Writing after the “poor little bomb”:

Fictionality and sabotage in Nadine Gordimer’s *The Late Bourgeois World*

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South Africa’s Nobel laureates in literature, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee, are frequently discussed together but not always in ways that cast the most helpful light on their work. Their well-publicized differences tend to obscure what they share, as novelists who by virtue of their origins and formations are invested in European intellectual traditions, but who have tested themselves to the utmost in making the contemporary novel responsive to the uniquely difficult conditions of South Africa under apartheid. It did not help the situation that they wrote about each other, always respectfully but not withholding judgement about the other’s aesthetic and ethical attachments.

Generally it is Coetzee who benefitted more from the situation because he has been able successfully to tack around the prevailing winds of the late twentieth century humanities academy, while Gordimer remained anchored to older, mid-century traditions of realism, existentialism, and *littérature engagée,* seeking out a middle ground between the claims of art and social conscience. Perhaps the time has come for a reassessment, not in the interests of recalibrating reputations, necessarily, but for more important reasons: first, because the theoretical affiliations that sustained the polarization have begun to exhaust themselves; second, because politics everywhere, including anti- and postcolonialism, are being reconfigured in the wake of populist regimes’ reaction to globalization; and third, because by now, enough time has past to allow for a more rounded picture.

Judging by a recent, powerful essay by Rita Barnard, “Locating Gordimer: Modernism, Postcolonialism, Realism,” the reassessment is well under way. Barnard starts with Gordimer’s famous review of Coetzee’s Booker Prize-winning Life & Times of Michael K (1983) in The New York Review of Books, which draws on György Lukács in arguing that the protagonist’s private accommodations and the work’s metafictional turns—its modernism, in fact—leaves it disconnected from the social world from which it derives its energies: “The organicism that [Lukács] defines as the integral relation between private and social destiny,” writes Gordimer, “is distorted here more than is allowed for by the subjectivity that is in every writer. The exclusion is a central one that may eat the heart out of the work’s unity of art and life.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Coetzee has responded to this over the years, in the dialogues of Doubling the Point (1992) and in essays that have probed Gordimer’s attachments within the history of the novel, particularly to Turgenev, but also to the modernists.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Noting that her control over the philosophical discourse in which she discusses the tension between “private and social destiny” is “at best uncertain,” Coetzee observes that Gordimer has no coherent theory of the novel; instead, what she develops is a theory of the *novelist*.[[3]](#endnote-3) Her view of the novelist as someone imbued with special talents to probe beneath the surface of society and bring out its truths strikes Coetzee as old-fashioned, but he is more concerned to point out that at the heart of Gordimer’s position is a contradiction between her attachment to “the aestheticist, antinaturalist wing of European realism and early Modernism,” and the Marxist critics “Lukács, Ernst Fischer, Sartre, with Camus as a counterweight”.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The insightful move Barnard makes in revisiting this ground is to argue that Coetzee misses the profoundly creative aspect to this tension in Gordimer: “far from being debilitating,” she argues, it “is the wellspring of the productive energies of Gordimer’s long career and her attempts to reconcile the tensions are compelling—and often successful.” Gordimer may not have been the nimble theorist, but she developed the resources for her writing from mid- and late-nineteenth century realism, and from modernism up to and including Beckett, with which to explore symbolically the undercurrents of her society, burdened as it was (and remains) by a colonial past that constantly ruptures through the surface of the present. In this respect, Gordimer herself drew no clear distinction between the modernists she admired and the Marxists from whom she accepted a necessary provocation. Citing The Conservationist (1974), which she calls “a daring, quasi-theoretical experiment,” Barnard points to the ways in which it draws attention to “hidden and emerging historical forces” beneath its realist fictional surface; in these terms, Gordimer’s entire oeuvre, Barnard concludes, “constitutes one of the most powerful examples we have of what might be called a situated postcolonial modernism.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

It is interesting that Coetzee should refer to Camus as a “counterweight” to Gordimer’s canon of Marxist critics, Lukács, Fischer, and Sartre. He recognizes here that Gordimer was not wholly able to give herself over to instrumentalist versions of the novelist’s craft. As we shall see, Camus plays a significant role early on in enabling Gordimer to establish a mode of address that brings out the kind of angularity that she desired—“a writer’s freedom” being one of the formulations she kept coming back to. The novel I am referring to here as exemplifying the influence of Camus is her work of 1966, The Late Bourgeois World, a text Barnard doesn’t discuss but which does much to confirm and extend her analysis.[[6]](#endnote-6) It is to this powerful, explosive novel that I turn in this essay in order to show how Gordimer’s realism, which kept her rooted in South African reality, and her modernism, which as she once remarked (referring to the influence of Kafka), kept her “falling, falling through the surface of ‘the South African way of life,’” could come together in uniquely productive ways.[[7]](#endnote-7) In order to tell this story in its most historically exacting form, I need to dwell on the social reality that Gordimer approaches in this text, a South Africa in which its most courageous and visionary activists, between 1960 and 1964, sought, then failed, to transform their world through non-lethal sabotage. In The Late Bourgeois World, Gordimer seeks the moral and aesthetic means to respond to this reality, in a leap of faith, or in more suitably secular terms, in an act of existential, ethical necessity.

