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### AT THE SAME TIME ... (THE NOVELIST AND MORAL REASONING)

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AT THE SAME TIME...  
(THE NOVELIST AND MORAL REASONING)

SUSAN SONTAG

Long Ago... it was the eighteenth century... a great and eccentric defender of literature and the English language—it was Doctor Johnson—wrote, in the Preface to his *Dictionary*, ‘The chief glory of every people arises from its authors.’

An unconventional proposition, I suspect, even then, and far more unconventional now, though I think it’s still true at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Of course, I am speaking of the glory that is permanent, not transitory.

I’m often asked if there is something I think writers *ought* to do, and recently in an interview I heard myself say: ‘Several things. Love words, agonize over sentences. And pay attention to the world.’

Needless to say, no sooner had these perky phrases fallen out of my mouth than I thought of some more recipes for writers’ virtue.

For instance: ‘Be serious.’ By which I meant: ‘Never be cynical. And which *doesn’t* preclude being funny.’

And...if you’ll allow me one more: ‘Take care to be born at a time when it was *likely* that you would be definitively exalted and influenced by Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy, and Chekhov.’

The truth is, whatever it might occur to you to say about what a writer *ideally* should be, there is always something more. All these descriptions mean nothing without examples. So, if asked to name a living writer who exemplifies all that a writer can be, I would think immediately of Nadine Gordimer.

A great writer of fiction both *creates* a new world...through acts of imagination, through language that feels inevitable, through vivid forms...that is unique, individual and *responds* to a world, the world the writer shares

with other people, but is unknown or *mis*-known by still more people, confined in *their* worlds: call *that* history, society, what you will.

Nadine Gordimer's large, ravishingly eloquent and extremely varied body of work is, first of all, a treasury of human beings *in situations...dramas* of the human, character-driven stories, many of them unforgettable. Her books have brought to those of us who are not South African a wide, wide portrait of the part of the world of which she is native, and to which she has paid such exacting, responsible attention.

Her exemplary, influential stand in the decades-long revolutionary struggle for justice and equality in South Africa, her natural sympathy for comparable struggles elsewhere in the world—these have been justly celebrated. Few first-rank writers today have fulfilled the multiple ethical tasks available to a writer of conscience and great intellectual gifts as wholeheartedly, as energetically, or as bravely as has Nadine Gordimer.

But, of course, the primary task of the writer is to write well. (And to go on writing well. Neither to burn out nor sell out.) In the end—that is to say, from the point of view of literature—Nadine Gordimer is not representative of anybody or anything, but herself. That, and the noble cause of literature.

Let the dedicated activist never overshadow the dedicated Servant of literature—the matchless storyteller.

To write is to know something. What a pleasure to read a writer who knows a great deal. (Not a common experience these days....) Literature, I would argue, is knowledge—albeit, even at its greatest, imperfect knowledge. Like *all* knowledge.

Still, even now, even now, literature remains one of our principal modes of understanding. And Nadine Gordimer understands a great deal about the private life—about family bonds; family affections; the powers of Eros, and about the contradictory demands that struggles in the public arena can make on the serious writer.

Everybody in our debauched culture invites us to *simplify* reality, to despise wisdom. There is a great deal of wisdom in Nadine Gordimer's work. She has articulated an admirably complex view of the human heart and the contradictions inherent in living in literature and in history.

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It is a singular honour to be invited to give the first Nadine Gordimer Lecture, and to have the occasion—this wonderful occasion—to pay tribute to what her work has meant to me, to us all, in its lucidity and passion and eloquence and fidelity to the idea of the *responsibility* of the writer to literature and to society.

By literature, I mean literature in the normative sense, the sense in which literature incarnates and defends high standards. By society, I mean society in the normative sense, too—which suggests that a great writer of fiction, by

writing truthfully about the society in which she or he lives, cannot help but evoke (if only by their absence) the better standards of justice and of truthfulness which we have a right (some would say the duty) to militate for in the necessarily imperfect societies in which we live.

