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# « Hieroglyph to Be Decoded » : Exploring Routes of Representation and Telling in Nadine Gordimer's *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories*



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Article abstract

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## « HIEROGLYPH TO BE DECODED » : EXPLORING ROUTES OF REPRESENTATION AND TELLING IN NADINE GORDIMER'S *BEETHOVEN WAS ONE-SIXTEENTH BLACK AND OTHER STORIES*

### RÉSUMÉ

*L'article examine les stratégies et modes narratifs qui montrent comment, après 1994, la « nouvelle » Nadine Gordimer explore une palette diversifiée de motifs, de situations et de personnages dans des tonalités moins tranchées que dans la plupart de ses précédents recueils de nouvelles. Son ancien « ego transparent » a maintenant beaucoup perdu de son aplomb monolithique pour emprunter des pistes mineures en quête de traces à moitié ensevelies et d'une « liminalité » qui n'est plus nécessairement associée au monde noir ou à la dissidence blanche. S'ils peuvent sembler étranges ou négligeables, les fragments d'expérience humaine ou animale représentés trouvent souvent leur place dans ce cadre défini par Njabulo Ndebele comme la « redécouverte de l'ordinaire » et, dans une perspective plus large, s'alignent sur l'épistémè post-apartheid et postcoloniale qui se défie des polarités hiérarchiques et des récits totalisants. Tout en s'éloignant du politiquement « spectaculaire » et du spectre de la pigmentation, les textes illustrent également les modalités selon lesquelles l'Afrique du Sud contemporaine s'inscrit dans une dialectique cruciale entre le local et le global.*

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When glancing through Nadine Gordimer's fictional output, one scarcely fails to notice how her publication of novels and short story collections has gradually and befittingly acquired an internal balance, as if the author needed both forms of narrative discourse to convey meanings, give authentic voice to her cultural and aesthetic imaginary and fully develop her penchant for honest scrutinizing. This is not only suggested by the test of time, or the very taking shape of such an organic systematization within her macrotext, but also by a number of Gordimer's statements and commentaries stretching throughout her outstanding career. As early as 1962, she had for instance drawn a basic distinction between the wider flexibility and varied viewpoints informing longer narratives and the self-contained, aesthetic unity of the story by comparing the latter to « a piece of music, with its distinctive movements, rhythms, and caden-

ces »<sup>1</sup>. In the 1970s, after successfully coming to grips with the complexities and compass of novel writing, she could at last admit to getting over « an inferiority complex about novels » and acknowledge that in the unfolding of the creative process « there are just differences in the way I conceive of different themes. Sometimes the theme can only be a story. At others it couldn't be encompassed in a story »<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, we should not forget that her earliest literary undertakings in the 1930s consisted in tales and that for several years afterwards she was to be internationally praised as an excellent practitioner of the short story genre, locating herself along the lines of Eudora Welty, K.A. Porter, Hemingway, Maupassant and Chekhov. Much more recently, in an article published on the occasion of the artist's ninetieth birthday, Karen Lazar has teasingly argued that many « readers are better acquainted, and more comfortable, with Nadine Gordimer's short stories than with her novels, preferring the short fiction's less elaborate, more concentrated aspect ». In this second province her pen is said to be « at its most lucid, establishing this often-underrated text form as a handsome, disciplined and far-reaching genre in its own right »<sup>3</sup> (although the contention does not unquestionably hold true for *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories*<sup>4</sup> and its somewhat mixed reception, as we shall briefly see).

As to Gordimer's theoretical contributions to the short story field, her most poignant piece remains « The Flash of Fireflies », an essay interspersed with Woolfian hints where, instead of focusing on the moth's falling parable down the window-sill – the reference is of course to « The Death of the Moth » (1942), a well-known essay by the English artist, whose style and psychological explorations Gordimer has in many ways appreciated – she emphasizes the flying

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<sup>1</sup> « Author : Nadine Gordimer », Interview with John Barkham, 1962, in : TOPPING BAZIN (Nancy) and DALLMAN SEYMOUR (Marilyn), eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*. Jackson-London : University Press of Mississippi, 1990, 321 p. ; p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> « Landmark in Fiction », Interview with Stephen Gray, 1973, in : TOPPING BAZIN (N.) and DALLMAN SEYMOUR (M.), eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> LAZAR (K.), « Writing by the Flash of Fireflies », *Mail & Guardian Online*, 20 November 2013 : <http://mg.co.za/print/2013-11-20-writing-by-the-flash-of-fireflies> ; retrieved on 3.02.2014.

