

Apocalypse Now, Never ... or Forever: Venter and Medalie on the Everyday Politics of Post-apartheid South Africa

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This article undertakes an analysis of the narrative temporalities and of the narratives of temporality, specifically those of apocalypse or end-times and of living-on respectively, to be found in two recent South African novels, Eben Venter's *Trencherman* (2008) and David Medalie's *The Shadow Follows* (2006). Against Venter's hyperbolic narrative of catastrophe, which also turns out to be a critique of the residual elements of the erstwhile apartheid era, I posit that Medalie's litotic and patchwork narrative offers a more appropriate narrative of the slow transformation of the post-apartheid South African polity. I use Venter's and Medalie's oddly complementary novels as a template for exploring an emergent sense of a non-teleological 'minor narrative' of liberation in a time 'after postcoloniality'.

Keywords: South Africa; post-apartheid; temporality; catastrophism; anti-teleology; futurity; post-post-colonialism

In David Medalie's *The Shadow Follows* (2006) one of the characters regularly visits a therapist whose consulting room contains two coffee-table books: *The Fairest Cape* and *Johannesburg: From Mining Camp to Metropolis* (55). Neil, the patient, puzzles over the meaning of these books, wondering what their hidden connections may say about the therapist himself. This question is never answered; rather, these titles suggest an open-ended triangulation between the individual subject (Neil as analysand), the national condition (as indexed by South Africa's two preeminent cities), and the need for 'therapy'. This brief moment in the novel offers a vignette of its undertaking: namely, a narrative meditation on the vexed question of how to achieve healing within a fabric of interwoven life-trajectories in post-apartheid South Africa. Medalie's innocuous coffee-table books mirror my own task, for this article addresses two recent novels about the (Eastern) Cape and Johannesburg respectively: Eben Venter's *Trencherman* (2008) and Medalie's *The Shadow Follows* (2006). In a sense, like the two coffee-table books, polarized between landscape and industry, between the timeless and the temporal, Venter's and Medalie's novels map out the broad contours of an urgent quest, across the respective coordinates of time and space, for 'therapy' in contemporary South Africa, in particular via the genre of a dialogical, narrative search for answers to the age's ills. It transpires, I suggest, that these texts do not merely offer prescriptions for reconciliation or reconstruction, but more profoundly, interrogate the very assumptions that underpin the search for 'therapy' and the models of temporality posited by such a search.

Venter's shrill, hyperbolic nightmare fantasy of a return home to South Africa stages all the worst-case scenarios of post-apartheid South Africa rolled into one. By contrast, Medalie's

work is a low-keyed exploration of the quotidian trajectories of his predominantly northern-suburbs Johannesburgers. Venter's elliptical plot takes Marlow to one of 'the dark places of the earth' (*Trencherman* 65) and back out into Antipodean orbit, whereas Medalie's decentred web of often (but not always) overlapping plot-lines presents a very different narrative geometry. Yet Venter's hyperbolic axes may intersect Medalie's intricately networked plots at some very significant points. The apocalyptic tenor of Venter's text is so excessive in its representation of white fears of collapse that, I posit in this article, it verges on parody and its real concerns are actually very close to Medalie's more muted view of living-on in post-apartheid South Africa. Both texts frame their respective hyperbolic and litotic accounts of life after apartheid with reference to topoi such as AIDS and migration, but also by subverting the rhetoric of apocalypse by close attention to the aftermath of an apartheid which refuses to end.

This temporal paradox is part of a larger picture; that of the new temporalities of global capital, whose transformative powers have created, in the words of Mbembe, 'a terrible crisis in the foundational theories of emancipation we used to rely on in order to further a kind of politics of openness and equality' ('Africa' 11). It is all the more important to note that this paradoxical temporality of a 'post'-apartheid that never quite becomes 'post' is also, in its persistent dynamic, the only framework within which morally serious fiction can pose the questions which matter. I explore these issues by, first of all, reading Venter's narrative as an extreme, parodic instance of apocalyptic visions which conceals a more concerning story about living-on. I then turn to Medalie's less lurid portrayal of life after the end of apartheid, paying attention to the litotic character of his writing and the fragmented, 'non-linear' plots it develops. I then analyze Medalie's novel using analogies taken from contemporary non-linear physics, analogies of 'minor' histories of small-scale regenerativity.

Narratives of eternal return

Venter's is a narrative of catastrophe; of ending: 'I am your destiny, Das Ende des Lebens', Koert grimly proclaims. It is also a narrative of continuity: 'I am he ... the volk' (*Trencherman* 247). Venter's turn of phrase consecrates and cements Afrikanerdom's sense of election, exceeding its temporal claims to arrogate the voice of an eternal, self-identifying God. Koert returns to the significantly-named (and dilapidated) 'Ouplaas' under its new management, but what he sets up is, in effect, a restoration and thus a perpetuation of the old order – Koert has become the 'new baas' (132). His is a new white regime of greed which is finally ousted by those who have nothing to eat. This return of the old regime is clearly foreseen by Ouma Zuka: 'He's devouring all the

meat before your eyes' she says to the others (133), anticipating Koert's, 'My meat, my meat' (131).

