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Empathy and Irony in "Keeping Fit" by Nadine Gordimer

Abstract I: Questo saggio offre un'analisi testuale di "Keeping Fit", racconto pubblicato nel 1991 in *Jump and Other Stories*, quando in Sudafrica era stato abolito il regime dell'apartheid ma non era stata ancora introdotta la democrazia. "Keeping Fit" è a mio avviso uno dei racconti più ironici e 'polarizzati' della raccolta. Ritengo che il racconto sfidi i contrasti che mette in campo, attraverso la dissoluzione ironica e carnevalesca delle differenze, evocando al tempo stesso un forte senso del perturbante, che destabilizza gli steccati e le divisioni su cui è costruita la storia. La protagonista nera è presentata come amorevole e capace di empatia, mentre la coppia bianca è descritta come egoista e indifferente; eppure, il finale aperto suggerisce, con ironia, la possibilità di un cambiamento e rinnovamento.

Abstract II: This essay proposes a close textual analysis of "Keeping Fit", a story published in 1991 in *Jump and Other Stories* at a time when South Africa was in a post-apartheid but pre-democratic situation. "Keeping Fit" is arguably one of the most polarised and ironic short stories in the volume. I suggest that the story challenges the polarisations that it installs by bringing about an ironic and carnivalesque dissolution of boundaries while conjuring up a strong sense of the uncanny, which destabilizes its own partitions and differences. While the black protagonist is presented as empathetic and caring, the white couple is described as selfish and indifferent, yet the open ending ironically suggests the possibility of change and renewal.

From the perspective of social neuro-science, empathy refers to "the capacity to understand and respond to the unique affective experiences of another person" (Decety & Philip 2006: 54). However, a large consensus has developed around empathy as a complex socio-emotional competency that encompasses more than a single ability. It has at least two interacting components: an affective response, which often entails sharing another's emotions; and a cognitive capacity to take the perspective of others. Both may play a role in the processes involved in coping (Sun *et al.* 2019). In point of fact, empathy has long been considered a contributor to positive social interactions, such as developing affective bonds and understanding, and promoting caring actions between people (Sun *et al.* 2019: 3).

The possibility for empathy to promote caring actions between people as opposed to selfishness leading to asphyxia is remarkably illustrated in Nadine Gordimer's life and works, if only because of the definition she herself provided for the act of literary creation.

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She suggested that literature should hinge upon "relevance and commitment"[1] and she made it her lifelong task to dedicate herself to the fight against apartheid through the unrelenting production of essays, conferences, novels or short stories (Clingman). An outstandingly productive writer, she contributed fifteen novels and sixteen volumes of short stories. In this paper, I will concentrate on one short story only from the volume entitled *Jump and Other Stories* published in 1991 in a country that Johan Jacobs described as "a post-apartheid but pre-democratic South Africa", between Nelson Mandela's release from prison and his election as President of South Africa (Jacobs 2001: 199).

Entitled "Keeping Fit", the story features a white man of high socio-economic status who goes jogging on a Sunday morning and finds himself involuntarily embroiled in hot pursuit, assault and homicide. He witnesses a man savagely killed by a crowd and is himself rescued from a similar fate by a caring black woman of low socio-economic status who extends her arm out of her barrack in a squatter camp and draws the man in to provide him with invisibility and safety. When the jogger returns home, he finds himself confronted to a domestic problem that is left unresolved at the end of the story. A baby bird is stifling in the drainpipe of his house and if he does not climb on a ladder and extend his arm to rescue the bird in the same way he himself was rescued, no one else will do it in his place.

"Keeping Fit" is arguably one of the most polarised and ironic short stories in the volume. By irony I do not designate the conventionally accepted definition, "saying one thing but meaning another", but I rather suggest the definition provided by William New: irony as saying at least two things at the same time, a process he calls "oversetting": "For irony often means saying what you mean at a slant, or saying two things at once-oversetting: so that a reader might hear (through the performance of a given set of words) not only their split levels of implication but also the divergent relation between an apparent surface intent and an often political undertow" (New 2004: 6).

