

Genre Borders in a Border Novel: Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*

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The following discussion starts from the assumption that genres have something to do with borders, and that that something is of both theoretical and practical interest for practitioners of literary theory, analysis, and interpretation. Genres and borders: what immediately comes to mind are the borders between genres. Genre systems seem at the outset to be ways of dividing up literature, of placing conceptual borders between groups of texts, borders defined either by distinctive features these texts share, or by family relationships between these texts. Following on this, one may imagine the possibility of texts which cross institutionalised genre borders, creating new, hybrid genres. There is a line of thought in which romanticism and modernism are seen as progressive steps towards an all-encompassing hybridity of genres, in which all genre borders are crossed, and literature becomes pure *Roman* (according to the German Romantics) or *Livre* (according to Stéphane Mallarmé and Maurice Blanchot). According to this line of thought, literature becomes progressively purified—of genre itself. Literature is what goes beyond genre. An increased awareness of genres outside of literature warns us, however, that this

would be just the creation of a new genre, the genre of literature itself.¹

The development of a theory of textuality allows another way of looking at genre borders; in fact, it makes genre borders an element in the internal analysis of the text. The reader who desires genre, who aims to allot the text a genre, searches for the markings of this or that genre. Sometimes these are in conflict, and the reader will say to herself: "Aha, this part of the text shows the signs of this genre... But, hmm, this part here shows the signs of another." If the reader continues in her search for the genre of the text, she must either judge which genre-marking comes out on top—is dominant—or choose to create a new, hybrid genre which combines two or more of these marks. Whichever solution she chooses, it is still possible for her to observe genre-markings as they are laid out in the text, and to transfer the genre map from a landscape of texts to the landscape of the text itself. Different genres may claim different zones of the text, and the borders between genres in a conceptual genre system may be traced

¹ Cf. Rosmarin's interpretation of Todorov (1976, 160) in Rosmarin 1985, 7–8.

as boundaries between different parts of the text. Fredric Jameson talks of “generic discontinuities” in the text: within his view of the novel as a “symbolic act” rather than an organic whole, such discontinuities are the effect of “the coexistence or tension between several generic modes or strands” (Jameson 1989, 144, 141). The question of which genre the text belongs to is replaced with the question of which genres belong to the text, and the boundaries are here only coincidentally the outer boundaries of the text, the boundaries which define the text as a work. They are rather boundaries of textual zones within the text, of textuality.

Yet, they are also evoked by the question of the text’s outer boundaries, those that constitute the text as a work rather than as textuality. A text may easily switch genres dependent on how its outer boundaries are placed. A fantastic tale may become a dream narrative with the introduction of the sentence “‘Wake up, Alice dear!’ said her sister; ‘Why, what a long sleep you’ve had!’.” Tzvetan Todorov grapples with this problem in his book on the fantastic, without explicitly stating that it invites the reader to give a genre label to a discrete part of the work, to a text within the text (Todorov 1976), or that it highlights the text’s internal boundaries—yet, in this case, internal boundaries which are closely tied to the outer borders of the work.

So, to sum up this introductory theoretical sketch, genre borders may be thought of as 1) borders in the conceptual landscape of the genre system, a landscape in which the position of these boundaries is a function of the similarities and connections between different texts. But they may also 2) be observed in the textual landscape, as

divisions between different parts of a text, a landscape in which conceptual genre borders are mapped out on the surface of the text itself. Yet reading a text like Nadine Gordimer’s *My Son’s Story* (1990) makes us aware that formal borders are not the only borders to be found in a text; a text may also contain, and even be structured by, a theme of borders, borders on the level of *histoire*, borders recreated in textual mimesis.² In *My Son’s Story*, as in so many of Gordimer’s other works, we read of the problematic nature of the apartheid nation of South Africa, with its “ethnic cleansings”, empty in-between spaces between communities, pass laws. We also read of how the borders of a family are reconstituted by the external walls of the house into which this family moves, and how they are broken by the internal walls of individual privacy in this house, and in the end how these walls are symbolically laid to ashes—all in a process closely connected with the political transgressions this family lives through and lives out.

Borders—geographic and psychological—are thus central to the novel.³ The question I want to pose here is, however, the following: Is there also a connection between the macrospatial borders described or represented within the text and the microspatial borders of the actual text?