Obviously, I think of the writer of novels and stories and plays as a moral agent. Indeed, this conception of the writer is one of the many links between Nadine Gordimer's idea of literature and mine. In my view, and I believe Nadine Gordimer's, a fiction writer whose adherence is to literature is, necessarily, someone who thinks about moral problems: about what is just and unjust, what is better or worse, what is repulsive and admirable, what is lamentable and what inspires joy and approbation. This doesn't entail moralising in any direct or crude sense. Serious fiction writers think about moral problems *practically*. They tell stories. They narrate. They evoke our common humanity in narratives with which we can identify, even though their lives may be remote from our own. They stimulate our imagination. The stories they tell enlarge and complicate—and, therefore, improve—our sympathies. They educate our capacity for moral judgement.

When I say the fiction writer narrates, I mean that the story has a shape: a beginning, a middle (properly called a development), and an end or resolution. Every writer of fiction wants to tell many stories; but we know that we can't tell *all* the stories—certainly not simultaneously. We know we must pick one story, well, one central story: we have to be selective. The art of the writer is to find as much as one can in that story, in that sequence, in *that* time (the time-line of the story, in *that* space—the concrete geography of the story). 'There are so many stories to tell,' says the alter ego voice in the monologue that opens my last novel, *In America*. 'There are so many stories to tell, it's hard to say why it's one rather than another, it must be because with this story you feel you can tell many stories, that there will be a necessity in it; I see I am explaining badly.... It has to be something like falling in love. Who ever explains *why* you chose this story hasn't explained much. A story, I mean a long story, a novel, is like an around-the-world-in-eighty-days: you can barely recall the beginning when it comes to an end...'

A novelist, then, is someone who takes you on a journey. Through space. Through time. A novelist leads the reader over a gap, makes something go where it was not.

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There is an old joke/aphorism I've always imagined to have been invented by some grad student of philosophy (as I was once myself), late one night, who'd been struggling through Kant's abstruse account in his *Critique of Pure Reason* of the barely comprehensible categories of time and space, and decided that all of this could be put much more simply.

It goes as follows:

Time exists in order that everything doesn't happen all at once...and space exists so that it all doesn't happen to you.

By this standard, the novel is an ideal vehicle both of space and of time. The novel shows us time: that is, everything doesn't happen at once. (It is a sequence, it is a line.) It shows us space: that is, what happens doesn't happen to one person only. In other words, a novel is the creation not simply of a voice, but of a world. It mimics the essential structures by which we experience ourselves living in time, and inhabiting a world, and attempting to make sense of our experience. But it does what lives (the lives that are lived) *cannot* offer, except after they are over. It confers—and withdraws—meaning or sense upon a life. This is possible because narration is possible, because there are norms of narration which are as constitutive of thinking and feeling and experience as are, in the Kantian account, the mental categories of space and time.

A *spacious* way of conceiving human action is an intrinsic feature of the novelist's imagination, even when a genuinely spacious world is opened, as in the claustrophobic narratives of Samuel Beckett and Thomas Bernhard.

A conviction of the potential richness of our existence in *time* is also characteristic of the imagination that is distinctively novelistic, even when the novelist's point—again one could cite Beckett and Bernhard—is to illustrate the futility and repetitiousness of action in time. Like the world we actually live in, the worlds that novelists create possess both a history and a geography. They would not be novels if they did not.

In other words—and once again—the novel tells a story. I don't mean only that the story is the content of the novel, which is then deployed or organized into a literary narrative according to ideas of form. I am arguing that having a story to tell is the chief *formal* property of a novel; and that the novelist, whatever the complexity of his or her means, is bound by—liberated by—the fundamental logic of story-telling.

The essential scheme of story-telling is linear (even when it is anti-chronological). It proceeds from a 'before' (or, 'at first') to a 'during' to a 'finally' or 'after'. But this is much more than mere causal sequence, just as lived time—which distends with feeling, and contracts with the deadening of feeling—is not uniform, clock time. The work of the novelist is to enliven time, as it is to animate space.