"'Voice - writes the poet Lisa Robertson - is a hybrid of the sonic and the political'. This blur between *saying* and *meaning* creates a sort of rhetorical diversion, a pause while meaning and function can be figured out; and often the figuring out occurs in an act of recognition (or, as D. J. Enright has it 'reverberation') rather than an act of explanation" (New 2004: 6).

Gordimer uses polarisation as oversetting. She pits one situation against another for the reader to recognize the reverberation of one event upon the other. There is a spatial and socio-economic polarisation between the affluent white upper middle-class suburb, Alicewood, where the protagonist lives and the shanty town where he finds a refuge. There is an axiological polarisation between the ethics of care as embodied by the black woman and the indifference or absence of commitment as represented by the upper middle-class jogger and his wife. More importantly there is a biological polarisation between breathing and asphyxia, between keeping fit and stifling, between the feast of life and the agony of death as diversely represented by the pumping heart of the white man jogging down the road on a Sunday morning and the bleeding corpse of the black man killed on the tarmac, or the baby

[1] "Relevance and Commitment" was the title of a lecture given by Nadine Gordimer at a conference entitled "The State of Art in South Africa" at the University of Cape Town in 1979. It has been anthologised in a volume edited by Stephen Clingman in 1988.

bird stifling in the drain pipe. There is even a sonic polarisation between the cockcrow at dawn on the other side of the fence in shantytown and the faint high-pitched sound of the trapped baby bird in the protagonist's home. Despite these apparently strongly enforced binaries, I would like to suggest that the story challenges the polarisations that it installs by bringing about an ironic and carnivalesque dissolution of boundaries while conjuring up a strong sense of the uncanny, which destabilises its own partitions and differences.

The first space we encounter is that of the affluent home of the white protagonist, which he leaves in the early morning hours to go jogging and which is repeatedly presented as one among many of the exact similar affluence and comfort. The bedroom is described more precisely in the last pages of the story with its lilac patterned blue silk curtains undulating with the breeze, the dressing table with the painted porcelain hand where the wife's necklaces and ear-rings are hanging, a red rose tripled in the angle of mirrors. This elegant, decorous setting stands in sharp contrast with the shack where the jogger finds protection from the crowd; the shack in which a family of seven black people are squatting is described as a place where rain pours in and where you have to stuff around the tin with plastic to try to keep it dry. The opulence of the former is pitted against the crowded deprivation of the latter. The two settings are in fact diametrically opposed, they are exactly poles apart, and yet they are presented in such a way that symmetry defeats alterity. Take the blue silk curtains of the master bedroom and compare them with the sleeping arrangement in the shack where there is no such thing as a private bedroom for the parents and no display of an open wardrobe with ties dangling thick on a rack. However, the bed is curtained: "the bed curtained for some attempt at the altar of privacy" (Gordimer 1992: 240). The use of the word altar in the shack ties in with the sacramental use of the color blue in the master bedroom. More strikingly, the protagonist is said to leave his wife still asleep in their bed "as if he has left his body in its shape impressed beside her and moved out of himself on silent running shoes" (Gordimer 1992: 230). His early morning departure is disquietingly compared with a near-death experience of a man leaving his body with the help of silent running shoes. This image is picked up again when he enters the shack: it is said that the intimacy of the habitation "presses around him, a mould in which his own dimension was redefined" (Gordimer 1992: 235). The metaphor of the mould used to define the shack implies a process of duplication between an original form and its actual imprint, which erases the difference between house and body.

The world of the other that Gordimer makes his protagonist enter is an uncanny universe, which obliterates frontiers between the animate and the inanimate, the organic and the inorganic, the human subjects and the objects around them. Consider for instance the description of the moment when the protagonist is saved by the black woman. She appears out of her shack, and tells him to get inside: "A firm grip, a big butterscotch-coloured upper arm in a tight filled sleeve, yellow and pink flowered" (Gordimer 1992: 233-234). The woman's help is literally presented as the hand of providence: her arm seems to be detached from her body and to exist on its own as a spare part. As such, the black woman's arm is diametrically pitted against the description of the painted porcelain hand, which stands on the dressing table of the white protagonist's wife and where her necklaces are hanging.