Gordimer herself was unambiguous about the provocations behind the novel, describing it in an interview as “an attempt to look into the specific character of the social climate that produced the wave of young white saboteurs in 1963-4”.[[8]](#endnote-8) In her previous novels, A World of Strangers (1958) and Occasion for Loving (1963), she had already signaled a shift in her political outlook away from the multiracial pluralism that was typical of liberal opposition to apartheid in the 1950s, to an exploration of subjectivities and relationships shaped by the racially coded malformations of South Africa’s political economy. The Late Bourgeois World consolidated that shift; nevertheless, the comment about her new novel was surprisingly precise and topical.

The “wave of young white saboteurs” was the African Resistance Movement (ARM), which had been formed in April 1960 under a different name, the National Committee for Liberation (NCL), in prison-yard conversations among thirty-six anti-apartheid activists in detention at the Fort in Johannesburg during the Emergency that followed the Sharpeville massacre. When the founders were released the movement became a broad church, which was multiracial but with a majority of whites. Monty Berman, a key figure among the detainees, a World War 2 veteran and a Trotskyist, described it as including “the Liberals, the Padres, the Left Wing, the right Wing, the Middle Wing, the Side Wing and the Quarter Wing.”[[9]](#endnote-9) It included African nationalists disaffected from the ANC who had gravitated towards the African Freedom Movement, and the Trotskyists, some of whom had been members of the Socialist League; but the majority of its members were in fact liberals, especially in Durban and in Cape Town where leading activists had been student leaders and members of the Liberal Party, which was led nationally by the novelist Alan Paton. ARM members (including David Evans, who was Paton’s research assistant on a biography he was writing at the time) didn’t disclose their underground activity to the party because it eschewed unconstitutional methods.[[10]](#endnote-10)

As a collection of liberals and social democrats, the ARM was united not only by anti-apartheid conviction but also by anti-communism, with the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary in recent memory. Its anti-communism set it apart from Umkhonto we Sizwe, which had been founded by Nelson Mandela and his compatriots, because in addition to the ANC, to which the ARM was sympathetic, Umkhonto was allied to the South African Communist Party (SACP). The turn to armed revolt on the part of liberals is paradoxical to say the least, but part of the explanation would be a crisis of belonging that overtook the generations during and immediately after World War 2, who feared that the world citizenship that was their due was being stripped away by the sectarian, Afrikaner-oriented National Party which had come to power in 1948, many of whose adherents (including John Vorster, who became the key nemesis for ARM members as Minister of Justice in the mid-1960s) had supported Germany and National Socialism. The ARM was anti-fascist, too, in an era when a reversion to fascism was under way, and their models, in principle if not in practice, were the French Maquis and other European partisan movements of World War 2.[[11]](#endnote-11)

On 26th September 1961 the movement embarked on a sabotage campaign aimed at economic disruption. It was most successful in targeting railway signaling systems and electricity pylons, but there were planned or unsuccessful strikes at an FM radio mast, a dam, and a government garage. There was also an unlikely scheme to free Robert Sobukwe (leader of the banned Pan-Africanist Congress) from Robben Island. Despite observers and some members themselves saying in retrospect that their efforts were amateurish, they were no more so than any of the underground movements of the period. Bram Fischer, who led Mandela’s defence at the Rivonia Trial, himself an Oxford-educated Communist with a patrician Afrikaner background and who was later imprisoned himself, believed privately that Umkhonto’s M-Plan, which earned the defendants life imprisonment, was “an entirely unrealistic brainchild of some youthful and adventurous imagination.”[[12]](#endnote-12) (The fact that the M-Plan had not been implemented was in fact a cornerstone of the defence and a factor in the court’s decision not to impose the death penalty.) The ARM struck earlier and arguably, was more technically proficient than other movementsin the period from 1961 to 1963. In a memorandum probably written by Berman, it acknowledged Umkhonto’s political advantage but believed that it had “an undoubted initiative over the other organisations in the degree of its technical competence.”[[13]](#endnote-13) (The spirit in which the statement was made was that the ARM had specific strengths to contribute to a collective programme of resistance.) Until July 1964, ARM activity scrupulously avoided injury or loss of life, to a degree not followed by the other sabotage movements.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Already by 1963, however, serious doubts were being expressed by key figures about the efficacy of sabotage.[[15]](#endnote-15) During the Rivonia Trial, which began in that year, a moratorium was kept by Umkhonto and other movements, including the ARM, to avoid jeopardizing the defence. Once sentencing was over and the ANC leadership was sent to Robben Island, these doubts were set aside and the NCL saw itself stepping into the breach—this was when it renamed itself the ARM in a militant leaflet and embarked on a renewed campaign.[[16]](#endnote-16) Albie Sachs, who served as a defence attorney in an ARM trial, recalls this moment, writing, “one day in the press there appeared reports that electricity pylons had been toppled in various parts of the country. Six had fallen in one night; another one was to hit the ground two nights later”; people were angry or delighted “but everyone, including myself, wondered what organization had been responsible and what sort of people had had the daring to organize such activity at a time of such danger.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

It soon came to a disastrous end. During a countrywide crackdown on 4th July 1964 the security police detained a leading member of a Cape Town cell, Adrian Leftwich, who had made it his business to know more than he should have of the identities of fellow members in cells across the country. After a short interrogation during which he was beaten up, Leftwich began giving names. He later compounded his early capitulation by becoming a witness for the prosecution, betraying comrades he had recruited and in the precision of his evidence, ensuring that they were given prison sentences of up to fifteen years. With Leftwich known to be talking, activists not yet in detention went into hiding or fled the country while others remained at home or at their jobs, inert and uncertain.

