beyond language, is problematic. As claimed by Mikhail Epstein:

Transculture cannot be described in positive terms, as a set of specific cultural symbols, norms, and values; it always escapes definition. It is an apophatic realm of the “cultural” beyond any specific culture or cultural identity. ... It does not “have place” anywhere: it is a force of displacement (Epstein, 2009, p. 332).

According to Epstein, the main features of the transcultural condition are its outsideness and individual character. What is more, transcultural space, being radically beyond, can be expressed only by negations, with words that do not define and encompass it but only direct towards it. Thus, he indicates a way to locate transculture through the types of movement inherent to it: escape and displacement. This kind of mobility does not depend on an actual change of physical position but on the internal epistemic quality of an individual. Thus, a description of its spatial configuration is useful but only as a general indication of spiritual movement, a change of perspective.

Similarly, the desire of *nowhere* described by Gordimer is most of all the inner quality of an individual, the “death wish of the spirit”. *Nowhere* as a response to the feeling of non-belonging would direct one to an alternative perspective of perceiving reality. It marks a mental space of non-location, the end of craving to belong in order to finally inhabit unbelonging where identity does not depend on nationality, ethnicity or locality. In those aspects, the desire of *nowhere* resembles the process of “transpatriation” described by Arianna Dagnino, as the power that “allows individuals to adopt new ways of self-identification” (Dagnino, 2016, p. 2). It shows an attempt to be radically beyond and to escape the prison of culture, thus Gordimer’s desire of *nowhere* can be described as “the force of displacement” proposed by Epstein.

It may be claimed that the radical overtone of Gordimer’s desire of *nowhere* is a desperate and escapist effort. It is true that the author puts her claim in fierce and uncompromising words, since “death wish” or “the desire to have over and done with” are catastrophically associated expressions indicating finality. However, it must be considered that they are used in an essay written by a socially engaged activist and author. Gordimer expresses point-blank the problem of non-belonging and the struggle for identity. She recognizes, but also feels the emotional force, the desire stemming from the very fact of being a white person in South Africa. Therefore, rather than a theoretician, she should be treated as a transcultural author, one who according to Dagnino goes through the process of “transpatriation” herself

and then creatively expresses it in her work (Dagnino, 2015). The idea of the desire of *nowhere* finds the fullest expression only in Gordimer's literary creation. Hence this attempt to trace it through one of the author's most popular novels, i.e. *Burger's Daughter*.

Despite the indicated outsidership of the transcultural dimension, Epstein describes it as a force uniting cultures rather than rejecting them: "Transculture lies both inside and outside of all existing cultures as *Continuum*, encompassing all of them and even the gaps and blank spaces between them" (Epstein, 2009, p. 333). He argues that the spirit freed from the homogenous and exclusive cultural bond can dive into the creative sea of potentiality existing in cultures. Although Epstein calls the process of acquiring transculture a "risky experience" (Epstein, 2009, p. 330), little attention is given to the difficulty of "transpatriation" which, after all, includes operations on the very deepest layers of 'self'. As a liberating experience, it is also a cutting and potentially devastating intervention in the mind and body of an individual. Thus, a transcultural experience may also be perceived in its challenging aspects as a personal catastrophe. This aspect of liberation from culture seems to find more examples in literary reflections on transculture which is based more on individual cases and experiences conveyed by literary creations.

In the short *Glossary of Concepts for the Study of Transculturality* (2015) Arianna Dagnino defines a transcultural novel as:

A novel whose main characteristic includes the creation, recreation, and interweaving of diverse cultural landscapes through which the writer and readers are able to see things from a different perspective and through which empathic and mental states of proximity and interconnectedness are being generated (Dagnino, 2015, p. 202).

However, besides the collision or intertwining of different cultural elements, other features of the genre described as the "transcultural novel" include challenging the collective identity of a particular community, crossing borders or the transnational identity of the narrator as well as contesting the traditional notion of 'home' (Helff, 2009, p. 83). These are elements that lead to a change of the inner experience of self, identity and belonging, by undermining collective identity and coherent self-identification. Thus, a transcultural experience or, more generally, a feeling of non-belonging may be a liberating force that creates new connections, but it always involves a real-life struggle with the outside world and, most importantly, with the self. Therefore, the question is, are those two aspects – the battle for 'self' and the process of finding a new dimension of being and relating with others – present in the book *Burger's Daughter*?

