

## CHAPTER TWO

### **‘The truth of wounded memories’: Writing on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

There was a long table, starched purple vestment  
And after a few hours of testimony,  
The Archbishop, chair of the commission  
Laid down his head, and wept.

That’s how it began.

Ingrid de Kok, ‘The Archbishop chairs the first session’ (2002:  
22)

During a preparatory outreach meeting for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the Eastern Cape, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a psychologist with the TRC, noticed a woman sitting with her back to the stage and the speaker. When the psychologist approached her, the woman got up and walked out. Once outside, she began to cry and asked, ‘Have you come here to hurt us? ...Have you come here to open our scars?’ Through her tears she denounced the TRC as a pointless exercise – she had forgotten her pain, she insisted, and had ‘put grass over it....And now you want us to remember? Will this bring my son back?’ she asked (2003:87).

Gobodo-Madikizela offered to take the woman, Mrs Plaatjie, home. Mrs Plaatjie invited the psychologist into her two-roomed home, offered her a chair, and sat down herself facing the window. ‘Then,’ Gobodo-Madikizela recounts, ‘she began to tell her story.’

‘My son was eleven. He came home during school break at ten o’clock. I was sitting there where you are sitting, just exactly where you are sitting in that chair. He walked in dressed in his school uniform and went to the cupboard over there and cut himself a slice of bread. He is doing all of this in a rush. He is like that when he comes home during break. He spread peanut butter on it and then put the rest of the bread back, leaving the crumbs all over the cupboard, and the knife, still smudged with peanut butter. He ran out. He is still chewing his bread and holding it in his hand. It wasn’t long – I heard

shots outside. Some commotion and shouts. Then I'm hearing, "*uThemba, uThemba, nank'uThemba, bamdabule!* [This is Themba. They have shot Themba!]" and then someone calling out for me: "*mama kaThemba!* [Themba's mother!]." I went flying out of this house. Now I am dazed. I ran, not thinking. My eyes are on the crowd that has gathered. Here is my son, my only child. It was just blood all over. My anguish was beyond anything I ever thought I could experience. They have finished him. I threw myself down. I can feel the wetness of his blood – I felt his last breath leave him. He was my only child.' (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003: 88-89)

It was a police bullet that killed eleven-year-old Themba Plaatjie in Mlungisi township that morning in 1986. Gobodo-Madikizela's concern now, more than ten years later, is for the bereaved mother who relives the events, gesturing with her hand, lapsing into the present tense, so that past events become vivid, here and now: 'I was sitting there where you are sitting'; 'He went to the cupboard over there.' 'He is doing all of this in a rush. He is like that when he comes home during break... He is still chewing his bread and holding it in his hand.'

Briefly, Themba is alive again. Then his death, too, becomes present: 'Now I am dazed.... My eyes are on the crowd that has gathered. Here is my son, my only child.' Gobodo-Madikizela calls this 'the timelessness of traumatic pain' (89). 'The traumatic past,' writes Shane Graham of the TRC process, 'cannot be assimilated into memory and consciousness as other events normally are, because the trauma survivor continues to be haunted by the past and is compelled to relive it literally...' (2003:13). It is clear from the mother's story that the crumbs of bread, the knife still smeared with peanut butter, take on a new significance after Themba's death, as she includes these details in reconstituting the events. In *Narrating our Healing* (Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008: 31), Gobodo-Madikizela writes, 'In a sense, the cupboard, the bread, the peanut butter, the knife are all crumbs, pieces that no longer fit into a coherent whole or life story. But these crumbs and pieces are recalled because they are the only things in her memory of that day that are not spattered in blood – to be buried under the grass.' Because trauma shatters one's life narrative, she argues, fragments are 'shored against the ruins' of one's life, and these are the images more easily recalled. 'Deep memory', on the other hand, where unspeakable pain lies buried, cannot be accessed without a 'second wounding' (34; the term is taken from Cathy Carruth's *Unclaimed Experience*). Yet, she argues, following Carruth, that

‘trauma will out’ because its psychic imprint remains present (30) – hence Mrs Plaatjie’s ‘exploded silence’ (31)

Nevertheless Mrs Plaatjie’s original question remains valid. Could anything be achieved by revisiting past events a decade later, making them once again so painfully present? Was there any point to re-opening scarred wounds and buried experience, re-opening graves, as it were, that had ‘grass put over’ them – and in all this asking survivors to revisit unspeakable pain, wounding them once again? Doing so could not, as Mrs Plaatjie had said, bring back her son. The true cost of the Truth Commission must be measured in the vulnerability of the wounded, revisiting shock, pain, torture, humiliation, helplessness, loss and bereavement.