<sup>4</sup> GORDIMER (N.), *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories*. London : Bloomsbury, 2008, 184 p. Subsequent quotations and page numbers refer to this volume, cited hereafter as *BWOSB*.

insects' climactic moment of freedom, radiating energy and vitality. She thus seems to substitute the motif of the doomed struggle against death, alongside its philosophical undertones connected with the brevity of existence and the desperate efforts to enjoy the opportunities sparingly bestowed on us, with a sparkling sense of life embodied by the firefly itself and, on a metaliterary level, by the short story, defiantly thriving in the face of critical dismissal and the trumpeted « death of the novel » sentence : « Why is it that while the death of the novel is good for post-mortem at least once a year, the short story lives on unmolested ? [...] like a child suffering from healthy neglect, the short story survives »<sup>5</sup>. Gordimer proceeds then to gear our perceptions towards considering the short story's approach and experimental methods as valuable epistemological or epiphanic tools, aimed at knitting the texture of human experience within a creative vision which revolves around the present moment and single situations. The peculiar intermingling of technical discipline, compression and openness to formal innovation can here be seen as elevating the story to a perfectly graduated lens for the modern consciousness to investigate the intimations of truth and « the quality of human life, where contact is more like the flash of fireflies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness »<sup>6</sup>.

With all her working knowledge in both novel- and story-writing, and her equal mastering of those crafts, one may be sure that the author manages to bring home some important points, such as the idea of the illuminating expansion of the moment within a story's miniature world, feeding on a distillation of significant details. She also believes that a given theme or subject always bears the marks of the life going on around the writer and that the content is bound to find its own counterpart in the style of the piece, being instrumental in forging form<sup>7</sup>. Keeping all these elements in mind,

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<sup>5</sup> GORDIMER (N.), « The Flash of Fireflies », 1968, in : MAY (Charles E.), ed., *The New Short Story Theories*. Athens : Ohio University Press, 1994, 337 p. ; p. 263.

<sup>6</sup> GORDIMER (N.), « The Flash of Fireflies », *art. cit.*, p. 264.

<sup>7</sup> This is what the author herself suggested in some of her interviews, bearing witness to the varying choices of style and textual structuring which noticeably characterize her *oeuvre*, and in a foreshadowing of, say, the prophetic-apocalyptic mode informing *July's People* and its powerful portrayal of the white caste's demise, the picaresque model suiting the protagonist's temperament and aims in *A Sport of Nature*, the state-of-the-nation format providing a proper palimpsest in her ambitious, post-liberation saga *No Time Like the Present*. See in particular the following comment : « I use the forms of short stories and of novels and within those separate forms I use different techniques [...]. For me it is a matter of finding the approach that will release the most from the subject. The form is dictated by the

and never forgetting Gordimer's propensity to cross epistemic barriers by «continually clarifying and reclarifying her thought»<sup>8</sup> and cope with novelty, it can be surmised that *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* – her 2007 collection of thirteen short stories, each of them previously published in reviews and magazines since 2004 – should follow suit. And in fact it does, although it has not taken readers by storm and has on the whole won a lukewarm acceptance<sup>9</sup>.