The doubling of this possessive is historiographically significant in Venter's grim aesthetics. For it hardly needs to be said that Koert's, 'My meat, my meat', is one of many unmistakably Conradian traces in the novel, from the names of the characters (Marlouw, Koert) to the elliptical plot of a voyage into and out of Africa. Venter's Conradian template is evoked recurrently in his ostentatious use of chapter epigraphs from the *Heart of Darkness*, not to mention a relentless flow of textual allusions, some of them explicitly recursive: 'I am ... the very heart of darkness who has remained' (247). These intertextual traces become increasingly heavy-handed. Their obviousness places them at one extremity on a spectrum of degrees of intertextual 'marking' (Helbig 98–112). But that, of course, is just the point: this is intertextuality, not as a secret code or a subtext, but as massive intrusion.

This use of intertextuality is a blatant exhibition of history as repetition. Speaking to Pilot, one of the new workers at Ouplaas, the narrator notes that, 'There are two Marlouws in the silver-blue reflective lens of his sunglasses' (*Trencherman* 112). The circularity of Marlouw's story mimics the circularity of a vision of history (from same to same). Such a version of history persistently repeats old tropes of 'apocalyptic presentiment' that have 'signally constituted our public discourse, and [have] been contagious' (Titlestad 52, 53). This apocalyptic mode continues to legitimize itself in its perpetuation of injustice, thereby bringing upon itself what it most fears. This, in Venter's words, is 'the rasping edge of a narrative that's out of control' (*Trencherman* 133). Venter's story is not merely a hyperbolic exaggeration of white fears about the end of white superiority, even though he has said in an interview that many South African readers have said that *Trencherman* 'was their own narrative laid bare' (Venter, interview). The exaggeration of the apocalyptic narrative in Venter's novel is so excessive that it works like a smokescreen, concealing a far more damaging claim, namely the assertion of a pattern of repetition which amounts to an uninterrupted structure of socio-economic power in the post-apartheid era. Koert may be named the 'new baas' (*Trencherman* 132) – but in fact, he is just the old one in a new form.

In this way, the narrative points towards a phenomenon which is the opposite of the macabre ending it rehearses: namely, the secure place, undiminished privilege and socio-economic, if no longer *direct* political power, of the white minority in South Africa, flanked by a new black elite. Appropriating a poetic turn of phrase from the end of Venter's text, one might say that 'the symmetry to which [South Africa] remains captive makes [it] sickly pale' (313). What critics even before 1994, indeed as far back as the 1970s, predicted would be a form of 'deracialized apartheid' (Smith 316; Biko 149) has indeed come to describe, by and large, the post-apartheid dispensation. In the person of Koert, Venter does not portray catastrophe in its

ultimate form. Rather, he portrays the *function* that the rhetoric of catastrophe has never ceased to perform: namely, the defence of inequality via the fear of social and economic apocalypse. This was the fear, after all, that brought about the African National Congress's capitulation to the demands of local and global capital and the enshrinement of white privilege in various legislative and administrative continuities between the old and new orders (from the regulation of the demographic distribution of municipal costs through to the framing assumptions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission). In other words, the rhetoric of ending disguises the perpetuation of a banal biopolitics. This banal biopolitics continues, below the threshold of formal politics and nominal democracy (Comaroff and Comaroff 3–4), to treat cheap labour or surplus manpower as if it was bare life, as 'animated things' – in a manner which, according to Mbembe, is rapidly encompassing the entire globe (*Critique* 14-15).

This double structure of repetition, of apocalyptic alibi and self-perpetuating hegemony, is not there by chance: in fact, it is symptomatic of the larger structure of which it is a part, namely, the aporetic temporality of global capitalism itself. Capitalism appears to be caught in a chronic crisis of its own making: under neoliberalism, the wealth generated by capital inevitably accrues to those who own the means of production. As the amount of wealth to be generated is finite, this process cannot but lead to a constantly widening gap between wealth and poverty (Piketty 2014). Such a disparity generates acute contradictions in the logic of capital itself (witness the 2008 crash), or high degrees of social unrest (to be seen in massive form in South Africa, but also, endemically, in Europe, as in London in 2011), both of which in the long term must vitiate the generation of capital (see Harvey 2006; 2010; Lewis 2014; Žižek 'Riots', *Living* 2011). Capitalism, in other words, must by its very nature dig its own grave, crisis by crisis. At the same time, however, capital displays a remarkable ability to recover from its successive failures, with its structures remaining more or less resilient, albeit ever more flexible and inventive as the decades go by. The narrative of the return of the 'new baas' (*Trencherman* 132) is no mere analogy, but rather a 'fractal' resemblance between local and global manifestations of capital at work. For global capitalism provides the larger framework which has superseded the capitalist structures allied to the erstwhile apartheid state. The end of apartheid was more or less coeval with the full emancipation of global electronic speculative finance. Whereas the apartheid state owed allegiance to a white constituency and to multinational corporations in an only partially globalized economy, the post-apartheid government and its largely white economic elite appear to owe allegiance only to global capital. The demise of apartheid saw the establishment a global arrangement in which the politics of civil society was fully subordinated to global neoliberalism, as evinced by the vacuity and inefficacy of the political class in the post-apartheid polity.