The dimension of time is essential for prose fiction; but not (if I may invoke the old idea of the two-party system in literature) not for poetry (that is, lyric poetry). Poetry is situated in the present. Poems, even when they tell stories, are not *like* stories.

One difference lies in the role of metaphor, which, I would argue, is *necessary* in poetry. Indeed, in my view, it is the task—one of the tasks—of the poet to invent metaphors. One of the fundamental resources of human

understanding is what could be called the ‘pictural’ sense, which is secured by comparing one thing with another. Here are some venerable examples, familiar (and plausible) to everyone:

Time as “river” flowing  
 Life as dream  
 Death as sleep  
 Love as illness  
 Life as play / stage  
 Wisdom as light  
 Eyes as stars  
 Book as world  
 Human being as tree  
 Music as food  
 [Etc., etc.]

A great poet is one who refines and elaborates the great historical store of metaphors and adds to our stock of metaphors. Metaphors offer a profound form of understanding, and many—but hardly all—novelists have recourse to metaphor. The grasp of experience through metaphor is not the *distinctive* understanding that is offered by the great novelists. Virginia Woolf is not a greater novelist than Thomas Bernhard because she uses metaphors and he does not.

The understanding of the novelist is temporal, rather than spatial or *pictural*. Its medium is a rendered sense of time: time experienced as an arena of struggle or conflict or choice. All stories are about battles, struggles of one kind or another, which terminate in victory and in defeat. Everything moves toward the end, when the outcome will be known.

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‘The modern’ is an idea, a very radical idea, that continues to evolve. We are now in a second phase of the ideology of the modern (which has been given the presumptuous name of ‘the post-modern’).

In literature, the modern is generally traced back to Flaubert, the first totally self-conscious novelist, who seemed modern, or advanced, because he worried about his prose, judging it by rigorous standards—such as velocity, economy, precision, density—that seemed to echo anxieties hitherto confined to the domain of poetry.

Flaubert also heralded the turn toward ‘abstraction’ characteristic of the modern strategies in making and defending art by denying the primacy of subject matter. He once described *Madame Bovary*, a novel with a classically shaped story and subject matter, as being about the colour brown. Another time, Flaubert said it was about...nothing.

Of course, nobody thought that Madame Bovary was really about the colour brown or about 'nothing'. What is exemplary is the extent of the writerly scrupulousness—perfectionism, if you will—implied by such patent hyperbole. Of Flaubert, one could echo what Picasso remarked about Cézanne: what attaches every serious novelist to Flaubert is, even more than his achievement, his anxiety.

This beginning of 'the modern' in literature took place in the 1850s. A century and a half is a long time. Many of the attitudes and scruples and refusals associated with 'the modern' in literature—as well as in the other arts—have begun to seem conventional or even sterile. And, to some extent, this judgment is justified. Every notion of literature, even the most exacting and liberating, can become a form of spiritual complacency or self-congratulation.

Most notions about literature are reactive: in the hands of lesser talents, merely reactive. But what is happening in the repudiation advanced in the current debate about the novel goes far beyond the usual process whereby new talents need to repudiate older ideas of literary excellence.

In North America and in Europe, we are living now, I think it fair to say, in a period of *reaction*. In the arts, it takes the form of a bullying reaction against the high modernist achievement in the arts which is thought to be too difficult, too demanding of audiences, not accessible (or 'user-friendly') enough. And, in politics, it takes the form of a dismissal of all attempts to measure public life by what are disparaged as mere ideals.

In the modern era, the call for a return to realism in the arts often goes hand in hand with the strengthening of cynical realism in political discourse. The greatest offence now, in matters both of the arts and culture generally (not to mention political life), is to seem to be upholding some better, more exigent standard... which is attacked, both from the left and the right, as either naïve or (a new banner for the philistines) 'elitist'.

Proclamations about the death of the novel—or in its newer form, the end of books—have, of course, been a staple of the debate about literature for almost a century. But they have recently attained a new virulence and theoretical persuasiveness.