No longer addressing the South African momentous core themes – apartheid, racial politics, internal strife and their range of scenarios or counter-scenarios, such as the 1994 euphoria or the TRC's confrontation with a traumatic past and its truth/s – this collection finds a sort of antecedent in *Loot* (2003)<sup>10</sup> and takes a further step towards picking new diegetic threads and exploring different routes

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subject. In some people's writing you are very conscious of the writer – the writer is between you and the subject all the time. My own aim is to be invisible and to make the identification for the reader with what is being written about and with the people in the work – not to distance the reader » – « Interview : Pat Schwartz Talks to Nadine Gordimer », 1977, in : TOPPING BAZIN (N.) and DALLMAN SEYMOUR (M.), eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>8</sup> CLINGMAN (Stephen), *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer : History from the Inside*. London-Boston-Sydney : Allen & Unwin, 1986, 276 p. ; p. 12. Clingman is the critic who most persuasively highlighted what has become a sort of truism in Gordimer studies, that is namely her constant overstepping of cognitive boundaries, willingness to explore and conscientious readiness to assess or revise past positions when confronting significant new developments. For her part, Gordimer often acknowledged the shifts in her vision, apprehension and self-definition in response to the historical and social situation of South Africa, a process of transformation underpinned by progressive stages of awakening, learning, rethinking and metaphorical rebirth.

<sup>9</sup> Various reviewers didn't find it particularly compelling and sensed perhaps a falling below the standard. Among them, Siddhartha Deb observed that a small number « of the stories in Gordimer's latest collection [...] are this powerful. A few, including the title story, seem no more than sketches. For some time now, Gordimer's language has also been sparse, and one misses the earlier style that sent sentences foraging across the external landscape of veld and snowdrift even as they probed the inner channels of desire and betrayal. » – DEB (S.), « Patterns of Intimacy », *The New York Times*, 16 December 2007 : <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/books/review/Deb-t.html?ref=nadinegordimer> ; retrieved on 3.02.2014. Miranda France sounded particularly censorious on matters of language and form, claiming that the 2007 stories « are all characterised by the same brittle, rebarbative style. Some passages read as though they were jotted down as notes and not developed any further. » – FRANCE (M.), « The Flash of Fireflies », *Literary Review* : <http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/france1207.html> ; retrieved on 3.02.2014.

<sup>10</sup> GORDIMER (N.), *Loot and Other Stories*. London : Bloomsbury, 2003, 240 p.

of representation and telling. If always resisting the pressure of political orthodoxies in her fiction, and giving credence to the postulate of the artist's integrity and imaginative freedom, Gordimer enters now a territory where the South African background is actually alluded to as one among others, as a « one-sixteenth fraction » on a worldwide scale, so to speak. And it is thus that readers find themselves projected into a transnational backdrop which also, but not pervasively, deals with the decolonized Rainbow Nation, looking sideways at both its advancements – Mandela's aura, women's and homosexuals' achieved rights, affirmative action, cultural sharing in a democratic state – and shadows, like political corruption, the new capitalism drawbacks, the underground fear of desegregated coexistence. As underlined by Ileana Dimitriu in relation to *Loot*, one can now hold that the author « expresses a new interest in the dynamics of the local and the global, of the global beyond the local [...]. She takes a special interest in the broader issues of post-colonialism in the world today, including (but not foregrounding) her home country »<sup>11</sup>.

While the ironical twists and acute prose are still there, they rely more on strings of rhetorical questions, parenthetical remarks, truncated sentences, snatches of interior monologues and witty self-referentiality, as though language itself took a moment's respite from the pressure of the politically spectacular. The Gordimer of *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* contemplates in fact a multifaceted range of motifs, situations and character profiles with much less strained overtones and anguished commitment than in most of her previous production of the same genre (whether historically connected with the states of emergency or linked to the transition period). Her old « transparent ego »<sup>12</sup> has definitely lost its monolithic aplomb to nimbly pursue minor tracks in search of the interstice, half-buried traces, indeterminacy and liminality : a borderland no longer necessarily associated with blackness, the slippery ground of the unimaginable encounter between whites and non-whites, or that minority-within-a-minority where she used to posit the white dissident.