This is the broad framework in which a reading of *Trencherman* needs to be placed in order to escape the limiting parameters of apocalyptic hermeneutics. At a very superficial level, Venter's novel may appear to portray the failures of post-apartheid majority government, confirming a monotonous mode of white whingeing (Jeynes 2014). But as the interrogative, 'Isn't this your country too?' (*Trencherman* 58) reveals, Venter is also addressing all the contemporary South African elites that profit while the people suffer – in Venter's own words, the 'miserable, deprived human beings with hardly anything to consume. And most of all with no hope of the future ever getting better' (Venter, interview). Thus the apocalyptic register of the text, crystallized in the figure of Koert, disguises a more subdued, yet more urgent set of concerns, namely the ongoing suffering of the majority of South African subjects, who continue to live under something that one might describe as massive residual apartheid. For one writer, 'The racial patterns of income inequality remain so stark that one is tempted to question the demise of apartheid' (Marais 208). Living-on, with all its varied resonances, is the dark underside of apocalyptic rhetoric (see West-Pavlov 'Living on').

And yet Venter also registers a grim resilience in figures such as Pilot, who, when asked by Marlow about future prospects after the total collapse of infrastructure, says, 'We will simply walk around the holes' that can no longer be traversed in the comfort of a rickety bakkie (*Trencherman* 194). And indeed, it may be worth asking whether the double structure of catastrophism and its other are the two sides of an elite (and thus predominantly, though not exclusively) white complex made up of the mutually reinforcing elements of paranoia and ideology-as-false-consciousness: in other words, a composite 'white lie' (*Trencherman* 313). In contrast, Pilot's impassive, almost stoic focus on the grim realities of everyday life may be indicative of another attitude which neither falls prey to an overblown pessimism, nor is duped by the alibis which hide the creeping advance of an ever-more voracious global capitalism. A literary analogy of these contrasting attitudes might be found in Frank Kermode's examination of a dialectical relationship between beginnings and endings in *The Sense of an Ending*, where he opposes 'myths' and 'fictions': 'mythological' versions of ending paradoxically encourage stability, while 'fictions' of endings (or endings of fictions?) may encourage change and transformation (39). An echo of this less pessimistic but perhaps more acute diagnosis of the current state of the polity can be found in David Medalie's novel *The Shadow Follows*.

In a minor mode

Venter borrows ostentatiously from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a way of stressing the self-vitiating *and* self-perpetuating continuities beneath the rhetoric of catastrophism. The motifs of circularity he uses range from the elliptical plot structure down to the various circular journeys undertaken by the characters from or on Ouplaas. In contrast to Venter's intertextual affiliations with Conrad, I would like to draw attention to David Medalie's debt to E.M. Forster – another Modernist writer equally interested in the relationships between Europe and its colonies. The legacy of Forster in *The Shadow Follows* is signalled from the outset by Medalie's use of an inaugural epigraph from *Room with a View* to reveal the provenance of the novel's title. What Medalie, in a major scholarly monograph on Forster, describes as that author's embattled and conflicted 'liberal-humanist' vision (*Forster's Modernism*, 1–62) has double implications for Medalie's fiction.

On the one hand, the 'humanist' component of this term resonates with Medalie's own focus upon the detail of the largely undramatic private lives of northern-suburbs Johannesburgers: Deanna who has separated from her husband Richard; Richard who is searching for the mother who abandoned him, and eventually finds not her but her mother's sister and in turn her adopted son, that is, an aunt and a cousin, Susan and Slush; Neil who cannot express his love for Richard, but forms a friendship with Helena the lesbian radio DJ ... to mention only some of a raft of loosely connected narrative strands.