The white woman is metonymically associated with the fragility and coldness of porcelain, while the black woman is metonymically associated with the sweetness and goodness of butterscotch. Porcelain is a hard but delicate shiny white substance made by heating a special type of clay to a high temperature; it is pitted against butterscotch, a hard, light-brown colored, sweet food made by boiling butter and sugar together. The symmetry of the metonymic associations simultaneously reinforces the similarities and the differences, the alterity and the sameness between the two women.

They also perform an uncanny dissolution of boundaries that is to be encountered throughout the story. For instance when the furious crowd is running to catch up their prey, the narrator says that the stink of adrenaline sweat was coming from the furnace within them" (Gordimer 1992: 232), thus providing the reader with a disquieting image which eliminates the crowd's odorous humanity and replaces it with industrial combustion. This process of transformation of the organic into the inorganic is reflexive in the sense that inorganic material is sometimes described with organic attributes, so that the inanimate becomes animate. Take the tarmac on which the man is running: it is described with the help of a hypallage as "the exhausted tarmac" (Gordimer 1992: 230) as if it was not only overused and damaged but also suffering from human fatigue. This description of the exhausted tarmac resonates with the description of the black woman's body which is similarly described as a "big used body" but it suffers a supplementary process of transformation. The tarmac is focalised at close range at the moment when the victim of the chase is bled to death: "on the oil stains of the tarmac blood was superimposing another spill" (Gordimer 1992: 233). The sedimentation that is described here is particularly macabre and disquieting because it mixes together the old waste oil from motorcars and the recently shed human blood of the victim, as if blood were sand or stones, that eventually formed a layer of rock superimposed over the tarmac.

The reflexive transformation of inanimate into animate and of animate into inanimate is also present when the protagonist scrutinises detritus and litter piling up in shanty town. A discarded car is then described as "the scabby body […] like the eviscerated shell of a giant beetle" (Gordimer 1992: 233).

The dissolution of frontiers between the living and the dead, human and animal is everywhere to be found in shantytown: when the protagonist flees down among the shacks, he sees bare-arsed children squatting to pee who "jumped up and bounded from him like rats" (Gordimer 1992: 233). The man pursued by the enraged crowd and stabbed to death is described as a body who "writhed away like a chopped worm" (Gordimer 1992: 233). Not only is there an elimination of frontiers between the human and the animal, but we are also confronted with the abjection of indeterminate states. The eviscerated car and the chopped victim inhabit an uncertain region in which they are deprived of ontological specificity; the car is a supernatural being, which continues to exist although it no longer functions as a car, and the man's body is chopped up as if it were food destined to a ritual feast.

One of the weapons that has been used to kill the man is a club the size of which is compared to a child's head: "the man went down under chants and the blows of a club with a gnarled knob as big as a child's head" (Gordimer 1992: 233). There is something profound-

ly uncanny in this description of the instrument of death, which superimposes over the inanimate stick, the image of a child's head. According to Jentsch, a state of undecidability is the essential element in rendering an entity uncanny to the observer who "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate" (Jentsch 1906, cit. Rahimi 2013: 459); Freud contested this definition of the uncanny and advanced his own. To him, the dark knowledge produced by the uncanny consisted of the realization that the 'familiar' body, which we were "previously used to regarding as a unified psyche," could so easily become an alien 'unfamiliar' object devoid of understandable meaning and lacking unitary cohesion (Freud 1919, cit. Rahimi 2013: 459).

In keeping with Freud's definition of the uncanny, the description that Gordimer provides of the victim's body transforms him into an alien unfamiliar object in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which recurs. The dead body bleeding on the tarmac is indeed a tar-mac. Tar is a black substance, sticky when hot, used especially for making roads and mac is an informal use when speaking to a man whose name you do not know as in "Hey, Mac". In Gordimer's story, the man under hot pursuit has been eliminated but he returns, not as ashes, but as tar. This is a tale full of sound and fury in which the horrific dimension stems from the uncanny specter of not-being. There is a profoundly tragic dimension to the description of the senseless violence which has led to this homicide but there is also at the same time, within the very tragedy which is depicted, a vision of extremity which is very close to the carnivalesque.