The place where things happen

As a kind of motto of the novel, Gordimer uses a quote from Claude Levi-Strauss: “I am the place in which something has occurred” (Gordimer, 1979, p. 5). The passage comes from the introduction to *Myth and Meaning* (Levi-Strauss, 1978), in which the author explains his relationship with writing. Thus it can be understood as another statement of Gordimer indicating freedom of art as an “essential gesture” (versus a politically determined “necessary gesture”; Gordimer, 1988, p. 285). However, used as an opening for the novel, it also gives an important hint as to the book’s perspective – it indicates the movement of distancing from oneself, which Levi-Strauss attributes to a specific kind of self-perception, as seen in the extended version of the quote:

I never had, and still do not have, the perception of feeling my personal identity. I appear to myself as the place where something is going on, but there is no ‘I’, no ‘me’. Each of us is a kind of crossroads where things happen (Levi-Strauss, 1978, p. 4).

Appearing to oneself means to come into one’s own sight. However, a simple look in the mirror would not be sufficient, as it gives too direct and flat a reflection. Rosa, the eponymous and focal character of *Burger’s Daughter*, in her first monologue recalls another way of grasping oneself in the mirror: “I saw – see – that profile in a hand-held mirror directed towards another mirror” (Gordimer, 1979, p. 14). The trick with two mirrors allows one to see oneself in profile, and thus to achieve distance and three-dimensionality inherent more to the position of a spectator. The attempt to show perspective shifts is the most important feature of Gordimer’s novel. Throughout the book, Rosa, the protagonist, becomes strange to herself, appearing as “the place where things happen”, thus the space of various and contradictory influences. This distancing movement, the angled look of two mirrors, is embodied by the novel – not only at the level of the plot but also in the structure of the text.

The book opens with the image of Rosa as a girl waiting in front of the prison to pass a warm quilt and hot-water bottle to her mother arrested for political activity the night before. The reader follows the scene as somebody who only observes the throng of people in front of the fortress, noticing a young girl in a brown and yellow uniform: “Imagine, a schoolgirl: she must have somebody inside. Who are all those people, anyway?” (Gordimer, 1979, p. 9). Then, the reader goes through a close-up description of the girl’s face and appearance, which goes beyond the knowledge of a passer-by and

becomes biographical (although the biography is not her own but her famous father's): "But her eyes were light ... Not at all like his brown eyes with the vertical line of concern between them that drew together an unavoidable gaze in newspaper photographs" (Gordimer, 1979, p. 11). Finally, it ends with the memory of one of the people who stood in the crowd with her: "Among us was a girl of thirteen or fourteen, a schoolgirl still in her gym, the daughter of Lionel Burger. It was a bitter winter day" (Gordimer, 1979, p. 12). This first passage of several glances concludes with a question from Rosa: "When they saw me outside the prison, what did they see?" (Gordimer, 1979, p. 13), followed by the counterpoint: "I shall never know. It's all concocted" (Gordimer, 1979, p. 14). She also describes the memory of the scene herself:

I was in place, outside the prison; both my parents had been expecting to be picked up for several weeks. ...

I knew them nearly all, the people I stood among, and didn't need to look at them to see them as I knew them: as I did the way home, the appearance of a landmark at a certain turn. It was that door that I see: the huge double door under the stone archway with a bulb on a goose-neck looking down as a gargoyle does (Gordimer, 1979, p. 15).

The opening of the novel already introduces a vital element of its structure – the narrative split of voices between an omniscient narrator and the first-person inner monologue of Rosa. The two narrations intertwine throughout the story, generally following a chronological order and not contradicting each other. Instead, they compound the "visual field", introducing new perspectives, as in the scene described above. What is more, the omniscient narrator is neither coherent nor stable, with the narration occasionally slipping into what might be biographical or witness testimony. Whereas the first-person monologues of Rosa oscillate from past tense memories, when she looks at herself from a distance: "a stranger about whom some intimate facts are known to me" (Gordimer, 1979, p. 14), to the present tense when she tries to inhabit the person she was: "I see this thing over and over again as I stand" (Gordimer, 1979, p. 15).