South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the product of negotiations for a new political dispensation, which led to the country’s first democratic election in 1994. This election belatedly but effectively decolonised the country and brought to power, with an overwhelming majority, the representatives of the previously disenfranchised black population. Those who had been marginalised, in many cases through imprisonment and exile, now formed the government and held the centre. Though there was, for a few years, a government of national unity, the election effectively ushered in a complete transformation, an overturning of power relations in the country.

The TRC became the country’s foremost passage rite. It was flawed from the outset by the very compromises that had made the settlement possible, and by the tension implied by its brief, which was both to reveal truth and to effect reconciliation. It offered, not blanket indemnity, but qualified amnesty to perpetrators of gross human rights violations between 1960 and 1994, provided the acts had been politically motivated and were not disproportionate to their objective, and on the condition of full disclosure.

Paul Ricoeur has criticised the concept of amnesty in that it ‘prevents both forgiveness and justice’: ‘amnesty is organised forgetting, and it has nothing to do with the pacification that forgiveness can bring between two consciences. The institutions of amnesty... constitute a forgiveness that is public, commanded, and that

has therefore nothing to do with... a personal act of compassion. In my opinion, amnesty does wrong at once to truth, thereby repressed as if forbidden, and to justice, as it is due to victims' (Ricouer quoted in Antohi 2005:10). Some survivors, like Mrs Limpho Hani, widow of the murdered leader of the SA Communist Party, Chris Hani, and Steve Biko's widow Ntsiki, have resolutely opposed amnesty for perpetrators of these crimes.

The trade-off of amnesty for disclosure was, in the words of Chief Justice Ismail Mohamed, a source of 'grave discomfort'. He nevertheless defended the compromise:

Much of what transpired during this shameful period is shrouded in secrecy and not easily capable of objective demonstration and proof. Loved ones have disappeared, sometimes mysteriously, and most of them no longer survive to tell their tales... Records are not easily accessible, witnesses are often unknown, dead, unavailable or unwilling. All that often effectively remains is the truth of wounded memories of loved ones sharing instinctive suspicions, deep and traumatising to the survivors but otherwise incapable of translating themselves into objective and corroborative evidence which could survive the rigours of the law. (In Tutu, 1999: 29)

Hearings were held by the Commission, travelling from centre to centre, for both perpetrators seeking amnesty and for victims or survivors seeking reparation, or simply seeking to have their stories recorded and validated.

Former constitutional court judge Albie Sachs, himself a former exile and car bomb survivor, has defended the TRC process against accusations that its 'truths' were legally untested, by referring to victims' testimonies as 'experiential truth': '...when you want to hear the voices, when dignity consists not only of the findings, but of the right to speak and be heard, of the right to be acknowledged, of personal pain becoming the pain of the nation, then the experiential side becomes predominant and very important' (Sachs: 2005). And indeed, personal pain did become the pain of the nation in what Sachs has called 'this deeply engaging, profoundly affecting, brilliant, difficult, dark, intense process that we all participated in and watched and argued about' (2005). In Paul Ricoeur's view, 'the hearings truly permitted the public exercise of the work of memory and mourning, guided by an appropriate process of

cross-examination. In offering a public space for complaints and for the recounting of suffering, the commission certainly gave rise to a shared *katharsis*' (2004: 483-484).<sup>18</sup>

The TRC's brief was criticised by some, however, who felt that there should have been a moral distinction between those fighting for freedom and those who believed they were defending the state, especially since the policy of apartheid had itself been declared a crime against humanity by the United Nations. Others pointed to the failure of the pre-democracy political leaders to take responsibility for the atrocities committed under their government. Theologian Willa Boesak (1996) has argued for the discourse of forgiveness to take cognisance of the many faces of justice and vengeance; besides the restorative justice which defined the TRC process, retributive justice, he insists, should be enacted. Retribution needed to be effected, in Boesak's eyes, on those responsible for apartheid and its injustices: 'at least those at the top level who gave the orders' (1996:68). When the National Party delegation, led by the then President F.W. de Klerk, denied knowledge of wrongdoing, Tutu wept.