In this climate of impending defeat, John Harris, acting alone, scaled up the risk of causing injury or death by placing an incendiary bomb in a suitcase with dynamite and petrol on the whites-only concourse of Johannesburg’s Park Station. He repeatedly phoned the press and authorities to have them clear the area but possibly too late for them to take action—it’s equally possible that he was deliberately ignored. There were a dozen or more injuries, the elderly Ethyl Rhys later dying from the complications and her granddaughter, Glynnis Burleigh, left severely burned. Harris was caught within hours and in the subsequent trial convicted of murder, despite the grounds of premeditation being in question. He was tried alone, sentenced to death, and hanged on 1 April 1965. The remaining ARM trials were conducted after Harris’s, in an atmosphere of morbidity. In a confessional essay written four decades later, Leftwich said that fear of the death sentence played a major part in his moral collapse.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Some fifty-nine people were active in the ARM over a period of four years but the actions of Leftwich and Harris in the final three weeks have left a disproportionately large shadow over its legacy, ensuring that a narrative that might have spoken of courage, principle and self-sacrifice would always be colored by miscalculation, betrayal and tragedy. Soon after its demise, Albie Sachs put the case positively, writing about the ARM as “bright people who in other countries would be in the Government, or writing plays or speaking out against the [nuclear] Bomb, but who in South Africa face the death sentence.”[[19]](#endnote-19) His account avoided the darker complexity of the betrayals and miscalculation, but the story soon attracted the attention of some of South Africa’s best-known writers apart from Gordimer. André Brink wrote three versions of a novel about the ARM, none of which was realized: his titles were Ninety Days (referring to the period defined by security legislation for detention without trial), The Saboteurs, and Back to the Sun.[[20]](#endnote-20) Brink said later that he was relieved that the novel never saw the light of day but it would be worth exploring whether the project was folded into later fictions.[[21]](#endnote-21) Athol Fugard produced his most experimental piece of theatre to that point: Orestes interpreted Harris’s bomb through the murder of Clytemnestra in Euripides’s Elektraand Aeschylus’s The Oresteia.[[22]](#endnote-22) C.J. (Jonty) Driver wrote Elegy for a Revolutionary and his subsequent four novels and much of his poetry were influenced by the events and his friendships with the people involved (as a student leader he was detained in solitary confinement and interrogated but he was not in the ARM). In life writing, a number of former members went on to publish autobiographies and prison memoirs: Hugh Lewin (Bandiet, 1974), Baruch Hirson (Revolutions in My Life, 1995), Eddie Daniels (There and Back, 2002), and Stephanie Kemp (Through an Unforgettable Storm, 2017). Hilary Claire’s autobiography, The Song Remembers When (2006), tells of her knife-edge escape by motor-bike into Botswana followed by years of exile. It would be fair to say that much of the cultural afterlife of the movement, especially the life-writing produced by former members themselves, but also a work like C. J. Driver’s The Man with the Suitcase: The Life, Execution and Rehabilitation of John Harris (2015), is a work of collective recovery from the diminished state of affairs when the ARM ended—the rise after the fall.

Gordimer’s and Driver’s novels make creative use of the events and people involved, most obviously by conflating Leftwich and Harris into a single composite figure. In Elegy, Jeremy betrays his comrades, tries to rehabilitate himself by bombing a police station, causes death and is executed; in The Late Bourgeois World, Max van den Sandt, also desperate to prove himself, tries to blow up a post office with sulphur, saltpeter and charcoal mixed in a tin. His “poor little bomb” is found before it explodes and he is arrested within twenty-four hours (LBW, 79). He turns State witness and three years later, looking back over his failures, chooses suicide.

Leftwich has commented on Driver’s Elegy. In his Granta confession he writes, “A friend from university days, the distinguished South African poet, C.J. Driver, wrote a novel in which the weakly disguised main character—obviously me—ends up being executed.”[[23]](#endnote-23) He doesn’t mention Max van den Sandt but he would have read the novel and it would have been like looking into a cracked mirror. [[24]](#endnote-24) Gordimer’s account of events after Max’s arrest comes straight from the state of affairs involving Leftwich: she writes, “Some fled the country, some were held in solitary in their cells and, refusing to speak, were kept on their feet under interrogation until they collapsed. Some did speak. He was beaten when he was first arrested, that we know, but what else he was confronted with later, what else they showed him in himself, we do not know—but he spoke” (LBW, 80). Leftwich is frank about what the security police “showed in himself”: he says he was overwhelmed by fear, by “terminal terror,” and the “thought, the horror, of my own extinction.”[[25]](#endnote-25) Max, Gordimer writes, “wasn’t equal to the demands he ... took upon himself ... As if you insisted on playing in the first team when you were only good enough—strong enough for the third” (LBW, 19). Leftwich arrives at the same conclusion about himself: “between my fantasies and my capacities, I crashed.”[[26]](#endnote-26) Relying on press reports and her friendship networks for information, Gordimer’s inferences were remarkably accurate.