On the other hand, the 'liberal' component of the term indexes Medalie's tendency to eschew the rhetoric of both revolutionary radicalism and conservative apocalypics. In many ways, Medalie's downbeat, low-key writing exemplifies Ndebele's celebration of a new aesthetics of the ordinary – a return to the fabric of the quotidian after the 'spectacular', 'exhibitionist' character of anti-apartheid writing which constituted a knee-jerk response to the 'mind-boggling brutality' of the apartheid regime (Ndebele 38). Even Medalie's earlier short fiction in *The Shooting of the Christmas Cows* (1990), indexes that brutality of the apartheid era in curiously understated ways: for instance the eponymous story displaces the violence of the 1980s onto an annual cattle-slaughter, a black farm-worker's rejection of the meat doled out to him, and the little girl's distraught reaction to the scene (1–15). In its understatement and indirectness, Medalie's fiction provides an important foil to the 'mind-boggling' grotesqueness of Venter's satire. If, as I have suggested, Venter's satirical apocalypse may in turn also appear to be entangled with some residue of the apartheid past it can only engage in an equivalently 'spectacular', 'exhibitionist' manner, then Medalie's more muted writing may provide a significant rejoinder. Put differently, Medalie's refusal of the rhetoric of excess may in itself be a deeply political statement in a minor mode. The

'liberal' tenor of his fiction does not represent a wan quietism. Rather, I shall be suggesting in what follows, that Medalie's discrete 'liberalism' may in fact index an important way forward in the midst of a depressing contemporary political stasis.

Medalie's fiction deserves far more detailed critical scrutiny than it has received to date. When Medalie quotes Forster on Woolf, he is perhaps commenting obliquely on the way his own writing attends carefully to the texture of mundane interpersonal relationships: 'it is open to tensivity and intensity, and willingly reveals the yawn and the gape' (*Forster's Modernism*, 189). This formulation neatly summarizes Medalie's writing, which works with ellipsis and litotes rather than hyperbole. Medalie's customary form is the short story, a 'minor' genre that eschews grand narratives. If the novel is a 'major' genre, Medalie persists in *The Shadow Follows* (his first venture into the novelistic genre) in retaining his customary use of a minor mode.

The litotic, deflationary technique of Medalie's narrative can best be illustrated with reference to the topic of AIDS. Significantly, AIDS constitutes the narrateme of catastrophe par excellence for Venter. *Trencherman's* narrator cites awesome statistics about the levels of infection (98), and its protagonist is confronted everywhere by wraith-like bodies ravaged by the disease. *The Shadow Follows* pays no less careful attention to AIDS. Deanna's needle-stick from an HIV-positive patient is placed prominently at the opening of the novel (5–6). But it is notable that this potentially fatal event has a thoroughly anticlimactic outcome. Deanna takes proleptic medication, undergoes regular tests, and appears to escape infection (70, 197). Medalie does not trivialize AIDS: the virus is grimly present in the margins of the novel, mediated by the death toll that keeps Miss Bertha awake at night as she worries about how to pay for the increasingly frequent funerals in her extended family (156–7). But Medalie works indexically, acknowledging the gravity of the pandemic while refusing to indulge any form of direct and spectacular voyeurism.

The implications of Medalie's choice of maintaining a minor tenor even in his foray into a 'major' genre are not restricted to the domain of content. Once again, Medalie's eponymous intertextuality provides a significant hint of the axiomatics of his project. His description of Forster's characters can be read as revealing his own method, particularly in the way it impacts upon the structure of the novel: 'it is in their elusiveness and inscrutability as characters and, literally, in their tendency to withdraw at crucial moments and to reappear when least expected, that their "prophetic" significance is felt' (*Forster's Modernism* 190). Medalie's assessment of Forster neatly describes the structures of his own work. What is expressed here in terms of unpredictability in Forster could equally well describe the abrupt transitions in Medalie's novel from one plotline to another. Characters and their narratives disappear regularly, only to reappear again some time later, as the respective overlaps and connections of other plotlines slowly

emerge. The successive chapters tend to have the compact form of short fiction, not merely in their scope, but also in their manner of beginning *in media res* and ending abruptly. Indeed, the experience of reading *The Shadow Follows* is not dissimilar to that of reading Medalie's short story collections such as *The Shooting of the Christmas Cows* (1990) or its successor, *The Mistress's Dog* (2010). This salient characteristic of the reading-experience in an encounter with Medalie's oeuvre is of central importance for the model of anti-apocalyptic temporality he proposes.

Medalie's narrative has the appearance of a mosaic-like pattern; this pattern is in turn the surface manifestation of an interwoven plot structure. The novel is constructed out of number of more or less equally privileged narratives that intertwine now and then. Thus the plot as a whole retains its multiple strands and eschews any reductive singularity of focus. No single plotline ever achieves dominance. In other words, the novel is an interweaving of short fictions whose respective trajectories criss-cross, link, but also interrupt one another. In another one of Medalie's suggestive summaries of E.M. Forster's method, 'the "separations and gaps" proliferate' (*Forster's Modernism*, 199), yet not without a tenuous network of odd coincidences and connections that crystallize in the most surprising of places. As Neil's friend Helena comments, in eminently Forsterian mode (Forster 3), 'Underlying everything is connection' (*Shadow* 215).