Ever since personal computers and word-processing programs became commonplace tools for most writers—including me—there have been those who assert that there is now a brave new future for fiction.

The argument goes as follows:

The novel, as we know it, has come to its end; however, there is no cause for lament. Something better (and more democratic) is going to replace it: the *hypernovel*, which will be written in the nonlinear or non-sequential space made possible by the computer.



This new model for fiction proposes to liberate the reader from the two mainstays of the traditional novel: linear narrative and the author. The reader, cruelly forced to read one word after another to reach the end of a *sentence*, one paragraph after another to reach the end of a *scene*, will rejoice to learn that, according to one account, ‘true freedom’ for the reader is now possible, thanks to the advent of the computer: ‘freedom from the tyranny of the line’. A hypertext ‘has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one’. Instead of following a linear story dictated by the author, the reader can now navigate at will through an ‘endless expansion of word’.

I think most readers—surely virtually *all* readers—will be surprised to learn that structured storytelling—from the most basic beginning-middle-end scheme of traditional tales to more elaborately constructed, non-chronological and multi-voiced narratives—is actually a form of oppression rather than of delight.

In fact, what interests most readers about fiction is precisely the story—whether it is the stories told in fairy tales, in murder mysteries, or the complex narratives of Cervantes and Dostoyevsky and Jane Austen and Proust and Italo Calvino. Story—the idea that events happen in a specific causal order—is both the way we see the world and what interests us most about it. People who read for nothing else will read for plot.

Yet hyperfiction’s advocates maintain that we find plot ‘confining’ and chafe against its limitations. That we resent and long to be liberated from the age-old tyranny of the author, who dictates how the story will turn out, and wish to be truly active readers, co-writers actually, who at any moment in reading the text can choose between various alternative continuations or outcomes of the story by rearranging its blocks of text.

Hypertext is sometimes said to mimic real life, with its myriad opportunities and surprising outcomes, so I suppose it is being touted as a kind of ultimate realism.

To this, I would answer that while it is true that we expect to organize and make sense of our lives, we do not expect to write other people’s novels for them. And one of the resources we have for helping us to make sense of our lives, and make choices, and propose and accept standards to ourselves, is our experience of *singular* authoritative voices, not our own, and which make up that great body of work which educates the heart and the feelings and teaches us to be in the world, which embodies and defends the glories of language (that is, expands the basic instrument of consciousness): namely, *literature*.

What is more true is that hypertext—or should I say the ideology of hypertext?—is ultra-democratic, and so entirely in harmony with the demagogic appeals to cultural democracy that accompany (and distract one’s attention from) the ever-tightening grip of plutocratic capitalism.

The proposal—that the novel of the future will have no story, or, rather, a story of the reader's (rather, *readers'*) *devising*—is so plainly unappealing, and should it come to pass, would so inevitably bring about not the much-heralded death of the author but, instead the extinction of the reader, *all* future readers of what is labelled as 'literature', that it's easy to see that it could only have been an intervention of *academic* literary criticism, which has been overwhelmed by a plethora of notions expressing the keenest hostility to the very project of literature itself.

But there is more to the idea than that.

These proclamations that the book and the novel in particular are ending can simply be ascribed to the mischief wrought by many major universities in the United States, Great Britain, and Western Europe. (I don't know how true this is of South Africa.) The real force behind the argument against literature, against the book, comes, I think, from the hegemony of the narrative model proposed by television.

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A novel is not a set of proposals, or a list, or a collection of agendas, or an (open-ended, revisable) itinerary. It is the journey itself—made, experienced, and completed.