But Gordimer also traduces the memory of the ARM, wildly exaggerating its failures and contradictions, a point illustrated in the difference between her fictional bomb and Harris’s actual one, which was far more lethal and effective. When Max drowns himself in the Cape Town harbor, he takes with him a briefcase of political documents, thus drowning the archive of his political life. One of his projects was a treatise on African Socialism written in Platonic dialogues, one example among others that Max’s head is in the clouds. But what *might* have been in that briefcase if the story had been imagined differently? The ARM trial records provide a kind of answer: they include a paper by Leftwich on the national situation and prospects for sabotage. Curiously, he spends most of the paper talking the movement (“the company”) *out* of sabotage. The State is too powerful; the apartheid economy is thriving; the African working class is not ready for revolution; there is very little external pressure; South Africa is unlike Cuba or Algeria because in South Africa the settler population is culturally and economically entrenched. He concludes by saying that the movement should continue with sabotage nevertheless, as a way of changing the moral climate, gaining political credit, and training cadres for a revolution that might come at some unspecified point in future.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Max’s drowned briefcase obviously represents Gordimer’s taking possession of the story on her own terms, but in doing so she reveals a curious lack of interest in the actual formative histories of the left-liberals involved. Doubly curious, in fact, because her notebooks from the late 1950s and early 1960s show that she was reading Camus, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty on the ethics of violence, a subject the ARM discussed *ad nauseam* according to the Bermans, in order to distinguish non-lethal sabotage from terrorism.[[28]](#endnote-28) She represents Max’s political affiliations as drifting from one movement to another, from the Liberal Party to COD (the Congress of Democrats, an organization of white Marxists allied with the ANC). He is the son of a wealthy, patrician family, his father a prominent Member of Parliament for the opposition United Party in the whites-only legislature, who expected a Cabinet post if they came to power but is forced to resign after Max’s exposure. Stephen Clingman sees Max as representative, through his parents, of the structure of white power: his father is of English and Flemish descent and his mother is an Afrikaner.[[29]](#endnote-29) By contrast, while the parents of some activists were well connected and intervened or tried to intervene in their children’s convictions, many of them came from ordinary middle-class and some distinctly lower middle-class homes. They were often strongly religious, too, Jewish and Christian, from which they developed their ethical sensitivities.[[30]](#endnote-30) Gordimer’s interest in the Marxist Left was in evidence later in Burger’s Daughter (1979) but in the earlier Bourgeois World, instead of taking the more liberal-inclined ARM on its own terms, she exaggerates the privilege and turns the activists into the disaffected children of the financial and political elite. This would help to explain why there is so little commentary on Gordimer’s novel by former ARM members themselves—they would not recognize themselves in it. I’ll return shortly to the question of Gordimer’s literary purposes in altering the history in this way.

“He is dead now,” says Elizabeth van den Sandt, Max’s ex-wife, with growing indifference to his suicide (LBW, 80). Allow me to digress for a moment to consider a scene of reading: Leftwich reading this and Driver’s fictionalizations of himself, in which his proxies die by suicide or execution. It would be hard to imagine a more direct challenge to the culturally entrenched principle of aesthetic autonomy, or the autonomy of fictional worlds, for here we have a reader who, one imagines, would find it impossible not to feel directly implicated. If the principle of autonomy could be invoked at all in such a situation, it may well be as an alibi. In his confessional essay for Granta, Leftwich mentions Driver’s novel, perhaps because there was a past friendship or perhaps because Driver’s association with ARM members plus the thin veneer of fictionalization called attention to the novel as a roman à clef; but one could easily imagine that feeling belittled by the connection, Leftwich would have kept silent about Gordimer’s novel on scrupulously literary grounds. There is no rule that links me to Max van den Sandt. I, too, can play the game of aesthetic detachment.

A further example of how aesthetic autonomy would count for very little in the wider culture in which Gordimer worked would be the effects of censorship. The Late Bourgeois World was banned in South Africa in 1967 and unbanned a decade later, in 1976. As Peter McDonald shows in his research on the censorship archives in The Literature Police, the censors were not, as one might expect, simple-minded bureaucrats who had no appreciation of literary value; on the contrary, most of them were literature professors in the Afrikaans universities as well as some English ones.[[31]](#endnote-31) Their role, as they saw it, was to act as guardians of the literary, keeping the nation’s high culture free of contamination by obscenity or propaganda. To this end, the grounds for their decisions were frequently aestheticist and universalist.[[32]](#endnote-32) What qualified as writing of high aesthetic value was often let through. It was Coetzee’s compromised good fortune to be treated in this way by the censorship system.

In the case of The Late Bourgeois World, the censors grudgingly recognized Gordimer’s rising international stature. They acknowledged that the novel was exceptionally well written and they didn’t want to act in a way that embarrassed the State. After a lengthy exchange of reports it was banned because it hinted at inter-racial sex, rather than that it depicted underground politics. And what made the sex “dynamite” in their view was Gordimer’s scrupulous verisimilitude, her powers of normalization and naturalization. That it seemed perfectly feasible for Elizabeth and the PAC activist Luke Fokase to contemplate having sex made the novel all the more seditious—Gordimer’s accomplishments made the novel more subversive, not less so.

In 1976 the ban was overturned on appeal by Gordimer herself (she had been approached for film rights) by a slightly more sophisticated censorship regime, because although it hinted at inter-racial sex and depicted underground politics, it is narrated by Elizabeth who, over the course of a day (shades of James Joyce) reflects on Max’s failures after hearing of his death, as well as on their life together and the social world they inherited and rejected (the “late bourgeois world”), in a taut, detached style that strips his political history of its power and purpose. In the language of the chief censor Merwe Scholtz, “Die aksie (die patetiese, triestige porsie van die verhaal wat die naam aksie verdien) word so toegespin onder die mymerende, soms filosoferende herinneringslewe, dat die boek geen vuis het nie.” *The action (the pathetic, sad portion of the story that warrants being called action) is so bound up with the speculative, philosophizing life of memory, that the book has no punch.*[[33]](#endnote-33) Both the original banning and the later unbanning had much the same basis insofar as they both referred to the work’s aesthetic qualities. These completely opposed judgements resulted from attempts to gauge what the text’s effects might be on the likely reader (by this stage, the criterion of the “reasonable reader” was being used to make decisions).