² In the following I will be referring to the first Bloomsbury edition, Gordimer 1990. The Penguin paperback from 1991 happily has the same page-numbering.

³ Cf. Clingman 1992, xiii–xiv, xxvii–xxviii; Bhabha 1992; Sonza 1994. More generally in Gordimer’s writing, see especially Engle 1989, a pre-*My Son’s Story* venture in the production of border theory through readings of Gordimer.

Liliane Louvel clearly suggests there is, in an analysis, which aims to show how "fragmentation" works as a "unifying web structurally present at the level of story, text and narration" in *My Son's Story* (Louvel 1992, 28).⁴ If there is such a connection, it would be central to the practice of a "poetics of the border" in which thematic borders are juxtaposed with the formal borders of the text as part of textual analysis and interpretation (see Schimanski 1996). Franco Moretti, writing not about Gordimer's novel, but about literature in general, implies that there is such a connection, when he writes that each genre has its own space, and that each space has its own genre, citing Bakhtin's opinion that it is "the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions" (Moretti 1998, 35; Bakhtin 1981, 85). Since thematic borders are created or expressed in the textual *discourse*, they can be mapped against other boundaries in the text, and indeed constitute boundaries in the text by themselves. Since every text has its chronotope, hybrid or otherwise,⁵ the implication is that we will in fact find thematic borders in every text. If this is so, a poetics of the border must be implicated in every poetics.

Narrative Description and Poetic Imagination

My Son's Story is the first novel Gordimer wrote with "non-white" protagonists, a strategic move, which may be lauded for its truly novelistic daring or criticized for its political presumption. As such, the novel has received a mixed reception; it dives right in to the heart of the problem of the representation of the underprivileged, so central to the debate carried on within post-colonialist theory and grounded perhaps most firmly there by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak 1988). The novel shares this problem of representation with the rest of Gordimer's work: whether the protagonists are "white" or "black" or "coloured" (or "coloured women"), these texts are all written to a great extent according to the models of realism, albeit nominally threatened (as it often is) by narrative ambiguity, by ironic intertextuality and metafictionality,⁶ or, as I shall be examining here, by the poetic.⁷ Kathryn Wagner points to the way Gordimer's writing has been received inside and outside of South Africa (Wagner 1994, 1–6). Outside South Africa, Gordimer has been valued partly because she provides needed information of how it is to live in South Africa. Inside South Africa, the reception has, however, been luke-warm; Gordimer has been criticized for trading in clichés and stereotypes (which are, of

⁴ Louvel also sees the text as crisscrossed by generic boundaries, when she talks of the text "continually" alternating between genres (Louvel 1992, 32). For the question of represented borders/textual borders, see also Bhabha 1992; Möller 1999, 169–170.

⁵ For the concept of hybrid chronotopes, see Kudrjavitseva 2000.

⁶ Cf. Chanda 1992, 69–70; Jacobs 1993; King 1993; Ettin 1993, 46, 53. Metafictionality and intertextuality are, however, not always read as threatening realism; see Head 1994, chapter 5.

⁷ Cf. Ettin 1993, 60, 65; Temple-Thurston 1999, 127.

course, the tools of the trade of a properly Lukácsian realism).⁸

Since twentieth-century realism does not belong to the realist period proper, one can confidently call it a style, or a convention, or indeed a genre. (The claim can be made that in historical terms, modes or styles or themes are always becoming genres, while genres are always becoming modes or styles or themes, in an endless complication of new oppositions, borders, and alternations.) If we accept that *My Son's Story* is written in a realist mode, we may freely call *My Son's Story* "a realist novel", and thus group it with other works belonging to the genre or sub-genre of "the realist novel". We can even (perhaps slightly more cheekily) discover a genre called "the Gordimerian realist novel", a form of realism especially intended to represent the sort of society of which South Africa is a unique example. *My Son's Story* is not only a place in which to find genre borders; it also constitutes (along with other texts) a special kind of "border genre", adequate in this case to the borders of apartheid.⁹