Completion does not mean that everything has been told. Henry James, as he was coming to the end of writing one of his greatest novels, *The Portrait of a Lady*, confided to himself in his notebook his worry that his readers would think that the novel was not really finished, that he had 'not seen the heroine to the end of her situation'. (As you will remember James leaves his heroine, the brilliant and idealistic Isabel Archer, resolved *not* to leave her husband, whom she has discovered to be a mercenary scoundrel, though there is a former suitor, the aptly named Caspar Goodwood, who, still in love with her, hopes she will change her mind.) But, James argued to himself, his novel would be rightly finished on this note. As he wrote: 'The whole of anything is never told: you can only take what groups together. What I have done has that unity—it groups together. It is complete in itself.'

We, James's readers, may wish that Isabel Archer would leave her dreadful husband for happiness with loving, faithful, honorable Caspar Goodwood: I certainly wish she would. But James is telling us she will not.

Every fictional plot contains hints and traces of the stories it has excluded or resisted in order to assume its present shape. Alternatives to the plot ought to be felt up to the last moment. These alternatives to the plot constitute the potential for disorder (and therefore of suspense) in the story's unfolding.

The pressure for events to turn out differently lies behind every unfortunate reversal, every new challenge to a stable outcome. Readers count on such lines of resistance to keep the narrative unsettled, permeated with

the threat of further conflict—until a final point of balance is reached: a resolution that seems less arbitrary and provisional than the invariably misleading moments of stasis within the body of the story. The construction of a plot consists of finding moments of stability, and then generating new narrative tensions which undo these moments—until the ending is reached. What we call a ‘proper’ ending of a novel is another equilibrium—one that, if it is properly designed, will have a recognisably different status. It will—this ending—persuade us that the tensions belonging to any difficult story have been sufficiently answered for. They have lost their power to effect further meaningful changes. They are held in check by the ending’s capacity to seal everything in.

Endings in a novel confer a kind of liberty that life stubbornly denies us: to come to a full stop that is not death and discover exactly where we are in relation to the events leading to a hypothetical total experience—whose strength and authority we judge by the kind of clarity it brings, without undue coercion, to the events of the plot.

If an ending seems to be straining to align the conflicting forces of the narrative, we are likely to conclude that there are defects in the narrative structure, arising perhaps from the storyteller’s lack of control or a confusion about what the story is capable of suggesting.

The pleasure of fiction is precisely that it moves to an ending. And an ending which satisfies is one which excludes. Whatever fails to connect with the story’s closing pattern of illumination, the writer assumes can be safely left out of the account.

A novel is a world with borders. For there to be completeness, unity, coherence, there must be borders. Everything is relevant in the journey we take within those borders. One could describe the story’s end as point of magical convergence for the shifting preparatory views: a fixed position from which the reader sees how initially disparate things finally belong together. Further, the novel, by being an act of achieved form, is a process of understanding—whereas broken or insufficient form, in effect, does not know, wishes *not* to know, what belongs to it.

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It is these two models that are now competing for our loyalty and attention. There is an essential—as I see it—distinction between stories, on the one hand, which have as their goal, an end, completeness, closure, and, on the other hand, information, which is always, by definition, partial, incomplete, fragmentary.

This parallels the contrasting narrative models proposed by literature and by *television*.

Literature tells stories. Television gives information.

Literature involves. It is the re-creation of human solidarity. Television (with its illusion of immediacy) distances—immures us in our own indifference.

The so-called stories that we are told on television satisfy our appetite for anecdote, and offer us mutually cancelling models of understanding. (This is reinforced by the practice of punctuating television narratives by advertising.) They implicitly affirm the idea that all information is potentially relevant (or ‘interesting’), that all stories are endless—or if they do stop, it is not because they have come to an end, but rather that they have been upstaged by a fresher or more lurid or eccentric story.

By presenting us with a limitless number of non-stopped stories, the narratives which the media relate—the consumption of which has so dramatically cut into the time the educated public once devoted to reading—offer a lesson in amorality and detachment that is antithetical to the one embodied by the enterprise of the novel.

In story-telling as practised by the novelist, there is always—as I have argued—an ethical component. This ethical component is not the truth, as opposed to the falsity of the chronicle. It is the model of completeness, of felt intensity, of enlightenment supplied by the story and its resolution—which is the opposite of the model of obtuseness, of non-understanding, of passive dismay, and the consequent numbing of feeling offered by our media-disseminated glut of unending stories.