Non-linear histories

This plot structure of *The Shadow Follows* is important, I suggest, as its 'exploded view' of contemporary South African society in – to pilfer the title of a 2004 novel by Ivan Vladislavić – has a strong axiological charge. This open matrix of loose connections is an eminently spatialized form, one not inappropriate for a scholar of Modernism such as Medalie (see Frank *Widening Gyre* 3–62). But as Frank, in his successive studies on spatial form in Modernism observed, and others such as W.T.J. Mitchell noted in response to his work, a spatial form in the wake of relativity cannot but have temporal implications (see Frank 1978; Mitchell 1980). It is these implications that I wish to tease out, in what follows, in contrast to and in dialogue with Venter's novel, by interrogating their respective 'chronotopicalities' (Bakhtin 84).

Any number of examples from *The Shadow Follows* could serve to illustrate this structure of unexpected intertwining, but let me focus upon the meeting, in late middle-age, of Barbara Lombard (also known as Marie Moxley) and Susan Southern (Elna Louw). Three or four decades previously, as teenagers, they talked, kissed, and parted; each, however, unbeknownst to the other, has continued to be influenced, over the years, by the encounter. The two episodes,

separated by years of story-time, are diegetically proximate (*Shadow* 164–8, 185–9), giving the lie to the apparent force of temporal and spatial separation, as Barbara realizes:

She was amazed. How could their brief interaction, so long ago, have had these consequences? How could she have influenced someone to such an extent and not known about it? Elna Louw had stayed with her all these years, although, as time went by, she had faded as a person and become instead a template of lurking dreams. She had never imagined, however, that she had remained with Elna and been so important to her. She believed she knew precisely what the devouring past had consumed and what little it had spared; and yet she saw now that it was not all as she had thought. (186–7)

This passage almost heuristically reduces those entangled paths of cause and effect to two strands, interlinked even as they appear to lose touch with each other, converging again almost half a century later. But the cumulative effect of the novel resists such reduction, working, rather, to amplify the complexity of such patterns. Every plotline in the novel is connected to at least several of the others, albeit at several removes. As Noldie says to James Pilkington in the plane on the way to Amsterdam, ‘The world ... is full of coincidences’ (204). Apparently small events have intertwined, multi-faceted results which in turn have further knock-on effects, leading in unexpected directions at times in inverse proportion to the insignificance of their origins.

Medalie sketches thus a model of temporality, a notion of causality and futurity, which is as un-apocalyptic as could possibly be – precisely because it consists in minor, everyday events which can never be construed as merely entropic or catastrophic. If anything, they are ‘catastrophic’ in a rather different sense, that of contemporary ‘Catastrophe Theory’, which studies the transformation of topological structures; the ways in which an external factor will provoke a metamorphosis at a so-called ‘point of bifurcation’ or ‘tipping point’ (Thom 1975). Such mathematical theories may appear far removed from the concerns of literary analysis, but in fact, they provide illuminating models of continuity, change at the nexus of temporal progression and spatiality in ways that are significantly relevant to the study of literary texts. In particular, they resonate strongly with narrative patterns in an age that is sceptical of the linear causalities of Enlightenment positivism (Werner 1999). Medalie, revealingly, describes social change in the post-apartheid era as ‘complex, knotty, jolting and subject to unexpected turns and reversals’ (‘To Retrace Your Steps’ 4).

In this respect, it is not surprising that Catastrophe Theory is closely related in its concerns to Chaos Theory, whose model of futurity assumes that minor events can produce cascading consequences. For Chaos Theory, the future is by definition open because its nature is unpredictable (Gleick 1988). In *The Shadow Follows*, Barbara reflects, ‘There was so much in her life, in Hannelie’s, in Noldie’s, that she could never have predicted; so much that she, who had

lived the changes, found hard to believe.... Life did just what it liked. There was nothing more anarchic than life' (81).

To pursue the analogy with Chaos Theory, we can imagine each story-episode in *The Shadow Follows* as a closed subsystem, a 'basin of attraction'; that is, a system whose coherence is guaranteed by its own internal 'centre of gravity'. At the moment a neighbouring subsystem becomes a strange (exterior, non-systemic) attractor, their respective margins touch, thereby creating a threshold of 'emergence'. One structure opens up to another, with a concomitant transformation of both. The susceptibility of one element to another is not merely a destabilizing factor; at the same time new networks emerge out of the instability of subsystems. In *Walden* Thoreau declared that, 'All change is a miracle to contemplate; but it is taking place every instant' (8). Change is a constant and it is always creative, even when it may have the appearance of catastrophe or collapse.