This is suggested by Gordimer herself when describing the chase in which the protagonist finds himself embroiled: "he who had blundered into the chase was whirled along as if caught up by some carnival crowd in which this time the presence of death was not fancy dress" (Gordimer 1992: 232). The chase in Gordimer's story is presented as part of the ritual of carnival if only because it turns into a social leveler. It brings together people of all echelons of society who in real life are irreducibly separated. Without this chase, the white protagonist would never have entered the black people's shack and would never have witnessed at close quarters the misery and deprivation of their habitation. There is also a process of crowning and de-crowning that occurs during this episode. The wealthy man in brokerage who sleeps in a bedroom with blue silk curtains is made to stoop into the tin shack and sit in the single sagging armchair it contains, while the woman with the butterscotch arm is elevated to the status of a saintly rescuer.

However, the gruesome butchering which ends up the chase is a far cry from the spirit of rejoicing attendant upon the carnivalesque and cannot be regarded as its modern or South African version if only because it is no make-believe ritual enactment. It is a horrendous slaying, an assassination which is knowingly and savagely performed without any hint at the possibility of redemption for those who indulged in the act. A carnival is a time of destruction and rebirth, the festival of all-annihilating and all-renewing time, a devastation that has as its counterpoint renewal, it is marked by comedy and laughter. The hot pursuit of the finally butchered victim is no carnival-like degradation; it is a story of Kristevan abjection which does not appear to be concerned with regeneration.

It makes the reader hear the pre-linguistic yawls of animals; the narrator says of the

chasing crowd that "they were bellowing in a language he didn't need to understand in order to understand" (Gordimer 1992: 232). Although the white protagonist veered off into the near-by shack and did not participate in the slaying of the victim, he seems to be part of the fray because of the words which describe his activity. The text begins with a description of his breathing efforts as he runs along and comes to his second wind. The first word of the text is "Breathe", which is repeated under different guises: "breath", "to breathe", "breathless" and the plosive sound of the first letter keeps exploding throughout the first sentence: "Breathe. Breath. A baby, a chicken hatching-the first imperative is to breathe" (Gordimer 1992: 229).

The basic plosives in English are t, k, and p (which are voiceless) and d, g, and b (which are voiced). What we have in this first sentence is the voiced plosive [b] and the voiceless plosives [p] and [t]. Posited together at the very opening of the text they function as a sonic warning. They constitute a stop, also known as a *plosive* or oral occlusive, because they are consonants in which the vocal tract is blocked so that all airflow ceases. The occlusion may be made with the tongue blade ([t], [d]) or body ([k], [g]), lips ([p], [*b*]), or glottis ([?]). The plosive speech sound produced in this opening are made with the tongue blade and the lips. They already embroil the protagonist in the major polarisations of the text, the biological polarisation between life and death. While they seem to mimic the sounds of birth, they already hint at the bellowing, which precedes the slaying of the victim as performed by the enraged crowd. They anticipate the white protagonist's own fury against his wife when he discovers at the very end of the story that a baby bird is stuck in the drainpipe and that no one in his household is doing anything to rescue the bird: "He jumped from the bed and burst through the house, going after her, bellowing, his hands palsied with rage. – Get the bloody thing out, can't you!" (Gordimer 1992: 242-243).

By opening the story with the bellows of the man's heart and closing it with his bellowing against his wife, Gordimer definitely allows his white protagonist to become complicit with the bellowing crowd. The man and the crowd are positioned in the Kristevan semiotic, and make the reader hear the pre-linguistic pulses of animal fury and unbound mania. Gordimer situates her white protagonists in an ambiguous region. As opposed to the selflessness and generosity of the black woman with the butterscotch arm, the white broker demonstrates selfishness. He does not play the part of the Good Samaritan. He does not mean to get on a ladder and rescue the stifling baby bird yet he wants it to be rescued and resents his wife's indifference to its plight. The wife pretends empathy but does not care about its death: "So, what's to be done about it? Can't exactly call the fire brigade. Poor little thing. Just wait for it to die" (Gordimer 1992: 242).