Thus, I return to Moretti and his discussion of genres and spaces—and indeed of genres and borders. The discussion takes place within a larger discussion of Benedict Anderson's claim that the "old-fashioned" (=realist) novel is the most suitable literary form for representing the nation (Anderson 1991, 25–32). Moretti takes Anderson's lead and subjects it to a wider variety of literary material; especially the historical

novel, but one can imagine him continuing on to a discussion of authors like Nadine Gordimer in extension of his argument. South Africa has passed through spatial and temporal arrangements very different from Anderson's homogeneous and synchronic horizontal solidarity of the modern nation. The events described in *My Son's Story* and most of Gordimer's work before the ending of apartheid are set in a period with radically different and competing national projects, one of which—the resistance to the apartheid regime—may be called proto-nationalist, identifying with a state to come. The political futurity this struggle involves might be expected to produce imaginative, utopian, almost science-fictional novels rather than the realist novel of the safely-established Andersonian nation. Indeed, within "Gordimerian realism" we do find a utopian and also a dystopian vein, the utopian also surfacing in *My Son's Story*, creating utopian genre zones in the novel. Gordimer's work is run through by internal genre borders between the realist and the utopian novel.

This opposition between realism (depiction) and utopia (fantasizing) runs parallel to a general modal polarity in her work: that between the real and the imaginary, between reflective mimesis and creative poesis. Or between—in the context of this kind of novel—prose and poetry. Reading Gordimer, one may be struck by her precise, economic prose—what Bruce King calls her "increasingly elliptical conciseness" (King 1993, 2)—only to suddenly stand face to face with an almost anomalous outbreak of metaphorical language and figurality, or cross one's own shadow in one of her symbolic and ironic repetitions. The text may be

⁸ For this kind of criticism of *My Son's Story* also from non-South-African perspectives, see the overview in Möller 1999, 61.

⁹ Cf. Engle 1989, 115; Jacobs 1990; Pechey 1998, 63.

mapped in terms of a net of poetic islands in a sea of prose; it is thus continually crossed and recrossed by the genre border between the epic and the lyric, between narrative description and poetic imagination.

Returning here to the question of borders and genre, Moretti comes in handy a third time, with the observation that "[n]ear the border, figurality goes up" (Moretti 1988, 45). This is an observation based on empirical material, especially Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), but theoretical explanations are hinted at to do with the cognitive and emotional function of metaphors (which Moretti takes as standing for figurality in general). Border figurality is a way of dealing with "the emotional impact with an unknown reality"; metaphors "simultaneously *express* the unknown we must face, and yet also contain it" (Moretti 1988, 45, 47). He also tries to explain why poetic language is a marginal phenomenon in novels (if one allows oneself to read "metaphors" in the following quote as standing also for "poetic language"):

This is why metaphors are so frequent near the border, then—and so infrequent, by contrast, once the latter is passed. Beyond the border, they are no longer dispensable: they can be replaced by analytical, 'appropriate' predicates. And since most novels spend most of their time inside this or that space, rather than on the border between them, it becomes equally clear why metaphors play in novels such a marginal role. (Moretti 1988, 47)

My Son's Story is, of course, a novel which runs against this tendency by reaffirming the figural—perhaps precisely because it deals with a space crisscrossed by the borders of apartheid. And the connection

between the borders of apartheid and figural or poetic language—poetic in the context of this realist novel—is striking. The veld—empty scrubland—which divides the zoned communities of the Johannesburg area becomes a central symbol of the novel, for it is here Sonny finds the skeleton of a fledgling which he suggests his children can take home and wire back together (38). The dead bird and the burnt-out veld resonate through the novel, culminating in the final images of the burned-down house, the phoenix, and the bird poem.

Dividing the Novel with Borders

Closer examination of the various kinds of borders thematized in the novel provide, however, alternatives to Moretti's explanation. I do not have the space here to examine all the borders described or hinted at in the course of the novel. Suffice it to say that there are many, and that the novel is divided into several parts according to the character of the borders mentioned.