If they may look weird or just negligible, such splintered slices of life could be compared to the constituents of a newly-attuned syntax

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<sup>11</sup> DIMITRIU (I.), « Shifts in Gordimer's Recent Short Fiction : Story-Telling after Apartheid », *Current Writing*, n°17 (1), 2005, p. 90-107 ; p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. ABRAHAMS (Lionel), « Nadine Gordimer : The Transparent Ego », 1960, in : SMITH (Rowland), ed., *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer*. Boston : G. K. Hall, 1990, 226 p. ; p. 26-30.

bent on capturing the hues and nuances of human (and partly animal) experience at large, as though the writer managed to recover a pristine sense of wonder about life and, in the same breath, hastened to temper it with the realistic optimism of her maturity. Lightness and gravity, (postmodern?) textual playfulness and psychological drama perceptibly inform the closing triad of stories, which go under the catchy heading of « Alternative Endings » (a preamble where the authorial I humorously challenges teleological imperatives in favour of life's unpredictability) and record the painful trial of marital infidelity from an oblique perspective : one hinging on the sensorial channels of sight (« The First Sense »), hearing (« The Second Sense ») and smell (« The Third Sense »). The scrutinizing third-person narrator weaves then threads into the canvas of deceit and unveiling, separation and reconciliation (a true or expedient one) in a vivid juxtaposition of diegetic frames related to the phenomenology and power of perception. In « The First Sense », the reader is to witness the splitting of a Hungarian couple emigrated to South Africa, as resourceful Zsuzsana feels progressively estranged from learned but narrow-minded Ferenc and finally divorces him under the spell of captivating images tied to new people and environments. In « The Second Sense », a self-effacing flautist goes so far as to renounce maternity for her partner's sake (the man is a talented cellist often on tour abroad) and will tacitly forgive him when his musical performances reverberate with the emotions of a secret and yet doomed affair, until love between husband and wife is passionately revived. In « The Third Sense », Eva cannot bring herself to speak plainly to Michael when smelling another woman's scent in the nape of his neck, after the house dog sniffed the lover's touch on his clothes, too. The tragedy of betrayal for this middle-aged couple seems to be eventually superseded by other dramatic events, namely the bankruptcy of the private airline that Eva, an academic and colonial heiress, had helped Michael to buy in the changing – in this case, treacherous – South Africa of the new economy.

A parallel wavering between *dénouement* and deferral of closure, ellipsis and tacked-on resolution can be found in « Mother Tongue », « Allesverloren » and « A Beneficiary », each of them marked by a double-layered title capitalizing on literal and metaphoric meanings. The German woman in the first story stumbles upon the limits of interaction with the local surroundings and the acquaintances of her South African husband, a businessman working for an advertising agency she had met in her home country : *vis-à-vis* a

mixed circle of friends speaking a jokingly pidginized language crammed with anecdotes, innuendos and intimate forms of address, she feels completely isolated and is propelled to realize that, in this « cross-pollination of lives » (p. 81) from past and present Africa, « she didn't know the language. The only mother tongue she had was his in her mouth, at night » (p. 84). The academic historian and widow in « *Allesverloren* » is similarly driven to accept the fallacies and blanks of a would-be comprehensive knowledge as she fails to discover something more about her dead husband's personality when visiting a photographer – a handsome man of Dutch and Malay ancestry, now living in London – with whom the South African architect had had a short homosexual relationship. The Afrikaans phrase « *Allesverloren* », meaning « everything lost » and referring to the brand name of the wine the protagonist had purchased as a present<sup>13</sup>, is brought into sharp focus in the last paragraphs as the epistemic marker of an irretrievable past, the impossibility of a thorough recalling. In the third story, the term « beneficiary » is puzzlingly stripped of its legal significance (the beneficiary in a will) and given antiphrastic weight when twenty-eight-year-old Charlotte finds out that her recently deceased mother – a hedonistic actress with the fascinating stage name of Laila de Morne – did not conceive her with the neurologist she had married (and divorced), but with an actor while on tour in the UK. Understandably shocked and inquisitive, Charlotte takes great pains to get in touch with the actor, but then stops short of telling him the whole truth – the man doesn't seem to be put on the alert when hearing of Laila's past pregnancy – and recovers instead the deep, authentic relation with her non-biological father, going beyond the compass of any DNA-test rationale.