Over the course of a decade, in effect the South African censors debated the distinction between events and their narration, *fabula* and *syuzhet*, trying to make rational decisions about the political implications of Gordimer’s fictionality, her handling of technical narrative elements such as voice and perspective. To use the terms offered by narratologist Richard Walsh, it was a debate over “the rhetoric of fictionality.” Walsh argues that far from shoring up the autonomy of fictional worlds, fictionality is a resource that serves the purpose of serious communication.[[34]](#endnote-34). The censorious South African professors had no doubt about the seriousness of what was at stake. This view of narrative leads us “back to the author (not merely the implied author) and the authorial communicative act,” which will emphasize “contextuality” and “specificity.”[[35]](#endnote-35) Both Leftwich and the censors would have felt the high voltage current flowing through these fictions in the situation that was their shared nightmare.

The question, then, is what is it about the art in The Late Bourgeois World that so mesmerized the censors? We might begin with Gordimer’s declared understanding of how the subject should be approached. Here we come to another striking admission on her part, which is that she could not have written The Late Bourgeois World had it not been for Albert Camus’s The Outsider.[[36]](#endnote-36) That some reviewers missed the connection and the force of the novel’s detached narration was a source of frustration to her. She wrote to her friend the Observerjournalist Anthony Sampson, “I did write that small book with the ‘controlled passion’ that you say you felt in it and I must admit that it has been a great disappointment to find the reviewers, so far, treat the whole thing as if it were some glum tract.” In another letter she complains, “Not a word about the writing, either; just the Subject.” Reading Hermann Hesse, she recorded in her notebook that she was striving for writing that “can perform the useful function of confessing with maximum honesty its own poverty and the poverty of its times.”[[37]](#endnote-37)

This early emulation of Camus is noteworthy and runs counter to her reputation for embracing more traditional, nineteenth century models of realism. She refers to Camus frequently, in fact, as a touchstone for her own thinking on literature and commitment throughout her career, including in the Nobel Lecture.[[38]](#endnote-38) Both The Late Bourgeois World and The Outsider begin with a telegram announcing a death: in Camus, it’s Meursault’s mother; in Gordimer, it’s the ex-husband. Gordimer chooses to focalize the story through Elizabeth in order to anchor the text in the hyper-observant, estranged perspective that she seems to have admired in Camus. Her subject, in other words, was less the saboteurs themselves than, as she is careful to say, “the character of the social climate that produced them.” She sought to capture this climate in what biographer Ronald Suresh Roberts calls the novel’s “well-wrought austerity.”[[39]](#endnote-39) That she traduces the formation, political careers and the actions of ARM activists in the process would have been less important to her than the perspective.

It is in the novel’s mode of address, then, that Gordimer conveys the effects of a moral and political aftermath. To clarify: by the end of 1964 the State had managed to smash all the sabotage movements that had begun in 1961, and it is in the context of this general collapse of revolutionary aspiration that Gordimer crafts Elizabeth’s voice: flat, clinical, observant, and ironic. As Clingman puts it, “there is a crucial new tone in the novel, marking a new mood for the mid-1960s. It is one of combined rage, frustration and resignation.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Max’s death, especially the manner of it, was, says Elizabeth, “Something to which my contemporary being said quietly: of course. Max had driven a car into the sea and gone down with it; as Max once burned his father’s clothes, and yes, as Max, three years ago, tried to blow up a post office. This time I wasn’t looking, that’s all” (LBW, 6). This matter-of-factness echoes Camus’s opening sentences: “Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday. I don’t know.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Gordimer’s version of Meursault’s disaffection enables her to free Elizabeth’s voice as the moment of a new post-revolutionary realism, and as we shall see, an existential awakening.

Specific to Elizabeth’s, unlike Meursault’s, rebellion, is that it is not directed at God or the universe; her plight lies in her immediate relationships and their context. History, personal and national, has smashed into her life to the extent that she wonders how the natural world manages to remain unaffected. As she drives out to the boarding school in the countryside where their son Bobo is at school to inform him of his father’s death, she marvels that it is “one of those absolutely wind-still mornings” of the Highveld: “How is it possible,” she wonders, “that it could still be there, just the same, the sun, the pale grass, the bright air, the feeling of it as it was when we had no inkling of what already existed within it” (LBW, 5). The possibility of an irruption during her childhood would always have been present as furious potential, she realizes; now that it has happened, why does the world seem the same? “Time is change; we measure its passing by how much things alter. Within this particular latitude of space, which is timeless, one meridian of the sun identical with another, we changed our evil innocence for what was coming to us” (LBW, 5). The aftermath of personal and political defeat is felt as a state of existential dislocation and suspension, registering as alienation from the normal, diurnal routines of the natural world. But there is also a contradictory compression: “Decades, eras, centuries—they don't have much meaning, now, when the imposition of an emergency law or the fall of a bomb changes life more profoundly in a day than one might reasonably expect to experience in a lifetime” (LBW, 76-77).