The subtle undulation of two narrative perspectives, resembling a game of glances, is strengthened by the juxtaposition of that which is visible and that which is hidden. Rosa standing in front of the prison is seen by passers-by and by people around her, while she sees the massive door of the fortress where her mother, one of the great invisible ones of the novel, resides. The visual aspects of the narration – the tension between the perspectives of that which is visible – are significantly proliferated in the plot line of *Burger's Daughter*, in issues of family and blood ties as well as clandestine political activity.

As indicated by the title, Rosa's father is a great, overshadowing figure in the novel. After the initial decentre image of a girl in front of the prison, the book proceeds with a strong representation of the father at his trial. Lionel Burger is a white Afrikaner anti-apartheid activist engaged in the South African Communist Party (SACP), loved and admired even by his political opponents; he acts as the centre point. This stable dominant position of Lionel is not weakened during the incarceration and trial, quite the opposite; it is just after being sentenced to life imprisonment that this image becomes complete. In the reader's and Rosa's eyes Lionel becomes a legend or a saint, as implied by the exalted tone of the narrator's description just after hearing the sentence:

There was a split second when everything stopped; no breath, no heartbeat, no saliva, no flow of blood except her father's. Everything rushed away from him, drew back, eclipsed. He alone, in his short big-headed body and his neat grey best suit, gave off the heat of life. He held them all at bay, blinded, possessed. Then his eyes lowered, she distinctly noticed his eyelids drop in an almost feminine gesture of self-conscious acknowledgment (Gordimer, 1979, p. 28).

Subsequently, in a final sealing of his biography, Lionel Burger dies after just a few months in prison. Discarnate, hence not visible (the authorities do not even give up his body), he is most prominently present for the rest of the novel. His life is the subject of a biographer's investigation, he is continuously recalled by friends and supporters, but most of all, he is frequently present in the monologues of Rosa. Lionel appears to be a familial and moral claim imposed on her, a powerful combination of blood and politics. Thus, Rosa's position, her image and her actions are significantly determined by inner ties, things in which, in her own description, she was "grown into". Consequently, Rosa feels defined by relations with others, as she expresses in one of the monologues:

... everything that child, that girl did was out of what is between daughter and mother, daughter and brother, daughter and father. When I was passive, in that cottage, if you had known – I was struggling with a monstrous resentment against the claim – not of the Communist Party! – of blood, shared genes, the semen from which I had issued and the body in which I had grown. ... My mother is dead and there is only me, there, for him. Only me. My studies, my work, my love affairs must fit in with the twice-monthly visits to the prison, for life, as long as he lives – if he had lived. My professors, my employers, my men must accept this overruling. I have no passport because I am my father's daughter (Gordimer, 1979, p. 62).

This mixture of blood and ideology goes further. The full name of the protagonist – Rosa Marie Burger – comes from Rosa Luxemburg, a

revolutionary socialist, and Marie Burger, her grandmother who shared all the privileges of being a white Afrikaner. The double name indicates two types of mutually excluding claims. First, of the socialist ideology of her father, and second, of the family tree and the order of life given by ancestors: “secure in the sanctions of family, church, law – and all this contained in the ultimate sanction of colour, maintained without question on the domain, dorp and farm, where she lay” (Gordimer, 1979, pp. 72–73). Rosa visits the grave of grandmother Burger, located on the family farm. It is a tangible trace of memory left for those who live – descendants who inhabit the life they inherited, like Rosa’s aunt and uncle, or struggle with it, like Lionel Burger. Therefore, the grandmother, similarly to Rosa’s father, seems to be still present, imprinted in the bodies of her offspring through the rules imposed on them. Thus, death appears illusory, as the dead inhabit the here and now, hidden yet sublimely present in every law and every boundary they appointed. The game of glances continues.

Paradoxically, it is after her father’s death that Rosa truly has to “face” him for the first time. The intensive presence of the dead Lionel Burger contrasts with the invisibility of Rosa, perceived through him as “Burger’s Daughter”. His death brings the girl to a state of very personal crisis, as she does not know anymore who she is and how to navigate the world around her. Alone, without family and outside the safe space of the home (which from now on she calls “that house”), Rosa seems to be deprived of stable ground but also to have been freed. However, the nature of this freedom is demanding, as indicated by its repetitive appearance in Rosa’s monologues, e.g.:

Now you are free. The knowledge that my father was not there ever, anymore, that he was not simply hidden away by walls and steel grilles; this disembowelling childish dolour that left me standing in the middle of them all needing to whimper, howl, while I could say nothing, tell nobody: suddenly it was something else.