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<sup>13</sup> Here one easily catches a dig at the renowned *Allesverloren* Wine Estate in the Swartland district, an ancient farm dating back to the end of the seventeenth century and, since 1872, a property of the Malan family. D.F. Malan, the South African Prime Minister from 1948 to 1954 and a notorious promoter of apartheid politics, was born on this farm in 1874. In Gordimer's story, the compound « *Allesverloren* » is provocatively described as « two words run into one, most likely those of a Boer wine farmer after the old war lost to the British » (p. 101). As a matter of fact, such a defeatist remark has been commonly ascribed to the Afrikaner widow who originally owned the place, when, on her way home after looking for provisions and tools in Stellenbosch, she found the farmstead burnt down by a hostile band of natives. Quite intriguingly, the widow in « *Allesverloren* » similarly sets off on a (psychologically) dangerous journey to eventually see her hopes and certainties vanish.



Needless to say, such sprawling fictional routes often fall within Njabulo Ndebele's province of a « rediscovery of the ordinary »<sup>14</sup> creating opportunities to lend an ear to the changing times, redefine relevance and the artist's consciousness as especially regards daily lives and interiority. In a wider perspective, via their leaps beyond a circumscribed South African milieu, the *BWOSB* tales chime in with a post-apartheid turn and postcolonial episteme distrustful of hierarchical modes of thinking, essentialism and totalizing metanarratives. Their discursive gesture rather points towards intersections, fractures and transmutations of identities, the porosity of borders and global mobility.

This leads back to the various provenance and affiliations of the characters in the aforementioned stories, but also keys us into such a volatile and decentered ground as Grete's, a Jewish German refugee who managed to survive extermination by the Nazis, the Second World War and the deaths of two husbands by virtue of her scatterbrained, « redeeming » flippancy – a flighty trace in the asphalt avenues of History – rather than any full-blooded political action (« A Frivolous Woman »).

Verisimilitude and strangeness, recognition and « phantasmal » dissemination inter-mingle even more in « Dreaming of the Dead », a first-person account reading like an affectionate homage to three great friends and personages of the twentieth century. Edward Said, Anthony Sampson and Susan Sontag are here hailed back to life thanks to the *topos* of a dream allowing for motley displacement and an amused contamination (even dismantling) of identities. Meeting in a Chinese restaurant in New York, the three deceased intellectuals and their living friend are shown to exchange greetings and talk about political events, social or ideological issues and their current projects, so that a Said emanating « intellectual light » (p. 28) is cast as a symphony composer, British upper-class and shebeen-goer Sampson makes his appearance in the flowing African robe of a *sangoma* and a Sontag resembling a « mythical goddess » (p. 30) says she has taken up the defence of the heterosexual male as opposed to the present-day gender elite of emancipated women.

In sum, the 2007 collection both records instants of realization, epiphany and crisis – within a semantic pattern grounded in life's mysteries, love, survival as well as betrayal, illusion / disillusionment, breaks in communication – and draws on the short story's

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<sup>14</sup> SEE NDEBELE (N.), *Rediscovery of the Ordinary : Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. Johannesburg : COSAW, 1991, 160 p.

potentialities as a destabilizing or defamiliarizing mode of narration, interrogating limits, silences and the alleged impregnability of ontological boundaries. And Gordimer certainly handles with panache the unusual interweaving of the trivial/domestic with the extraordinary when choosing animals as the protagonists of three stories, in which she probes into a deracialized dimension of alterity and clears a space for parody, unsettling counterdiscourse, epistemological or ontological doubt and authorial self-referentiality.

We are thus being teased into discovering to whom the cunning eloquence and speculative bent of the I-narrator in « Tape Measure » – a long creature arguing for respectful coexistence with its human host – actually belong, and into realizing that the History in the tale with the same title boils down to the small vicissitudes of a parrot that has long been an exotic attraction for the customers of a restaurant in Southern France. Both the sharp-witted tapeworm expelled from the intestine and the parrot, whose mimicry ultimately conveys a disquieting message – in the epilogue, from « the depths of whatever he has that mocks vocal chords, low and angry », the bird silences a clichéd « Ça va ? » with the retort « Ça ne va pas du tout » (p. 111) – remind one of such trans-generic postmodern feats as Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (notably the woodworm in « The Stowaway ») and of course *Flaubert's Parrot*.