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Television gives us, in an extremely debased and untruthful form, a truth that the novelist is obliged to suppress in the interest of the ethical model of understanding peculiar to the enterprise of fiction: namely, that the characteristic feature of our universe is that many things are happening at the same time. (‘Time is so it doesn’t all happen at once...space is so it doesn’t all happen to you.’)

To tell a story is to say: *this* is the important story. It is to reduce the spread and simultaneity of everything to something linear, a path.

To be a moral human being is to pay, be obliged to pay, certain kinds of attention.

When we make moral judgments, we are not just saying that this is better than that. Even more fundamentally, we are saying that *this* is more *important* than *that*. It is to order the overwhelming spread and simultaneity of everything, at the price of ignoring or turning our backs on most of what is happening in the world.

The nature of moral judgement depends on our capacity for paying attention—a capacity which, inevitably, has its limits, but these limits can be stretched.

But perhaps the beginning of wisdom, and humility, is to acknowledge, and bow one's head, before thought, the devastating thought, of the simultaneity of everything, and the incapacity of our moral understanding—which is also the understanding of the novelist—to take this in.

Perhaps this is an awareness that comes more easily to poets, who don't fully believe in story-telling. The supremely great early twentieth-century Portuguese poet and prose writer, Fernando Pessoa, wrote in his prose summum, *The Book of Disquiet*:

I've discovered that I'm always attentive to, and always thinking about two things at the same time. I suppose everyone is a bit like that.... In my case the two realities that hold my attention are equally vivid. This is what constitutes my originality. This, perhaps, is what constitutes my tragedy, and what makes it comic.

Yes, everyone is a bit like that.... But the awareness of the *doubleness* of thinking is an uncomfortable position, very uncomfortable, if held for long. It seems normal for people to reduce the complexity of what they are feeling and thinking, and to close down the awareness of what lies outside their immediate experience.

Is this refusal of an extended awareness, which takes in more than is happening *right now, right here*, not at the heart of our ever confused awareness of human evil, and of the immense capacity of human beings to commit evil? Because there are, incontestably, zones of experience which are not distressing, which give joy, it becomes, perennially, a *puzzle* that there is so much misery and wickedness. A great deal of narrative, and the speculation that tries to free itself from narrative and becomes purely abstract, inquires: Why does evil exist? Why do people betray and kill each other? Why do the innocent suffer?

But perhaps the problem ought to be rephrased: why is evil not *everywhere*? More precisely, why is it somewhere—but *not* everywhere? And what are we to do when it doesn't befall us? When the pain that is endured is the pain of *others*?

Hearing the news of the great earthquake which levelled Lisbon on November 1755, and (if historians are to be believed) took with it a whole society's optimism (but, obviously, I don't believe that any society has only one basic attitude)...hearing the shattering news of the earthquake, the great Voltaire was struck by the inability to take in what happened elsewhere. 'Lisbon lies in ruins,' Voltaire wrote, 'and here in Paris we dance.'

One might suppose that in the twentieth century, in the age of genocide, people would not find it either paradoxical or surprising that one can be so indifferent to what is happening simultaneously, elsewhere. Is it not part of the fundamental structure of experience that 'now' refers to both 'here' and

'there'? And yet, I venture to assert, we are just as capable of being surprised by, and frustrated by, the inadequacy of our response to the simultaneity of wildly contrasting human fates as was Voltaire two and half centuries ago. Perhaps it is our perennial fate to be surprised by the simultaneity of events—by the sheer extension of the world in time and space. The here we are here, now prosperous, safe, unlikely to go to bed hungry or be blown to pieces this evening ... while elsewhere in the world, right now...in Grozny, in Najaf, in the Sudan, in the Congo, in Gaza, in the favelas of Rio....