The early part of the narrative is dominated by the confining spatial borders of apartheid.¹⁰ The boundaries around the "white" town are compared to the territorial markings of "some lordly wild animal" (12) and to the walls of Kafka's castle or his gates of the law (17), and Will figures the blondness of his father's "white" lover Hannah as an infection, transgressing the borders of the "black" or "coloured" body

¹⁰ Approximately the first four chapters, up to the scene where Sonny finds the dead bird and the family moves out of Benoni and into a "white" area.

and of a racialized community. In each case, however, the figurality involved is strangely self-reflecting or over-determined. The people who come into the "white" town on Saturdays always recognize the "scent of immutable authority" (12); that is to say that they are not only subjected to this authority, but that they also know about it, repeat it to themselves, because they are temporarily allowed to cross the borders of its territory, put in place by its authority. The parallel to Kafka is accompanied by an explicit, metaliterary statement about such metaphoric relationships: "Kafka named what he had no names for" (17). Elsewhere, the border is not described by specific metaphors, but simply as somehow magical: "I mean, my father made of the circumscription of our life within the areas open to us a charmed circle" (20). Will associates the Saturday trips into town with the comics his father Sonny buys for him and his sister Baby: "publications from England with stories of brave fighter pilots and King Arthur's Round Table, for me, and romantic fables retold in pictures for my sister" (20). Hannah's blondness, on the other hand, he associates with sexual fantasies: "The wet dreams I have, a schoolboy who's never slept with a women, are blonde" (14).

The focus of figurality in these examples is not necessarily the unknown that might be on the other side of the border, but rather the border itself as unknown. The examples also potentially allow for the use of psychoanalytical theory and theories of ideology. Psychoanalytical theory suggests that the border must have an imaginary dimension, and as Lars Engle writes, an uncanny or *Unheimlich* dimension (Engle 1989, 113–114), while ideological analysis

reveals the implicit acceptance of the border as so much ideological gluing-together of the incommensurability of daily life. When the confining borders of apartheid are first introduced in the novel, the realist, mimetic and historical statement is that the sense of community for Sonny, his wife Aila, and their family is a doubling surmounting of the confines of apartheid:

[...] the community to which they were confined, to which they belonged because the law told them so, in the first place, and that to which the attachments and dependencies of daily life and the shared concerns that came from living within it, made them belong, of themselves. (9)

The boundaries of their community are first defined by the law, but then by the community so formed itself. Finally, I want to add that the examples also cite in various ways *genres*: the Kafkaesque, the romance, and the fantasy. The poetic glides into the fantastic, the marvellous, and the uncanny.

As I have said, the islands of figural language in the novel deserve more attention, especially in the way in which they are bordered off from the rest of the text. I will not be examining here the last half of the novel, which is less concerned with the internal boundaries of apartheid than with the external borders of the South African state—as all the characters besides the narrator Will eventually go into exile (or at least visit others in exile). Thus, I also neglect the interesting question of why these borders show less signs of figural language. I will, however, examine the final chapter of the novel, in which it is revealed that Will is the author—the fictional author—of the novel, and not just the narrator of those sections of the novel which are put in the first

person. Without this last chapter, it would be impossible to tell that Will is also the author and narrator of the third-person narratives in the novel, delegating his point of view vertically to characters such as Sonny.

The Imaginary Act of Fiction

If we engage with *My Son's Story* as a symbolic act within the field of genres, the final chapter brings together several concerns: partial resistance to modernism (cf. King 1993; Ettin 1993, 19) and to the dissolution of genres in an essential literariness; the problem of the representation of the other; the possibility of fiction in a society in which fiction must be political because the political often seems so fictional. The genres involved in this symbolic act include not only those of poetry and the novel, but also the novel and the extraliterary genre of history writing. This is an opposition often called upon in discussions of Gordimer's fiction, and indeed in Will's naming as two influences his father's "Gramsci or his Kafka" (151), signifying the political and the literary, the historical and the fictional.¹¹ For the moment, poetry becomes solidaric with novelistic fiction, not standing in opposition as it has before in this analysis. In the final chapter of the novel, both fiction and poetry are connected to the imagination: fiction in the sense of imagining other people in a story; poetry in the sense of evoking the imaginary. In this interpretation, poetry works hand-in-hand with fiction to prevent

My Son's Story from becoming simply the history of the struggle against apartheid. Significantly—to return to the border theme—this happens at the end of the novel, in a chapter which both leads up to the final textual border of the novel, and in a sense comes after the final border of the story in that novel. It constitutes an uneasy border zone, both part of the book and an explanation of the book—both inside and outside. This unease spreads to the whole book, as the last chapter allows the book to change its narrative and generic status (cf. Ettin 1993, 137; Möller 1999, 166).