Such a dynamic of creative generation creates odd coalitions and alliances, which do not mimic those of linear family genealogies, but rather, are constructed via jumps and surprising connections. It is such structural characteristics which account for the prevalence, in Medalie's novel, of what Noudelman (2004, 2012) calls 'disruptive kinship'. In the place of missing parents, children or siblings (of which the Medalie's novel contains a surprisingly large number), there emerge adopted children, ersatz families and unexpected partnerships of various sorts: Susan Southern and her adopted son Slush (150); straight Richard and gay Neil eventually reconciled in a sort of friendship (237–9); Richard reunited not with his errant mother, but with her sister and adopted son, that is, with an aunt and a cousin (232); gay Neil and lesbian Helena as literal bedfellows (138–9); abrasive Aunt Maisie and her equally sulky domestic Miss Bertha (59–60); the lesbian couple Hannelie and Barbara; and so on.

The Shadow Follows has in common with the work of many other African writers, from Coetzee to Gordimer and from Farah to Gurnah, a tendency to use the family as a synecdoche of the nation or of society more broadly. Whereas Venter's families (biological in Melbourne, ersatz in Ouplaas) are portrayed as totally dysfunctional, Medalie's families or their cognates are both dysfunctional and – the duality is of central importance – nonetheless susceptible to renewal in unexpected and contingent ways. It is notable that Medalie's text with its oddly matched cross-racial couples (Susan and Slush, Aunt Maisie and Miss Bertha, white-Afrikaans-ANC MP Noldie and his coloured wife Theresa) is quietly optimistic about the long-term possibilities for multi-ethnic coexistence in South Africa. This contrasts markedly with Venter's alliance between HIV-positive Esmie and monstrously bloated Koert, both of whom are doomed to die.

Gloom, doom and boom

Lest this description of Medalie's poetics and its socio-political axiology appear trite, it is worth recalling that *The Shadow Follows* never eschews negative, indeed horrifically realistic elements. As indicated, the threat of AIDS is omnipresent in the interstices of the narrative. More shockingly, towards the end of the novel, Richard's elderly parents Elaine and Jock are assaulted, leaving Elaine dead and Jock in a coma (204–5). This attack does not take place in the vulnerable old-world suburban mansion their doctor son Richard persuades them to leave because of its lack of burglar bars, alarms and electric fences. Rather, it occurs in the high-security retirement complex they have reluctantly moved into at his bidding. Not unrelatedly, Miss Bertha and BB, Aunt Maisie's maid and companion (in an irritable but somehow durable old-age partnership), are overwhelmed by the rising tide of AIDS-related deaths in her extended family and circle of acquaintances. The text is at pains to depict the heavy financial and moral burden this places on her (156–7).

Other large-scale political issues are acknowledged, albeit in passing – that is to say, elliptically. For instance, the huge, indeed expanding gap between rich and poor in South Africa (Leibbrandt 2012; Tregenna and Tsela 2012), is acknowledged in a discussion between Noldie and James Pilkington, the expatriate investment banker. Pilkington observes, 'the government says it wants to create a bigger and more powerful black middle class. But what we're getting of course is a black elite. The rest have had it of course. They're done for. They're never going to get a foothold. That's why the country can't come right: too great a disparity between the rich and the poor. Doesn't bode well' (*Shadow* 203).

To be sure, then, there are moments of pessimism in the novel when Medalie's fiction functions as a barometer of the present. Yet, for all these, the novel is never dystopian. Pilkington disavows responsibility: 'I'm not here to solve the country's problems. In any case, it's not my problem any more. I'm a Canadian citizen now' (203). The diagnosis of the country's problems is outsourced to a callously amoral expatriate ex-South African – as if the gloom-and-doom scenario he articulates is the luxury of those not confronted on an everyday basis with South Africa's dilemmas. Such a diagnosis and accompanying prognosis reveals that its bankruptcy is predicated upon the absence of obligation of any practical or moral engagement with those problems. Rather, Medalie suggests in his almost offhand placing of these indices of a grim social reality that his novel is deliberately acknowledging and not hypostatizing such phenomena. The text appears to be claiming, via its litotic diction and its fragmented structures, that it cannot address problems of this dimension except at the very prudential level of everyday negotiations within the compass of fictionalized human relationships. The modesty of its undertaking is in

inverse proportion to the seriousness of its intention. Even the possibility that the novel implicitly resists the gravity and scope of responsibility I am ascribing to it may be a further index of its litotic method.

The story that Richard and Susan piece together of Richard's biological mother's hidden life exemplifies what Medalie, quoting Forster on the 'history of this planet' describes as a mere 'planet full of scraps ... which no historical arts can arrange' (*Forster's Modernism* 196). The story of his biological mother's life after her abandonment of him at birth 'would never be what Richard so clearly longed for: a story that justifies, that completes as it encloses. Instead, it sagged: it was patchy and frayed. But still, it *was* a narrative' (*Shadow* 235). This formulation in fact describes both Medalie's patchwork plotting and, more significantly, the narrative of South Africa in the aftermath of its spectacular hopes in 1994. It suggests a future that needs to be patched together out of the everyday. The form of the book offers just such a configuration: fragmented yet joined, pragmatic yet cautiously optimistic. The text offers a question and an answer regarding these issues. Speaking in the context of the marred friendship between Richard and Neil, but in a manner which resonates with broader issues of multi-racial coexistence, Richard wonders, 'Could there ever be a relationship between them that was free of pain and untarnished by power? And if not, was there any point to it?' (238). A response comes from Deanna, formulated in the eponymous language of the 'shadow' of the apartheid past: 'She no longer found consolation in a shadowless purity. Her impulse was to contend with misshapen seasons, not escape them' (240).