Now you are free.

I was afraid of it: a kind of discovery that makes one go dead cold and wary.

What does one do with such knowledge? (Gordimer, 1979, p. 62)

To be free is to become almost a stranger to oneself: the nearest I’ll ever get to seeing what they saw outside the prison. If I could have seen that, I could have seen that other father, the stranger to myself. I seem always to have known of his existence (Gordimer, 1979, p. 81).

Establishing a powerful image of the father is an important narrative strategy used by Gordimer. However, it is built up only to be disassembled. The appearance and disappearance of Lionel Burger is crucial to show the ties imposed on Rosa. The social and cultural norms followed by an individual become tangible and reveal their nature – as they are not a matter

of individual and conscious choice, but factors that structure everyday life. They are proliferated by the closest and most seemingly “natural” forces of genes and shared spaces. In this sense, Lionel was the father of Rosa, a source of safety and confidence, but also an incarnation of forces claiming her life. Behaving like a daughter of her father, thus continuing his struggle in South Africa, was inherent to Rosa’s place and position, but through it Gordimer reveals a universal endeavour – the personal and inner struggle for ‘self’, even though it would mean dismantling ‘self’ and stripping it from every safe space and every force that had shaped it.

The issue of what is hidden and what is visible appears in Gordimer’s book also along with the problem of language. When we see the 14-year-old girl in front of the prison, she is carrying a hidden message under the cap of the hot-water bottle. The same girl, while visiting her father in prison, knows how to pass useful information in seemingly innocent phrases about everyday life. Clandestine activity puts things and signs in a different light. It creates a language of its own, understood only by some people and learned by experience, a language of subtle hints hidden behind the official words and expressed with a tone of voice, a look or even pauses. As Rosa describes this when she talks about an unexpected meeting in the supermarket with a friend whose husband had already been in prison for political activity for two years:

Between us, while the murmured exchange went back and forth like any other insincere enthusiasm between friends who bump into one another, was the unspoken question-and-answer that our kind follow by gaps in what is said and hesitations or immediacy of response. Marisa is banned and under house arrest. I am Named. ...

You taunted me with being inhibited; but you never had anything you valued enough, that was threatened enough for you to hide. Secrecy is a discipline it’s hard for old hands to unlearn (Gordimer, 1979, p. 138).

For both of them, clandestine language is an almost natural way to communicate in a situation when one can be imprisoned or even killed for political activity. Even though Rosa is not directly active in the communist underground, she is “named”, she bears the family mark of political engagement. The ability of “naming” is the inherent political power of language. In contrast, the subversive communication between the women avoids direct naming of things, it happens beyond the official language, using tiny breaks and ambiguities of its structure. Thus, we can observe that language as a defined structure does not cover and cannot express all the reality of the experience, it always leaves room for bifurcation and transformation.

Can subversive language ever be independent if it always remains reliant on whatever it is opposing? The freedom it brings seems to be only illusory. What is more, subversive language can be misleading and only simulate belonging – Rosa used it with Marisa more out of habit than real engagement – and it is always burdened with the risk of congealing and detaching from the life it wants to express. As noticed by Rosa:

For me to be free is never to be free of the survival cunning of concealment. I did not tell you what I know, however much I wanted to. ... My father's biographer, respectfully coaxing me onto the stepping-stones of the official vocabulary – words, nothing but dead words, abstractions: that's not where reality is, you flung at me – national democratic revolution, ideological integration, revolutionary imperative; minority domination, liberation alliance, unity of the people, infiltration, incursion, viable agency for change, reformist option, armed tactics, mass political mobilization of the people in a combination of legal, semi-legal and clandestine methods – those footholds have come back to my vocabulary lately through parrying him (Gordimer, 1979, p. 142)

An important element of the inner development of Gordimer's protagonist is becoming conscious of the different languages she manoeuvres. The plot is sketched against the background of the Soweto uprising of 1976, initiated by a law introducing Afrikaans as the main medium of instruction at local South African schools. However, this awareness of language is indicated on different levels and goes beyond issues of vernaculars. Rosa realizes not only the political power but also artificial and abstract structure inherent to any language.