Gordimer takes the title of her novel from the Austrian communist Ernst Fischer’s book The Necessity of Art (1959). It was translated into English and published by Pelican in 1963, making it a timely resource for her. Fischer develops a social history of art and literature from precapitalist magic to postcapitalist socialism, dwelling on the role of art in what he calls “the late bourgeois world.” In Gordimer, Elizabeth asks her legal friend and lover Graham Mill what he thinks our era will be remembered for, and he replies saying that he has just read Fischer’s book. When he mentions the phrase, “the late bourgeois world,” it passes over Elizabeth’s “skin like wind over water” (LBW, 100). Writing about the “loss and recovery of reality,” Fischer observes, “The industrialized, commercialized world has become an outsideworld of impenetrable material connexions and relationships. The man living in the midst of that world is alienated from it and from himself.”[[42]](#endnote-42) (original emphasis, Fischer, 197). The analysis was also taken up by the Frankfurt School, notably by Adorno, and it was certainly relevant to Gordimer but with a difference: the contradictions of that suffocating world of surfaces of which Fischer speaks were always more starkly obvious in apartheid South Africa. Remembering a moment of unwelcome intimacy with Max’s mother, Elizabeth thinks: “Oh we bathed and perfumed and depilated white ladies, in whose wombs the sanctity of the white race is entombed! What concoction of musk and boiled petals can disguise the dirt done in the name of that sanctity?” (LBW, 29). The conversation between Graham and Elizabeth about the late bourgeois world is analogous to the situation in Europe, but not directly so. It is the artist in Fischer’s diagnosis that would have struck a chord with Gordimer: “In a decaying society,” he writes, “art, if it is truthful, must also reflect decay. And unless it wants to break faith with its social function, art must show the world as changeable. And help to change it.”[[43]](#endnote-43) Camus’s Meursault provides a model to Gordimer of a mode of address that, in a different but analogous context, “reflects decay” by opening up the late bourgeois world of apartheid South Africa to forensic self-scrutiny.

My argument thus far has been based on two of Nadine Gordimer’s statements about The Late Bourgeois World, both of which we have no reason to discount: that it was an attempt to look into the social climate that produced the ARM; and that the novel would not have been possible without the example of The Outsider. My assessment is that given the ways in which she represents the actual history of the ARM, Gordimer’s treatment of the subject, following Camus, is in fact her real purpose, indeed her real subject. Let me pursue this point a little further. Stephen Clingman argues that Gordimer chose to base her novel on the ARM because it was closer to her own experience than Umkhonto or the Communist Party might have been. His larger argument is the more important one, which is that “the ARM itself typified, as an extreme embodiment, the overall revolutionary moment of which it was a part: its romance, dedication and fervor, but also its illusions and hidden desperation.”[[44]](#endnote-44) The idea of typification is central to Clingman’s thesis on Gordimer’s writing: drawing from Lukács (appropriately, given her uses of him), he shows that Gordimer’s protagonists tend to embody in extreme form the tensions and energies of their historical moment.[[45]](#endnote-45) To simplify slightly, on the example of The Late Bourgeois World, Max typifies the ARM and the ARM typifies the aspirations and failures of the revolutionary moment of the period 1960 to 1964.

Judging by a curious detail in Hilary Claire’s autobiography, there is evidence that Gordimer was in fact close to the social circle of the ARM: Max’s speech at his sister’s wedding at the Donnybrook Country and Sporting Club, which embarrasses everyone including Elizabeth, in which he warns the assembled bourgeoisie against the dangers of “moral sclerosis,” was based on a speech actually made at Claire’s brother’s bar mitzvah, which Gordimer had attended.[[46]](#endnote-46) But as we have seen, more broadly the novel exaggerates the ARM’s failures and changes its social provenance. Given the drift of his argument, Clingman might agree with the following qualification to his position: it is not Max who embodies the movement, or the tensions and energies of the historical moment (despite his resemblance to Leftwich), so much as Elizabeth herself. It is through her consciousness that we feel most intimately the post-revolutionary malaise of the mid- and later 1960s and it is through her inch-by-inch journey towards discovery of her readiness for political action that we glimpse the possibility of change. In the evening of the same day that she learns of Max’s death, she entertains Luke Fokase, who has come to ask if she would provide a bank account for the transfer of funds from the Defence and Aid Fund in London to support the legal defence and the families of PAC members charged with sabotage (125).[[47]](#endnote-47) She agrees to do so, ultimately, we are led to assume, using an account belonging to her senile grandmother, whom she visits in an old-age home in the afternoon. The relationship with Luke is close, born of their shared political life while Max was alive, to the extent that while they talk of politics, sex is in the air: “The flirting is even part of this other game; there was a sexual undertone to his wheedling, cajoling, challenging confrontation of me, and that’s alright, that’s honest enough” (LBW, 129). These are the suggestions that disturbed the censors when the book was banned. When Elizabeth realizes that she has power of attorney over the account and that this would be a reasonably risk-free way to channel the funds, the idea “[grows] inside [her], almost like sexual tumescence” (LBW, 130). It is soon apparent that the prospect of taking political action, like the prospect of sex with Luke, answers a hitherto unspoken need.