Yet for victims and survivors like Sachs – and perhaps Mrs Plaatjie too - it was also important to speak of state-sponsored terror, which had been kept secret and lied about, its perpetrators even decorated, because the silence needed to be broken. Terry Dowdall, a psychologist with the TRC, has written about the importance of breaking the 'culture of silence', and I quote his words again, more fully:

The 'culture of silence', then, is not just an absence of speaking out against intimidation and repression. It is a complex mix of fear, avoidance and compromise that is often entangled with confused ideas from the regime's propaganda. In many cases the primary message that has been absorbed is the 'process' message – that power confers the right to abuse. This is one of the reasons the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is so important to the

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<sup>18</sup> *Katharsis* was sometimes experienced by individual witnesses. In fact, another commissioner, Piet Meiring, recalls the incident of Tutu's weeping at the first Human Rights Violation hearing, after the difficult testimony of 'one of the unknown, practically forgotten witnesses' – an old, bereaved mother who is not named even in his account. Seeing the witness again during the lunch break, Meiring hesitantly asks her if her testimony was 'worth it'. He recollects her reply:

It was difficult to talk about all these things. But tonight, for the first time in sixteen years, I think I will be able to sleep through the night. Maybe tonight I will be able to sleep soundly without having nightmares. (Meiring, 1999: 25)

country as a whole: left alone – just walked away from – the distorted visions absorbed during the period of repression remain unchallenged, uncorrected. The general public does not necessarily rethink its assumptions about the proper use of power; the survivors are left with the ache, the burden and confusion of the past and the sense of lessened value... Much has been written about the cathartic effect upon the nation of telling the truth about the abuses of the past.... It remains crucial that it is clearly stated that these things happened and that they are evil. (1996: 32, 36)

While Dowdall's emphasis is on correcting the acceptance of an abuse of power by the state, other abuses were brought to light as well. The revelation of truth was equally important to Bishop Peter Storey, a witness in the investigation into the activities of Mrs Winnie Mandela and the so-called Mandela Football Club, who, with Mrs Mandela as their patron, had sown terror in Soweto with their thuggery and whose members had been convicted of three murders, one of a child. Testifying after other witnesses had clearly been too intimidated or loyal to the Mandela name to speak openly about her part in a number of murders (Krog, 1999:383), Storey said:

To dispel the suffocating fog of silence is very important for the future of this country. This tragedy has wounded, it has hurt, it has destroyed people's ability to know the difference between right and wrong. It has shown that it is not enough to become politically liberated, we must also become human. (In Meiring, 1999: 310, quoted in different words by Krog, 1999: 374-375.)

Both sources emphasise the discernment of good and evil, not only for the perpetrator, but for the victim too, who can be dehumanised by brutal oppression. Storey speaks of apartheid as the 'primary cancer' of the body: 'But secondary infections have touched many of apartheid's opponents and eroded their knowledge of good and evil. And one of the tragedies of life is it's possible to become that which we hate most – a ruthless abuse of power and a latitude that allow our deeds to resemble the abuses we fought against' (in Krog, 1999: 374). The healing process, the rehumanisation of a traumatised nation, requires a reformulation of values. Archbishop Tutu's words, in his memorable plea to Mrs Mandela, capture this new struggle: 'We are struggling to establish a different dispensation characterised by a new morality, integrity. Truthfulness. Accountability.' (In Krog, 1999:390)

I have mentioned that the TRC process was hampered by its 'bi-polar' brief, to reveal truth, and to effect reconciliation: in fact some of the worst truths disclosed made

reconciliation seem increasingly out of reach. Two Zapiro cartoons from the period illustrate this predicament. In the first, Archbishop Tutu, chairman of the Commission, leads a group representing victims, perpetrators and the media, to the edge of a chasm. His side is marked Truth, the other, Reconciliation. Map in hand, the archbishop nevertheless has no bridge to reach the other side (*Sowetan*, 26-5-92, reprinted in Verwoerd and Mabizela, 2000: 133). A later cartoon, produced well into the TRC process, features a map as well, but this time it is of a maze, with the archbishop trying to lead a disgruntled black man and white man through a poorly lit underground labyrinth, on an impossible path to reconciliation (*Mail and Guardian*, 30-7-96, reprinted in Verwoerd and Mabizela, 40).