My version and theirs. And if this were being written down, both would seem equally concocted when read over. And if I were really telling, instead of talking to you in my mind the way I find I do... One is never talking to oneself, always one is addressed to someone. Suddenly, without knowing the reason, at different stages in one's life, one is addressing this person or that all the time, even dreams are performed before an audience (Gordimer, 1979, p. 16).

Rosa's monologues are consciously performative but, again, it is a double performance, language reflected by two mirrors. After the death of her father, Rosa leaves the family house, distances herself from old friends of the family and goes to live with Conrad – a young student she met at the trial, who initially was her lover but then became more of a brother. He is a person with a completely different background, story and ideas, someone who never really met her family but was visibly interested in it and, finally, someone who is also struggling to find himself. Hence, Rosa directed the first part of her internal monologues to Conrad, although as we discover in

the course of the novel, he had probably drowned during an Atlantic cruise on a self-made yacht. Thus, she talks in her mind to a phantom, mute and absent, but the real audience of this performance is herself.

In Gordimer's debut novel *The Lying Days* the protagonist says: "I knew that to know the names is to know less than to know that there can be no names, are no names" (Gordimer, 1953, p. 86). Real liberation comes with the realization that there is a space of no language, and it is the only necessary one. Towards the end of the novel, Rosa's monologues become more scarce. As for the final game of glances, after a European trip the woman goes back to South Africa and ends up in prison. Her body is locked up, but internally she is free – what she describes in her very last letter is only a "water-mark of light that came into the cell at sundown every evening, reflected from some west-facing surface outside" (Gordimer, 1979, p. 361). Thus, the frantic monologues are ended, together with the internal struggle. Her final words indicate an attentive presence, calm observation of the sun's reflection on the prison wall. What is more, as if to underline the incomprehensibility of her final experience, the last remarks are deleted by the prison censor and "Madame Bagnelli is never able to make it out" (Gordimer, 1979, p. 361). The struggle to have a voice and the intensive labour of language concludes in silence, ungraspable by words.

In *Burger's Daughter* Gordimer exposes the unreliability of language, applicable equally to written and spoken words. Realizing the limitations of different languages, their contradictions and artificiality, Rosa can free herself from social and cultural ties. The subjective liberation of the protagonist is an often-invoked interpretative trace of the book, whether the fractured personality of Rosa is treated as an exemplification of Lacan's understanding of subjectivity (Sistani, 2015) or as "a compulsive yearning for singularity" (Heffernan, 2010). However, neither the narrative play with perspective and language, nor the focus on the main character's self-liberation distinguishes *Burger's Daughter*. Those features would rather suggest a modernist or postcolonial way of reading the novel³, while its content reaches further. Besides picturing a young woman in crisis, it also outlines a more general human struggle – the path to *nowhere*. It does so by exposing the deep sphere of the body through its boundaries and catastrophes, shown as blood, agony, and death.

³ Followed e.g. by Julián Jiménez Heffernan (2010).

Blood, agony, and death

The structure of the novel is founded on the struggle of the protagonist – the process of telling her own story works as a tool of liberation for Rosa Burger. Gradually she becomes aware of her familial entanglements, leaving her physical and psychological entrapment. However, throughout this process, her liberation transforms into a more general human struggle with social norms, political orders and even life itself. Thus, the narration of Gordimer's novel has one more layer – additional to the already exposed narrative game of glances. While the latter breaks the solidity of the subject using proliferated points of view and multiplication of words, the other moves along a different kind of vector, directed into what is beyond words.

The strategy that leads to a dimension beyond the realm of culture and society is to reach into the primary ground of the body. Gordimer creates points of small crises of the protagonist, here called “nodal points” of the text. They bring together and focalize the main topics of the novel in brief scenes. They work through moments of intensive focus on the here and now, on the very presence of the flesh that is exposed to suffering and death – moments of presence going into depth, into the “continuity of life itself”. The “nodal points” in the novel are carried on by the most suggestive images of blood, agony, and death.