To be a traveller—and novelists are often travellers—is to be constantly reminded of the very different world you have visited and from which you have returned 'home'.

It is a beginning of a response to this painful awareness to say: it's a question of sympathy...of the limits of the imagination. You can also say that it's not 'natural' to keep remembering that the world is so...extended. That while this is happening, that is also happening.

True.

But that, I would respond, is why we need fiction: to stretch our world.

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Novelists, then, perform their necessary ethical task based on their right to a stipulated shrinking of the world as it really is, both in space and in time.

Characters in a novel act within a time that is already complete, where everything worth saving has been preserved—'washed free', as Henry James put it in his preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, 'of awkward accretion' and aimless succession. All real stories are stories of someone's fate. Characters in a novel have intensely legible fates.

The fate of literature itself is something else. Literature as a story is full of awkward accretions, irrelevant demands, unpurposeful activities, uneconomical attention.

*Habent sua fata fabulae*, as the Latin phrase goes. Tales...stories...have their own fate. Because they are disseminated, transcribed, misremembered...translated.

Of course, one would not wish it otherwise. The writing of fiction, an activity that is necessarily solitary, has a destination that is necessarily public, communal.

Traditionally, all cultures are local. Culture implies barriers (for example, linguistic), distance, non-translatibility. Whereas, what 'the modern' means is, above all, the abolition of barriers, of distance; instant access; the levelling of culture—and, by its own inexorable logic, the abolition, or revocation of culture.

What serves 'the modern' is standardisation, homogenisation. (Indeed, 'the modern' is homogenisation, standardisation. The quintessential site of the modern is an airport; and all airports are alike, as all new modern cities,

from Seoul to Sao Paulo tend to look alike.) This pull toward homogenisation cannot fail to affect the project of literature. The novel, which is marked by singularity, can only enter this system of maximum diffusion, through the agency of translation, which, however necessary, entails a built-in distortion of what the novel is at the deepest level—which is not the communication of information, or even the telling of engaging stories, but the perpetuation of the project of literature itself, with its invitation to develop the kind of inwardness that resists the modern satieties.

To translate is to pass something across borders. But, more and more, the lessons of this society, a society that is ‘modern’, are that there are no borders—which means, of course, no more or less than: no borders for the *privileged* sectors of society, who are more mobile geographically than ever before in human history. And the lesson of the hegemony of the mass media—television, MTV, the Internet—is that there is only one culture, that what lies beyond borders everywhere is—or one day will be—just more of the same, with everyone on the planet feeding at the same trough of standardised entertainments and fantasies of Eros and violence manufactured in the United States, Japan, wherever; with everyone enlightened by the same open-ended flow of bits of unfiltered (if, in fact, often censored) information and opinion. That some pleasure, and some enlightenment, may be derived from these media is not to be denied. But I would argue that the mind-set they foster and the appetites they feed are entirely inimical to the writing (production) and the reading (consumption) of serious literature.

The transnational culture into which everyone who belongs to the capitalist consumer society—aka, also known as, the global economy—is being inducted in one that in effect, makes literature irrelevant, a mere utility for bringing us what we already know, and can slot into the open-ended frameworks for the acquisition of information, and voyeuristic viewing at a distance.

Every novelist hopes to reach the widest possible audience, to pass as many borders as possible. But it is the novelist’s job, I think (and I believe Nadine Gordimer agrees with me)...it is the novelist’s job to keep in mind the spurious cultural geography which is being installed at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

On the one hand, we have, through translation and through recycling in the media, the possibility of a greater and greater diffusion of our work. Space, as it were, is being vanquished. Here and there, we are told, are in constant contact with each other...are converging, mightily. On the other hand, the ideology behind these unprecedented opportunities for diffusion, for translation—the ideology now dominant in what passes for culture in modern societies—is designed to render obsolete the novelist’s prophetic and critical, even subversive, task...and that is to deepen, and sometimes as needed, to *oppose* the common understandings of our fate.

Long live the novelist’s task.

Thank you for your work and your spirit, Nadine.