Medalie's novel does not capitulate to the temptation of 'gloom' because it knows that catastrophism is not genuinely interested in palliating social injustice. Rather, apocalypticism serves to exacerbate collective anxieties, militating against empathy or compassion. His low-key attention to microcosmic concerns (which index bigger issues without attempting, hubristically, to address them in their totality) is thus intensely ethical, albeit in a minor mode. It could be objected that later criticism by Medalie, focussing upon such texts as Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Mda's *Heart of Redness* and Van Niekerk's *Agaat*, appears to take a decidedly less optimistic view of the way the 'shadow of the past' follows South African society ('To Retrace Your Steps' 14). It is notable, however, that the novels that Medalie identifies as sites of pessimism participate in the same *plaasroman* tradition as Venter's *Trencherman*. The *plaasroman*, as the central genre of Afrikaner celebrations of settler belonging on stolen land (see Coetzee 1988; Warnes 2009, 2011), turns increasingly sour and dystopian in an age of post-apartheid land rights, despite the unconscionably slow process of land redistribution (see Ntsebeza and Hall 2007). It is not insignificant, then, that Medalie's narratives all lead away from rural areas towards the city of Johannesburg as a site of potential, though never guaranteed, transformation. In place of a *plaasroman* increasingly preoccupied with its own generic aporia and geopolitical anachronism, the

labyrinthine city-text stands as a remarkably cogent and suggestive statement about possibilities for future-making today.

Venter's *Trencherman*, by contrast, a *plaasroman* in a state of terminal paroxysm, is a model of laminated layers of entropy, in which structures are collapsing at various speeds: 'This country is devastated. It's over' (89); 'Everything's finished, everything's destroyed' (116). At the surface level we are given a view of a South African society in which food is scarce (54, 60, 66, 71), power is down, phones are down (64, 67), hospitals have closed (86), AIDS-related deaths are omnipresent (58–9, 60), and a Hobbseian state of nature prevails: 'All rules have been forgotten' (21). This scenario echoes the entropic model of classical physics, in which the universe is caught in a process of permanently dispersing energy. The final lines of *Trencherman* are, 'The name of the farm was ... long forgotten. Imagine: wind blowing through the ruins of the farmstead as if no one had ever lived there' (316). According to this model, human action combats entropy by co-opting natural processes and siphoning off their energy – wind, water, and especially carbon fuels (which converge in *Trencherman* in a central episode where Marlowe drives to Maitland to get parts for the moribund windmill, without which the Ouplaas sheep have no water). These energy sources underpin a model of technological development that is fundamentally posited upon the consumption-driven, expansion-obsessed, counter-entropic dynamic of capitalism. That model depends crucially (and fatefully) upon the elision of the costs of dynamic expansion (infinitely deferred debt, increasing poverty, ecological depredation) (Harvey 2006; 2010); it inverts the model of entropy, assuming constant expansion beyond the limits of any sustainability (Vogl 56–9). Put in simplified terms, the fear of entropic loss generates a greedy acquisitiveness that merely becomes someone else's loss and, ultimately, everybody's loss. My implementation of economic and scientific analogies of entropy may require some justification; yet it is also part of a tradition that goes back to the polymath knowledge of authors such as Goethe, and includes late-nineteenth-century writers' allusions to Kelvin's theory of planetary cooling (Kern 96)

Significantly, what entropic and counter-entropic models, caught in a fateful stranglehold, both assimilate and simultaneously elide, is a non-entropic dynamic of creativity and continuity at the heart of apparent entropy. Medalie's closing line offers in this respect an interesting contrast to Venter's: 'They arrived so quietly that at first there was nothing more to discern than a gathering of small movements and sounds. Many did not even notice this faint clamour.... The winds of August were come again' (*Shadow* 244). In this non- or co-entropic model (Capra and Luigi 159), apparent collapse merely prefaces phasal transitions between various states of matter, transitions in which novelty is always being regenerated out of apparent disintegration (see Bohm and Peat 132–7, 146). Medalie offers a much more discreet version of the (non)alternative of entropic and counter-entropic models when he deftly sketches out the complex relationships

between the ‘*conservative* houses’ of the white middle class (*Shadow* 110), whose ‘restrained economy’ (Bataille 1991) does not preclude a ‘stern entropy’ (*Shadow* 110); a less disciplined version of this inevitable entropy is embodied by the ‘anarchy’ condemned by Jock, a condemnation which leads him to turn over his nephew to the police (34–5). ‘Anarchy’ is explicitly condoned by Barbara, however, in her recognition that ‘[t]here was nothing more anarchic than life’ (81). Medalie’s novel thus subscribes, in its own low-key manner, to a radically subversive notion of entropy-as-generativity.