The metaphor of blood keeps returning in the novel, referring to the family ties between children and their parents, or ancestors and their descendants. It imposes an obligation of remembrance and continuity. Consequently, it does not belong to specific bodies, but rather to history and tradition. It also appears as a sign of injustice and resistance, as the blood of young protesters flowing in the street. There it loses its corporeality while becoming a revolutionary imperative. However, the reader also encounters another type of blood, different, because firmly connected with the body:

There are iron studs with hammer-marks faceting the white sunlight like a turned ring. I see these things over and over again as I stand. But real awareness is all focused in the lower part of my pelvis, in the leaden, dragging, wringing pain there. Can anyone describe the peculiar fierce concentration of the body's forces in the menstruation of early puberty? The bleeding began just after my father had made me go back to bed after my mother had been taken away. No pain; just wetness that I tested with my finger, turned on the light to verify: yes, blood. But outside the prison the internal landscape of my mysterious body turns me inside out, so that in that public place on that public occasion ... I am within that monthly crisis of destruction, the purging, tearing, draining of my own structure. I am my womb, and a year ago I wasn't aware – physically – I had one.

As I am alternately submerged below and thrust over the threshold of pain ...
(Gordimer, 1979, pp. 15–16).

As already pointed out at the beginning of the previous section, the scene of young Rosa in front of the prison doors is based on the interplay of a multiplicity of perspectives. Among them, none of the glances has a dominant role, not even the girl's look fixed on the iron studs. However, the very focal point of the scene, the "peculiar fierce concentration of the body's forces", is put in the pelvic area of a girl who is menstruating for the very first time. "I am my womb" – says Rosa. Everything is reduced to only one point, one organ inflicting bleeding and pain. The girl's menstrual blood does not escape the connection with the "internal landscape of the mysterious body". Its order and meaning are not historical, as it has neither past nor future, just a monthly repetition of the female cycle. Its very essence is biological and goes deep into the body's tissues and cells, reaching into the domain of nature, the mysteries of reproduction and life. That is why menstrual blood often enters into the religious sphere as a taboo – mysterious and dangerous, but also inherently connected with the sacred. The essence of this blood cannot be fully grasped and appropriated by culture. Thus it is situated on its borders or excluded as impure.

Pain that "turns the body inside out" is another important feature exposed by the scene. Rosa vividly describes her body going through the "crisis of destruction, the purging, tearing, draining of [her] own structure", as she is "submerged below and thrust over the threshold of pain". The pain inflicts a liminal experience, a moment of inner dissolution on the verge of existence. The body that suffers is very much present but at the same time exposed to the risk of final destruction. It faces decay that is above understanding. What is more, the pain intensified into agony is observed by Rosa as she is getting lost somewhere in the suburbs of the city – "caught on the counter-system of communications that doesn't appear on the road-maps" (Gordimer, 1979, p. 207), in the symbolic terrain of unknown possibility. Driving a car, Rosa encounters a cart with a donkey. At first the image seems strangely immobile to her. However, this stillness is suddenly broken by the whipping motion of a man and the paroxysm of the animal's pain:

I didn't see the whip. I saw agony. Agony that came from some terrible centre seized within the group of donkey, cart, driver and people behind him. They made a single object that contracted against itself in the desperation of a hideous final energy. Not seeing the whip, I saw the infliction of pain broken away from the will that creates it; broken loose, a force existing of itself, ravishment without the ravisher, torture without the torturer, rampage, pure cruelty gone beyond control of the humans who have spent thousands of years devising it. The entire

ingenuity from thumbscrew and rack to electric shock, the infinite variety and gradation of suffering, by lash, by fear, by hunger, by solitary confinement – the camps, concentration, labour, resettlement, the Siberias of snow or sun, the lives of Mandela, Sisulu, Mbeki, Kathrada, Kgosana, gull-picked on the Island, Lionel propped wasting to his skull between two warders, the deaths by questioning, bodies fallen from the height of John Vorster Square, deaths by dehydration, babies degutted by enteritis in ‘places’ of banishment, the lights beating all night on the faces of those in cells ... (Gordimer, 1979, p. 208).