What bridged the divide between truth and reconciliation, in some truly remarkable instances, was pure grace: the surprising gift of forgiveness.

The TRC chairperson, Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu, and his deputy, Dr Alex Boraine, were both clergymen, and for many the TRC process was perceived to become a Christian sacrament of confession and, sometimes, absolution on the part of victims – quite apart from the amnesty which was in the commission’s power. But for Antjie Krog, a writer who covered the TRC as a journalist and wrote a personal account of the experience, another ethos was at work: the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, which is roughly translated as humaneness. It is a communal ethos summed up in the words *I am a person because of other people*.

Krog quotes the words of another mother, Cynthia Ngewu, whose son, Christopher Piet, died in March 1986 of multiple bullet wounds (twenty-five, in fact). He and six other youths killed on that day in a police ambush became known as the Gugulethu Seven. Ngewu found and identified her son in the morgue, then saw news coverage of Christopher being dragged behind a police van. Her testimony was recorded before the TRC:

During that time, when all this happened, I was too weak. What I – what I knew was that I didn’t want to see any white man in front of me, because I

was – I was full of hatred at that time, because of the way my son was killed.  
(In Krog, 1999: 292.)<sup>19</sup>

Yet this same, remarkable woman, when confronted years later with the man who killed her son, is able to say:

This thing called reconciliation... if I am understanding it correctly... if it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back... then I agree, then I support it all. (In Krog, 1999: 164)

Ngewu provides a profound statement on reconciliation, and essentially on the forgiveness that breaches the divide. It rehumanises, not only the guilty, but his victim – and more: when this mother says that ‘all of us get our humanity back’ she understands at a profound level that an injury to one damages, diminishes, dehumanises *everyone*. It is this sense of community, and of taking responsibility for community, that characterises *ubuntu*. Cynthia Ngewu also understands that she has the power, through the spoken word, to heal the body. That forgiveness entails strength, too, is evident in her words that, earlier, she was ‘too weak’.

Desmond Tutu describes *ubuntu* as that which ‘constrained so many to choose to forgive rather than to demand retribution....Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good,’ he writes of the African world view. ‘Anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness, are corrosive of this good. To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest.’ This surprising statement is then explained: ‘What dehumanises you, inexorably dehumanises me. Forgiveness gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanise them’ (1999: 34,35).

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<sup>19</sup> A word of caution should be included here: Catherine M. Cole has pointed out that a number of secondary renditions of TRC testimonies, including Krog’s, are too easily treated ‘as though these sources are primary evidence from the Commission itself’ (2010:82). A notable example of this, which she discusses at some length, is the testimony given by mothers of the Gugulethu Seven, and in particular that of Cynthia Ngewu, whose testimony, she says, ‘Krog reproduces, apparently verbatim and without commentary’, in an account which is in fact ‘highly compressed and edited’, shaped ‘to suit the narrative thrust of both the chapter and the book’. She concludes that ‘Krog manipulated victim testimony’ (82). Krog’s material is not untrue, but is not acknowledged to have been edited. (Cole’s portrait of Ngewu is of a far more forceful and vigorous, articulate woman than seems to emerge from Krog’s account.)

To speak forgiveness, then, is to set free both perpetrator and victim. ‘(M)emory becomes language in telling’, writes Ricoeur (2000:15). But the power of the spoken word is also finite. The struggle to put unbearable trauma into words is captured by Ingrid de Kok in ‘Tongue-tied’ (2002: 24):

‘Do you promise to tell the truth,  
The whole truth and nothing but the truth?’

Someone’s been hurt.  
But she can’t speak.  
They say she’s ‘tongue-tied’.

Like an umbilical neck throttle.  
No spit, sound, swallow.  
Voice in a bottle.