The novel’s conclusion makes this all too apparent, taking us into the heart of the 1960s in topical as well as philosophical terms. On the day of Max’s death, the press is reporting that an astronaut has conducted the world’s first spacewalk: “’From the pacific to the Atlantic in twenty minutes’; when Max drowned today, a man walked about in space” (LBW, 136). (From this detail we know that Gordimer could not have completed the novel before March 1965 when cosmonaut Alexey Leonov became the first spacewalker, although she gives this achievement to the Americans [LBW, 142].) The aspiration to reach the moon becomes part of Elizabeth’s ruminations as she contemplates whether she is going to take her own first step into the political unknown. Gordimer works hard in these paragraphs to tie the spacewalk to Elizabeth’s decision, and she does so in terms that reflect on Max’s death and her own dystopian views:

What’s going on overhead is perhaps the spiritual expression of our age, and we don’t recognize it. Space exploration isn’t a ‘programme’—it’s the new religion. Out of the capsule, up there, out of this world in a way you can never be, gone down to the seabed; out of this world into infinity, eternality. Could any act of worship as we’ve known such things for two thousand years express more urgently a yearning for life beyond life—the yearning for God?

That’s what up there, behind the horsing around and the dehydrated hamburgers and the televised blood tests. If it’s the moon, that’s why ... that’s why ... (LBW, p. 139)

Gordimer is clearly influenced by Fischer here, insofar as she argues, as Fischer does in the European context, that the late bourgeois world has become one of pure externality and surfaces, that “outside world” of “impenetrable material connexions and relationships.” To this world, says Fischer himself, Camus, along with purveyors of the nouveau roman and the anti-novel like Nathalie Saurraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet, are well-attuned in showing that “the world is neither meaningful nor absurd, ... it is just there.”[[48]](#endnote-48) Following Fischer, and Fischer’s comment on Camus, Gordimer uses space flight as a metaphor for escape from this externality, from the obtuseness of consumer capitalism, as well as from the persistent stuckness of time in the period of high apartheid on which she muses at the beginning of the novel.

All this is the framework of ideas and the contextual ground on which Elizabeth has to make a political decision, in which there is as much libidinal impulse as political calculation, judging by her ruminations about the pork fillets she is cooking and especially, about the prospect of sex: “Oh yes, and it’s quite possible he’ll make love to me, next time or some time. That’s part of the bargain ... And in any case, perhaps I want it. I don’t know” (LBW, 142). By the end of the novel, the clock has stopped and her experience of time has been reduced to the beating of her heart:

I’ve been lying awake a long time now. There is no clock in the room since the red travelling clock that Bobo gave me went out of order, but the slow, even beats of my heart repeat to me, like a clock; afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive .... (LBW, 142)

In these sentences Gordimer brings Elizabeth close to what I would argue is the most convincing conclusion we can reach about the motivations of the ARM for embarking on sabotage. As Leftwich’s own analysis shows, it had very little, if any, convincing strategic purpose, and it tragically miscalculated the capacities of a ruthless State to outflank it. Indeed the properly left-wing analysis of the time, to which Leftwich himself alluded, argued that sabotage was an untimely and dangerous strategy and that the route to revolution should be sought in the slower, less spectacular work of building grassroots organizational capacity. ARM members had no material or class interest in choosing sabotage; it was a response to ethical distress, a leap of faith, and a thoroughly existential rebellion.

And so we come to Gordimer’s epigraphs to The Late Bourgeois World: Franz Kafka’s, There are possibilities for me, certainly; but under what stone do they lie? and Maxim Gorky’s: The madness of the brave is the wisdom of life. Together, they map the journey Camus took, from The Outsider (1942) to The Rebel (1951), from existential estrangement to the new, as yet still indefinite, ethically utopian possibilities embodied in humanity in a state of revolt. For Camus, choosing abandonment to this new possibility is essential to the novel itself, as form: “men cling to the world and by far the majority do not want to abandon it. Far from always wanting to forget it, they suffer, on the contrary, from not being able to possess it completely enough, estranged citizens of the world, exiled from their own country.”[[49]](#endnote-49) The novel, Camus argues, is a refusal to accept this, a gesture of revolt, rather like the journey Nadine Gordimer herself undertook through her fictional treatment of Elizabeth van den Sandt, a gesture not unlike sabotage when the weight of history bears down.