For Rosa, an abrupt movement of the whip reaching flesh reverberates into the “infinite variety and gradation of suffering”. A sudden twist of the body connected with the convulsion of the donkey – they demonstrate some abruptness and centre the attention around the “here and now”. “The thing was like an explosion,” says Rosa. She sees an assembly – animal, driver and cart as one object, the epicentre of pain that has broken loose and goes into infinity. The suffering of the donkey becomes the sum of sufferings through the use of frantic enumeration that embraces concentration camps, the skull of her father, and babies degutted by sickness. It accommodates the entirety of pain caused by people, and pain exceeding individual sin, which becomes the guilt of society, the errors inherent to the arrangements of humanity. That is why Rosa only witnesses the scene but does not intercede. She could end the donkey’s agony with an easy gesture, yet she just watches.

The event on the road was critical for Rosa and made her leave for Europe, as she said: “After the donkey, I couldn’t stop myself. I don’t know how to live in Lionel’s country” (Gordimer, 1979, p. 209). It exposed the phantom character of the moral claim of a better future she inherited from her father. The reason for Rosa’s helplessness in the face of the suffering animal was not caused merely by the fact that her authority in that situation came from the privileged position of a white woman in South Africa. To act was already impossible as the intensity of the moment detached the situation from its social and cultural roots. Rosa was no longer facing a man beating a donkey but the whole inevitable continuity of suffering. If she put herself between the man and the animal “it would have become again just that – the pain of a donkey” (Gordimer, 1979, p. 209).

Agony, as perceived by Rosa, goes through an infinity of gradations until the very finitude of the body. Its final element and the third “nodal point” of the novel is death. The protagonist seems to be familiar with it – she works in a hospital, her little brother Tony drowned in the pool, her mother passed away after illness and, finally, her father died in prison just a few months after being sentenced. However, all those deaths, even

if sudden, seem to have their proper reason or meaning. They follow a logical course of events – sickness, prison conditions, political activity or a piece of bacon stuck in a boy’s throat. Rosa perceives death as a most critical event when it strikes in a public square, during lunchtime, and still remains unnoticed. The place is crowded – a couple kissing on a bench, children playing, people eating or sleeping on the grass. Against that buzz, there is also an immobile man sitting on a bench with his legs crossed and arms folded. At first glance, he seems to be asleep. Just one brief moment is enough to reveal he is already dead:

But there was nothing cruel and indifferent about our eating our lunches, making love or sleeping off a morning’s work while a man, simulating life with one leg easily and almost elegantly crossed over the other, died or was dying. He looked as if he were alive. He gave no sign of injury, pain or distress, he was not held between the uniformed bodies of custodians, looking out where he could not run, he was not caged in court or cell, or holding out, as a beggar has nothing to present but his stump, a paper for the official stamp that is always denied him. The whole point was that I – we – all of us were exonerated. What could we have done? (Gordimer, 1979, p. 78)

The death of a man in a square is of no significance to Rosa or the rest of the world, yet it becomes extraordinarily meaningful. It occurs among intensified life, as the man “concluded the digestive cycles and procreative tentatives around him by completing the imperative, the ultimate necessity” (Gordimer, 1979, p. 78). Moreover, there is no visible cause for the man’s death, besides the very ultimate one of the biological termination of life. In fact, its connection with life is the most striking aspect. This death comes in “a shape of arranged flesh” (Gordimer, 1979, p. 78), disguised as life and exposing not only the ultimate destination of living but also its elusive character. Being as simple as “we die because we live”, it also lies beyond understanding. It is a final “unspeakable act carried through in our presence” (Gordimer, 1979, p. 79).

Is the pure presence of the body possible? It may be argued that blood, agony, and death as inherent parts of human life are always meaningfully articulated through cultural and societal sets of practices established to familiarize people with the unknown. Thus, the presence of suffering or bleeding flesh will always be immediately captured by some narrative that seeks to detach it from the body and inscribe it into some moral, political or religious order. This movement is well displayed in the novel *Burger’s Daughter*. However, the “nodal points” act as a counter-movement to it. They restore the connection with the body and demarcate a different kind of inner escape – from the instant of flesh into the continuity of life itself.

Through the precise use of language combined with a meaningful storyline, Gordimer designs a space for the intensified experience of the “here and now” of the body. Short instants allow Rosa to grasp the pure presence of the body that directs the experience onto a different level, situated beyond that which can be captured by any narrative.