Within this border zone, *poetic* language comes to a height—as Moretti claims it must in the vicinity of a border, though this time a textual border—with its inclusion of Will's short text about the bird, easily interpretable in its symbolic lyrical language as a national allegory (cf. Möller 1999, 168). The symbolic or figural language spread throughout the rest of the novel reveals itself here as poetic in a direct way, with the separation from the main text by empty lines, and the use of italics and an irregular right-hand margin throughout what must be called a poem. Within the fiction it is an independent text, and the reader realizes that Will is, in fact, giving us two texts: that of the novel and that of the poem. The last chapter can thus also be seen as inverting the relationship between the novelistic and the poetic, making the novelistic marginal to the poem. Instead of a sea of narrative dotted with islands of poetry, perhaps we are surveying lakes of poetry surrounded by narrative landscapes. But the allegorical potential of this poem-novel suggests that the poetic may be realigned with history. This is indeed the main argument of Homi

¹¹ For history/literature, see Jacobs 1993; political novel/*Bildungsroman*, see Louvel 1992, 32; politics/writing, see Clingman 1992, xxxiv; historical process/epic width, see Kreimeier 1991, 153.

K. Bhabha's lecture on *My Son's Story*, where the aesthetic—or literature with “its imagistic impulse, its tropic topos, its metaphoric medium, its allegorical voice”—becomes the “grounds of historical re-cognition” (Bhabha 1992, 146, 143).¹² It also confirms Stephen Clingman's claim that the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are crossed also on the symbolic or allegorical level of Gordimer's texts (Clingman 1993).

My argument concerning *fiction* in this final chapter is based in the narrative. The author and narrator Will has been deceived by his father Sonny and by the rest of his family, concerning their private lives. This deception is symbolized by the walls of their new home in the “white” area: the introduction of boundaries of individual privacy. It is thus these complicated, hybrid walls, walls of deception, which make Will into a writer of an impossible literature: “I am a writer and this is my first book—that I can never publish” (277). These walls are also the walls between family members: Will imagines Sonny “breathing in the next room in the house that's burned down” (276). His act of writing is that of representing their lives partly by making them up: “I've made up what I wasn't there to experience myself” (275). The basic mode of crossing the fictional boundaries between people is that of making-up, of imagination, of *poiesis*. Gordimer thus constructs Will as a model of her own attempt to represent other people, in her case attempting to let the subaltern speak through her fiction, so to speak (cf. Head 1994, 159). The symbolic

act of the last chapter, as concerns the problem of representing the other, is thus to allow Will to justify what Susan Lanser has presented at the conference “Problems of Genre” in Göteborg 2001, as the central narrative act of *clothing*.¹³ Nadine Gordimer's controversial strategy in *My Son's Story* is precisely one of cross-dressing and of “passing”—that is, the passing oneself off as one of another “race” or “colour”. But Gordimer also takes on these problems by giving a new turn to the concept of deception, which she has introduced as an explanation of Will's will to write fiction. Will writes:

I've imagined, out of their deception, the frustration of my absence, the pain of feeling and knowing them too well, what others would be doing, saying and feeling in the gaps between my witness. (276)

But what this metapoetical statement paradoxically signals is that imagination is not just learnt *from* deception, but is also a reaction *against* deception. In Gordimer's case, it has been argued that her urge to write fiction is also a product of family deception,¹⁴ but I would argue that it is also a product of the lies and deceptions of apartheid.¹⁵

¹² See also the more concentrated version published as an introduction to *The Location of Culture*; Bhabha 1994, 1–18.

¹³ See Lanser above in this volume.

¹⁴ See Ettin 1993, 37–38; Weinhouse 1993, 69.

¹⁵ For other views on lying and fiction in *My Son's Story*, see Weinhouse 1993; Möller 1999, 166. I would like to thank Homi K. Bhabha for introducing me to *My Son's Story*, successive generations of students in Oslo and Tromsø for discussing the book with me, and the *Institutt- og forskerforum* at the Department of Comparative Literature in Tromsø for closer discussions.

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