Now she’s speaking underwater,  
To herself, to drowning,  
To her son, her lost daughter.  
Her tongue’s a current  
Washing over dead fish,  
Abandoning rope and tackle:

‘They came for the children, took, then me,  
And then, then afterwards  
The bucket bled. My ears went still.  
I’m older than my mother when...’

The gull drags its wing to the lighthouse steps.  
‘That’s the truth. So help. Whole. To tell.’

With marine imagery De Kok evokes the impossibility of making oneself understood underwater, mouthing vainly, as the witness ‘drowns’ in the attempt to recapture a wounding memory which overwhelms her. She becomes incoherent when she leads up to unbearable events: ‘...then me/ And then, then afterwards/ The bucket bled.’ Even an attempt to approach the event differently, creating distance through placing the trauma in the context of generations, tails off as the horror still cannot be spoken: ‘I’m older than my mother when...’ At the centre of her experience lies the unspeakable, the ‘abyss’: for trauma victims, write Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela, ‘a crucial matter is the abyss between the time before and after the trauma, an abyss that has destroyed all feelings of continuity and order’ (2008: 6). Without the control of ‘rope and tackle’ the woman’s tongue, first tied in muteness,

follows its own futile course, a ‘current/ Washing over dead fish’. Her isolation from her listeners is emphasised by ‘voice in a bottle./ Now she’s speaking underwater,/ To herself.../ To her son, her lost daughter.’ The poem’s last words, ‘To tell’, isolated among incoherent fragments, underscore her futile effort.

This woman is not named; she is ‘someone’, one of the many who have ‘been hurt’. Her pain is still too great to articulate, its fragmentary presentation in itself a symptom of the limitations of memory. Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela point out that extreme trauma causes a ‘psychic rupture, a tearing apart of the integrity of the self’ which affects the way it is remembered: ‘Memories of trauma... are stored in dissociated and fragmented form’ (2008:25); they are the ‘unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences’ (quoting Van der Kolk: 56). This is what makes it both difficult and painful to try to bear witness to traumatic events.

De Kok’s fragmentary representation of these ‘unassimilated scraps’ of the memory of trauma (also called ‘deep memory’) is telling in itself. The ‘double gesture of fragmentary writing,’ Saul Tobias writes, ‘its seeming invitation to, and suspension of, closure, takes on an ethical dimension when the fragment marks the place of a lost or inaccessible life or memory which seems at one and the same time to demand acknowledgement but would hold any appropriation of its singularity and uniqueness to a common order of understanding to constitute a betrayal’ (Tobias, 1999: 8). De Kok, in maintaining the elisions, the halting, incoherent narrative, leaving a hole at the centre of the account, follows the speaker in marking that place of a lost life or irrecoverable memory, conjoining, in the words of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, ‘the functions of the monument and evocation’ (quoted in Tobias, 1999: 14).

In a recent text, *There Was This Goat* (2009), Krog, Mpolweni and Ratele return to the incoherent testimony of Notrose Konile, the mother of one of the Gugulethu Seven, to make sense of the piecemeal presentation of her story, in which details and images appear out of context and little narrative thread is to be discerned. Mrs Konile’s experience eludes assimilation, integration – and understanding. When asked what she would want to say to the perpetrators, what she would want to have done for her, she answers, ‘I wouldn’t know. I would never be able to say what – I can never tell them what to do. I’ve just given up everything, I don’t know. I don’t know

anything' (2009:17). What is evoked is the tension between, on the one hand, the incomprehensible – even unbelievable – aspect of traumatic experience, and, on the other, the limitations or failure of language in seeking to describe it, so restoring some continuity and coherence, and with it greater control.

Traumatic experience defies description: 'Extreme trauma is "unspeakable" precisely because of the inadequacy of language to fully convey victims' experiences,' write Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (2008:25-26). 'Our language lacks words to express this offence,' Primo Levi said of Nazi atrocities (quoted in Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela, 26).