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The analysis reveals that the key feature of the book *Burger's Daughter* is the method that Gordimer uses to expound the entrapment of individuals in the net of social and cultural demands and how they try to reach beyond them. The novel's structure and storyline are shaped through the personal endeavour of the novel's main character – Rosa. The political climate of South Africa in the mid-1970s and a family story play a vital role in the construction of the plot. However, they do not exhaust or dominate the narration. *Burger's Daughter* is not only the story of the difficult relationship between daughter and father or the struggle between private life and public demands. It reaches further, because by exposing the illusory character of social or cultural patterns, Gordimer also shows the possibility of going beyond them.

The story of Rosa exposes two kinds of movement – appearing to oneself as a place where something happens, and a return to the biological community of the body. The former is a distancing movement of ‘self’, necessary but devoid of affective association. It exposes the elusive character of cultural and social separations but also severs affective connections and deprives the self of an identity foundation. The latter is based on crucial gestures named “nodal points” and exposed through the themes of blood, agony, and death. The intensively dramatized moments designed by Gordimer are based on increased emotional tension simultaneously introducing an extremely broad perspective that captures everything from the very instant of flesh into the realm of “life itself” (where, as recalled in the introduction to this article, a “final solution does not exist”).

The attempt to signalize the community of “life itself” goes beyond the literary strategies acknowledged by transcultural research. It may be perceived as a movement contradictory to transcultural, as it finds its final ground in an affective belonging. However, the language of a transcultural novel mirrors the problems of transcultural space – instead of expressing, it rather directs the experience, whether by juxtaposing perspectives, undermining language or playing with the storyline by distorting the continuity of time or space. Similarly, “nodal points” work through language but with the primary focus of reaching beyond it, directing the

experience of the protagonist and the reader. They also introduce a very different perspective and demonstrate the presence of experience that lies beyond culture and society, and that can never be fully articulated by it. The transcultural perspective undoubtedly implies the possibility of the existence of such a dimension and detects some of the literary strategies used to signalize it. This dimension allows the catastrophic overtone of the desire of *nowhere* to be turned into another type of venture, “the death wish of the spirit”, which is exposed as a struggle for liberation to find one’s own space of unbelonging.

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Pragnienie nigdzie – *Córka Burgera* Nadine Gordimer w perspektywie transkulturowej

Artykuł zestawia książkę Nadine Gordimer *Córka Burgera* z „pragnieniem *nigdzie*” („the desire of *nowhere*”), odczytanym przez autorkę w perspektywie transkulturowej. Gordimer to jedna z najbardziej rozpoznawanych południowoafrykańskich pisarek i aktywistek anty-apartheidu. Sytuacja polityczna Południowej Afryki jest tym samym ważnym tłem jej książek. Mimo to, kluczowym problemem twórczości autorki wydaje się być bardziej uniwersalne poszukiwanie przestrzeni indywidualnej wolności jednostki. Podjęta przez Gordimer refleksja nad „pragnieniem *nigdzie*” w swojej istocie przypomina transkulturowe poszukiwania przestrzeni znajdującej się poza kulturą, choć odmiennie rozkłada akcenty.

Wyrażenie przestrzeni wolności od kultury w literaturze nie jest łatwe, jako że jej podstawowe narzędzie – język – jest mocno zapośredniczone kulturowo. Dlatego też, literatura transkulturowa posługuje się zestawem kreatywnych strategii podważania języka, e.g. poprzez pluralizację głosów, wprowadzenie narratora niewiarygodnego, intensywne użycie ironii lub międzynarodową lokalizację narracji. Artykuł jest próbą znalezienia innych metod wyrażenia tego, czego nie może oddać język. Prezentowana analiza powieści Gordimer skupia się na użyciu wizualnych strategii, które pomagają zdecentralizować narrację i nadać tekstowi transkulturową dynamikę. Refleksji poddany zostaje także performatywny proces dystansowania się narratora do własnego „ja” – pojawiania się sobie jako „miejsce, gdzie coś się dzieje”. W konsekwencji, artykuł dochodzi do analizy kluczowych „gestów” – momentów intensywnego napięcia narracyjnego, które poprzez wykorzystanie motywów krwi, agonii oraz śmierci, prowadzi czytelnika poza tekst, aż do doświadczenia „samego życia”.

Słowa kluczowe: transkulturowość, powieść transkulturowa, Nadine Gordimer, strategie narracyjne, literatura Południowej Afryki.

Note

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