What Venter’s novel displays, in a surprising if hidden affinity with Medalie’s text, is the hollowness of the counter-entropic model of constant expansion, which is ‘conservative’ at best. At worst, it converges with a vision of greed-ridden capitalist counter-entropy – ‘My meat, my meat’ (*Trencherman* 131) – and its final paroxysm of self-destruction. This vision of self-preserving expansiveness is embodied in the grotesque, quasi-Bakhtinian figure of a hugely bloated Koert – ‘He’s devouring all the meat before your eyes’ (133) – and disguises a slower, but by far more dangerous, self-destructive form of entropy endowed with remarkable longevity: infinitely accumulated debt delegated in the form of ‘slow violence’ to the global poor and the global environment (Nixon 2011). Venter’s novel offers a stinging critique of contemporary South Africa that is far more complex than the initial impression of shrilly hyperbolic nightmare suggests. But Venter’s vitriol remains largely an exercise in critique, in sharp contrast to Medalie’s low-key and nuanced proposal of ways of living-on. In turn, Medalie’s novel suggests, in the phasal transitions of its structure and the cunningly interwoven life narratives, a counter-entropic model of modest continuity.

It is hardly surprising that Venter’s shrillness, even if it parodies and mocks catastrophism, has garnered him a wider media reception than Medalie’s work (see for instance the reviews by de Kock 2009 and de Villiers 2008). By contrast, the undramatic quality of Medalie’s novel is the text’s greatest and ultimately enduring strength, and the mode in which it proposes modest solutions to the malaise of contemporary society. This modesty is important, not merely as an index of realism, but because it refuses assimilation into an over-arching model of growth, expansion and delegated debt, from the macro-level of economics down to the micro-level of literary genre. Paradoxically, however, just that quality has led to its almost total neglect by academics and the absence of discussion in the public sphere (for one exception see Lenta 71–2). This article aims to make a contribution to lifting that silence somewhat, not merely to give the novel the critical credit which is its due, but also to place its important contribution to contemporary South African future-making more visibly in the public sphere.

In both novels, in the final analysis, and despite the grotesquely thick veneer of catastrophism in Venter’s text, life goes on – in fits and starts, to be sure, in unexpected

directions, without much hint of a heroic narrative of absolute transformation, but it goes on. In Venter's *Trencherman*, it goes on in the margins of the narrative, indexed by Pilot's riposte to Marlow's white-middle-class question about what will happen 'when I leave and you don't have a car to drive in any more': Pilot replies, 'Then we shall simply walk around the holes. Then we walk past these poles' (194). The discreet anaphora and assonance, and the shift from future to present evinces a minor poetics of endurance and living on, albeit one which is largely overshadowed by the apocalyptic tone of Venter's text and its overriding preoccupation with settler-colonizer bankruptcy. In Medalie's novel, life goes on with Helena's self-deprecating radio-disc-jockey-humour: 'She paused and then continued: "I'm Helena Verster, enjoying your company on Radio Blue Crane, 88.7, the Station for Committed South Africans, and this is Crowded House with *Don't Dream its Over*"' (244). The discrete syncopation inaugurating these penultimate lines epitomizes Medalie's version of living-on. His quiet tone has allowed his fiction to be overshadowed by novels such as Venter's – but in that self-deprecation lies its promise and potential as creative social intervention.

Medalie's narrative offers both a theory and an abundance of exemplary narratives of mitigated transformation that are neither linear nor teleological. Neil's lack of expectations of his therapy is exemplary here. Therapy as salvation is explicitly disavowed by the text:

Neil was a therapy agnostic... he had not witnessed any miracles ... Neil had heard of these things, but he could not bring himself to believe in their immanence – certainly not as a creed which he could adapt for his own purposes. ... But, for all that, there was something that made him persevere, that made him cling to the faint hope that it would bring him to what he needed: a way out of the impasse of himself, a journey to a land where he could meet himself as if he were being introduced to someone new and exciting. (52–3)

Whether therapy can act as a template for the healing of wounds and the resolution of trauma at a much larger scale – that of the national – is debatable. In a sense, that was the premise of the TRC, which, for all its bravery and indisputable significance, may not have brought the healing it promised (see for instance Simpson 241). But Neil's scepticism bespeaks much more than a loss of hope in models of national reconciliation analogous with the talking cure. More significant is the perseverance with the work of self-scrutiny and dogged perseverance in a minor key, in the absence of a guaranteed teleological fulfilment.

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