Intertextual echoes and baffling irony are more palpable in « Gregor », a story in which Gordimer obliquely resumes the threads of her long-standing appreciation for Franz Kafka by winking at the surreal and subconscious context of *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*), along with the horrified reactions to Gregor Samsa's abasing transformation. Here her artistic persona seems to encounter a grotesquely dislocated or repressed male double : Gregor himself, a little cockroach who has wormed his way into the threshold space just below her typewriter glass-display, and whom she takes pains to chase away (as a nasty interference on her creative absorption ? an uncensored gloss at the edge ? an unwelcome figment of the imagination ?) only to find him burnt to death, except for a « segment of a black leg, hieroglyph to be decoded » (p. 62).

Let's now come full-circle and draw attention to *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, in which Gordimer toys with some twentieth-century conjectures relating to Ludwig van Beethoven's black ances-

try and Negroid or mulatto features<sup>15</sup> to bring under scrutiny her white male protagonist's troubled sense of social identity. The setting is a contemporary South Africa where a Mr F. M. – a middle-aged academic and ex-activist called Frederick Morris by a sympathetic and yet scathing narrator, who is actually talking about himself – is intrigued by the « Black Beethoven » urban legend revived by a radio speaker. He thus starts wondering whether there might be a trace of black blood in his own family lineage, too, and embarks on a (fruitless) investigation concerning his English great-grandfather's connections with native girls in Kimberley. A biology professor going through a funny phase of post-apartheid estrangement, Morris sets about reinventing himself by turning into a path which has unfortunately been trodden for centuries, and dangerously so : the claustrophobic course pivoting on the fetish of pigmentation. In his pseudo-Fanonian attempt at wearing a « black mask » in the age of non-whites' assertion, he seems to forget what has been heroically made clear by the Struggle : the fact that « our kind, humankind, doesn't need any distinctions of blood percentage tincture » (p. 15), that people of different colours possess a common humanity made up of an ethnic medley often impossible to pin down.

His would-be journey of discovery will consequently throw him into the abyss of self-delusion, helplessness and unknowing : « Oh and how was the Big Hole [of the diamond mine in Kimberley] ? ” “Deep”. Everyone laughs at witty deadpan brevity » (p. 16). For all its rhizomatic development and resistance to figures of enclosure, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* does then sound adamant on a rock-solid tenet, a kind of signpost warning the reader at the very beginning of his/her delving into the stories : there

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<sup>15</sup> The celebrated classical music composer, born in Bonn in 1770 from half-Flemish Johann van Beethoven, has been the subject of various pseudo-scientific theories concerning his putative African ancestry. Such contentions, which gained strength in the wake of the studies published in the 1940s and 1950s by Jamaican-born American historian and journalist Joel Augustus Rogers, capitalized on both the artist's physical appearance – portraits and testimonies depicting him as a man of swarthy complexion, with a flat nose and bristly black hair – and his family tree. If much was made of the fact that Beethoven's paternal ancestors came from Flanders, Belgium (a region which had been under Spanish occupation, when the Moors of North African descent had in turn exerted a powerful influence in Spain), his mother's family even happened to be traced back to the Caribbean area and hence black slavery. This went of course completely against the grain of the « Aryan Beethoven » tenet once propagandized by the Nazis.

should be no turning back towards any devious mystique of the race<sup>16</sup>.

■ Laura GIOVANELLI

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<sup>16</sup> Though agreeing in general terms with Rim Makni-Bejar, I would in this sense neither compare enfeebled and inertly progressive Morris to the fiercely conservative Mehring of *The Conservationist*, nor speak of this story's ending as evidence of « Gordimer's pessimism and even, one can venture, her historical cynicism » – MAKNI-BEJAR (R.), « The Resurgence of Hidden Identities : The Burden of Ancestry in Nadine Gordimer's "Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black" », *Journal of the Short Story in English*, n°54, Spring 2010, p. 145-151 ; p. 150.