The wife is indifferent to the bird's suffering and does not mind its stifling inside her own drainpipe. She displays no strategy of active coping. The man is disturbed by its faint cries but wants someone else to deal with the problem so that he can find peace after his eventful morning run. Through the story of the stifling baby bird stuck in the drainpipe, Gordimer is writing an ironic fable about the white couple's selfishness, maladaptive coping and behavioral disengagement as opposed to the black good Samaritan who risked her own safety and that of her family to provide hospitality for the endangered jogger.

Gordimer is also writing a political and spiritual allegory in which she ironically denounces the absence of political commitment in the white population *vis-à-vis* the plight of the blacks during apartheid. She denounces the white population's carelessness and their lack of concern but she also denounces their sloth, their wrath, and their pride as opposed to the charity, faith, hope and prudence of the black woman with the butterscotch arm. In other words, she pits the spiritual sins of the former against the theological and cardinal virtues of the latter. The black woman is animated by a Christian philosophy of love that is in stark contrast with the neglectful and selfish behavior of the white couple. She is not simply an embodiment of *caritas*, she commands the respect of her family and of the white man because her behavior is adapted, appropriate, and effective. Under the circumstances, and given the title of the story, it may very well be that Gordimer requires her reader to try and question the concept of fitness.

The title of the story "Keeping Fit" is a reference to the condition of being physically strong and healthy and the necessity for human beings to try and retain that condition as long as possible, but "fit" is a polysemic word which also refers to suitability, that is to say the appropriateness of a conduct or of a person. The suitability of the black woman's conduct is exemplary but the white couple's behavior in front of the domestic problem of the bird stuck in the drainpipe is very much in question. Gordimer seems to be very ironically asking: who is the misfit? Who is using a maladaptive coping strategy? Is it the black family in their shack at the periphery of Alicewood or it is the white couple who refuse to take responsibility for what is taking place in their drainpipe or the vicinity of their well-appointed home? She seems to be challenging the white population with the last sentence of the text. The wife suggests that her husband should put up a ladder against the wall, and that he should climb up to try and dislodge the baby bird from the mistaken habitat that he has fallen into. Her injunction falls into the rhythm of a periodic aggrandisement: "Do it then! *You* do it. Do it if you can. You're so athletic" (Gordimer 1992: 243). In addition to the threefold repetition of the verb "do" with its plosive consonant which echoes those of the opening lines of the story, "breathe", "breath", "to breathe", we find an italicised interpellation, a challenge and the polysemy of the word "athlete". It is derived from the greek "Athlon" meaning prize or prizefighter. The wife is jealous of the activities that her husband indulges in on his own, and resents his taking time away from his family, so she alludes to his fitness to convince him to rescue the dying bird. She wants him to prize the baby bird out of the drainpipe because he is such a prizefighter. But the story finishes on the injunction without providing the reader with a definite solution. The ending is open and it is precisely this open-endedness that liberates the text from the rigidity of the polarisations it has installed. With this final, domestic, quarrel which highlights the selfishness of both white protagonists, Gordimer returns to the carnivalesque atmosphere of the beginning of the chase. With the woman's de-crowning of her husband and his possible crowning as a bird rescuer, the finale opens the way for a potentially regenerative conclusion. Should the broker actually climb on top of the ladder and bring the baby bird back to the world of the living, he will prove his moral adequacy and physical fitness. Should he refuse to climb the ladder, he will demonstrate a paralysis of the will, which will expose not only the couple, but white society in South Africa as devoid of the possibility of moral and political renewal.

Gordimer does not finish her story on the radiance of an epiphanic moment that captures a shift of authorities and truths. She does not force the moment to its empathetic resolution, she remains in an ironic and disquieting inconclusiveness, in a locus of unactualised possibilities, where barriers might eventually be removed[2], and paralysis and asphyxia transformed into living breath and appropriate renewal.

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[2] Apartheid came to an end in the early 1990s in a series of steps that led to the formation of a democratic government in 1994, with Nelson Mandela elected President of South Africa.