1. Rita Barnard, “Locating Gordimer: Modernism, Postcolonialism, Realism,” in Michael Valdez Moses and Richard Begam, Eds. Modernism, Postcolonialism, Globalism: Anglophone Literature 1950 to the Present. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 100. Nadine Gordimer, “The Idea of Gardening,” The New York Review of Books, 2 February 1984. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. J.M. Coetzee, “Gordimer and Turgenev,” in Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999. London: Secker and Warburg, 2001. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Barnard, p. 100; Coetzee, “Gordimer and Turgenev,” p. 230. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Barnard, p. 100; Coetzee, “Gordimer and Turgenev,” p. 230. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Barnard, pp. 100-101. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Nadine Gordimer, The Late Bourgeois World (1966). London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated LBW. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Barnard, p. 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Gordimer, “Towards a Desk Drawer Literature,” The Classic, 2, 4 (1968), p. 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Monty and Myrtle Berman interviewed by Magnus Gunther, 4 July 1990. Magnus Gunther/ARM Papers, Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg. PC170/1/1/2/1-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Magnus Gunther, “The National Committee for Liberation (NCL) / African Resistance Movement (ARM)” in SADET (Eds.), The Road to Democracy in South Africa Vol. 1, 1960-1970. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004, pp. 209-212. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Personal interview with Neville Rubin, Cape Town, 5 December 2017. Rubin recalls telling Adrian Leftwich that the ARM was the most important development in South Africa since the Torch Commando, a movement of ex-servicemen opposing Nationalist rule. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. “Document 73, Operation Mayibuye, Document found by police at Rivonia, July 11th, 1963,” in Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter, From Protest to Challenge, Vol. 3, pp. 760-769. The quotation from Fischer is from Stephen Clingman, Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary. Cape Town: David Philip; Bellville: Mayibuye Books; Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998, p. 313. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. “Document 5. Memorandum of the National Committee for Liberation, London, mid-1963” in Thomas G. Karis and Gail Gerhart, From Protest to Challenge, Vol. 5, pp. 369-372. Compare this with Eddie Daniels, “We were complete amateurs as far as sabotage was concerned,” from his autobiography, There and Back: Robben Island 1964-1979. Third Edition. Self-published. Printed by CTP Printers, Cape Town, 2002, p. 105. Tom Lodge’s account of early underground activity on the part of Umkhonto and the PAC-aligned Poqo would seem to bear out Berman’s judgement, in Black Politics in South Africa, 1945-1976. London: Longman, 1983, pp. 235-241. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Despite its formal position on avoiding injury, Umkhonto’s early cadres firebombed post offices, drinking halls selling government-manufactured beer, “Native Affairs” offices, and targeted black policemen (Lodge, 235-241). Poqo, aligned with the PAC, advocated killing whites. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Baruch Hirson, Revolutions in my Life. Johannesburg: Wits Press, 1995, pp. 320-324. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. “Document 6. Flyer of the African Resistance Movement announcing its formation, June 12th 1964,” in Thomas G. Karis and Gail M. Gerhart, From Protest to Challenge, Vol. 5, pp. 372-373. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Albie Sachs, Stephanie on Trial*.* London: Harvill Press, 1968,p. 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Adrian Leftwich, “I Gave the Names,” Granta, 78 (Summer 2002), p. 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Sachs, Stephanie on Trial, p. 284. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The State introduced the General Law Amendment Act, informally called the Sabotage Bill, in 1962, specifically to suppress the widespread turn to sabotage. It made provision for detention without trial of up to ninety days, a period that was extended and eventually became indefinite in later legislation. The definition of sabotage was wide and made provision for a maximum sentence of death. In practice, the courts had some discretion in the application of the law. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. André Brink, A Fork in the Road. London: Harvill Secker, 2009, pp. 189-192. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. With his passport revoked, Fugard was sent books by director Peter Brook in London, including Jerzy Grotowski’s Towards a Poor Theatre, which informed the dramaturgy in this and subsequent plays. Interview with Athol Fugard, Stellenbosch 20th October 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Leftwich, “I Gave the Names,” p. 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Correspondence in the ARM archive collected by Magnus Gunther shows that throughout his subsequent academic life as a political scientist at the University of York, Leftwich followed developments around the ARM and its legacy closely until his death in 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Leftwich, p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Leftwich, p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. National Archives, Cape Town, Cape Supreme Court Records, Case No. 349/1964. The State vs. Daniels, de Keller, Trew, Kemp. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. J.M. Coetzee records reading Gordimer’s notes on the ethics of violence as he began preparing the Tanner Lectures, later published as The Lives of Animals. Coetzee Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Notebook for *The Lives of Animals*, 16th May 1996. The comment about the debate on violence being conducted “ad nauseum” is made by Myrtle Berman in the interview conducted by Magnus Gunther on 4th July 1990. Gunther Papers, Alan Paton Centre, PC170/1/1/2/1-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Stephen Clingman, The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside. London, Boston, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986, pp. 97-98. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See the autobiographies of Baruch Hirson, Hilary Claire, Hugh Lewin, Stephanie Kemp, and Eddie Daniels. Interview with Norman Bromberger 7th September 2017, whose father was a pentecostal preacher. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. The censors are named at theliteraturepolice.com, the website that accompanies McDonald’s The Literature Police (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). I am indebted to McDonald for his careful documentation and insightful discussion of LBW, pp. 227-230. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. McDonald, pp. 21-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Report to the Publications Control Board on Nadine Gordimer, LBW, T. Scholtz, 14th March 1976. McDonald offers a slightly different translation, p. 230. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Richard Walsh, The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University, 2007, pp. 5-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Walsh, p. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Letter to Melvin B. Yoken, 18th March 1971, cited in Ronald Suresh Roberts, No Cold Kitchen: A Biography of Nadine Gordimer, Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2005, p. 280, footnote p. 673. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Roberts, p. 280. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Gordimer, “The Essential Gesture,” in The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places, Ed. Stephen Clingman, London: Penguin, 1989; “Writing and Being” Nobel Foundation, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1991/gordimer/lecture/ [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Roberts, p. 280. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Clingman, The Novels of Nadine Gordimer, p. 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Albert Camus, The Outsider (1942). Trans. Joseph Laredo. London: Penguin, 2000, p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ernst Fischer, The Necessity of Art (1959). Trans. Anna Bostock. Harmondsworth: Penguin (Pelican Books), 1963, p. 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Fischer, p. 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Clingman, The Novels of Nadine Gordimer, p. 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Clingman, The Novels of Nadine Gordimer, pp. 7-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Hilary Claire, The Song Remembers When. Cape Town: Double Storey, 2006, pp. 203-204. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Judging by her account of the trial of Bram Fischer, Gordimer took an interest in an actual case of this kind, and she would have known of Arthur Blaxall, who was convicted of channeling funds to a banned organization before leaving the country. The fictional case of Colonel Gaisford in the novel would appear to be based on this case (Clingman, The Novels of Nadine Gordimer, pp. 96, 240; LBW pp. 126, 140). [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Fischer, p. 199 (original emphasis). [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Camus, The Rebel, p. 260. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)