Krog mentions the testimony of Nomonde Calata, who, aged twenty at the time, visited Nyameka Goniwe after both their husbands had been killed:<sup>20</sup> '...(S)o I was taken to Nyami's place (cries loudly while interpreter finishes) and when I got there Nyami was crying terribly... it affected me also....' Krog intersperses extracts from Calata's testimony with the later comments of a Professor Kondlo, who remembers Calata's actions: '(S)he threw herself backwards and that sound... that sound... it will haunt me for ever and ever.' Kondlo comments more fully on the significance of this terrible cry. 'It is significant,' he continues, 'that she began to cry when she remembered how Nyameka Goniwe was crying. The academics say pain destroys language and this brings about an immediate reversion to a prelinguistic (sic) state – and to witness that cry was to witness the destruction of language... was to realise that to remember the past of this country is to be thrown back into a time before language. And to get that memory, to fix it in words, to capture it with the precise image, is to be present at the birth of language itself. But more practically, this particular memory at last captured in words can no longer haunt you, push you around, bewilder you, because you have taken control of it... so maybe this is what the Commission is all about – finding words for the cry of Nomonde Calata.' (In Krog, 1999: 63-64)

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<sup>20</sup> Matthews Goniwe and Ford Calata were well-known activists, who were killed with two others by agents of the state. They became known as the Cradock Four.

The failure of language is the subject of another De Kok poem, ‘Parts of Speech’ (2002: 21), which begins, ‘Some stories don’t want to be told’ – as though pain refuses to be converted to language:

Some stories don’t want to be told.  
They walk away, carrying their suitcases  
held together with grey string.  
Look at their disappearing curved spines.  
Hunchbacks. Harmed ones. Hold-alls.

Some stories refuse to be danced or mimed,  
Drop their scuffed canes  
And clattering tap shoes,  
Erase their traces in nursery rhymes  
Or ancient games like blindman’s buff.

And at this stained place words  
Are scraped from resinous tongues,  
Wrung like washing, hung on the lines  
Of courtroom and confessional,  
Transposed into the dialect of record.

Why still believe stories can rise  
With wings, on currents, as silver flares,  
Levitate unweighted by stones,  
Begin in pain and move towards grace,  
Aerating history with recovered breath?

Why still imagine whole words, whole worlds:  
The flame sputter of consonants,  
Deep sea anemone vowels,  
Birth-cable syntax, rhymes that start in the heart,  
and verbs, verbs that move mountains?

De Kok’s poems on the Truth Commission are collected under the subtitle ‘A Room full of Questions’. The questions raised in this poem, ‘Why still believe...?’ (l.16) and ‘Why still imagine...?’ (l.21) are left open. Why indeed, as there must be a reason to believe in the power of words to ‘move mountains’ – ‘still’, after time has elapsed, after everything that has been heard. The poem’s ‘stained place’ could be the site of memory, but in this context is primarily the TRC hearing, where the words are ‘scraped’ (l.12) from the tongue, ‘wrung’, (l.13), then ‘hung’ (l.13) out for all to see, and finally ‘transposed into the dialect of record’ (l.15). What is evoked is the violation of the traumatised witness and of private grief, through language, as pain is

voiced in halting words, then translated by interpreters into English – a process which can never be complete or accurate – to become part of official records in an impersonal version removed from the lived world of the victims and reductive of their experience. Neither ‘whole words’ nor ‘whole worlds’ can be achieved.

A single word, ‘confessional’ (l.14), evokes the damaged life of not only the victim, but the perpetrator, and could also suggest the guilt experienced by survivors and the bereaved. The private space of confession and absolution is negated in the ‘hanging out’ of such memories.

Behind all this, De Kok implies, is the belief that truth will set free; through the power of language it will dance and fly and shine, moving from pain into grace. This belief is questioned most eloquently in the jarring contrast between the images of dance and play, like tap shoes, and the reminders, through the imagery used, of the shuffling poverty of those who have suffered: the grey string holding a suitcase shut, the ‘scuffed canes’ (l.7) of tap dancers, but also of maimed and elderly witnesses. Indeed, these people, it is implied, have the right to refuse to have their stories made public record. The stories themselves merge with the damaged people in the image of bent individuals walking away, suitcase in hand:

Hunchbacks. Harmed ones. Hold-alls. (l.5)

The hold-all, the suitcase with its contents, is both the person withholding information and the story refusing to be told. Yet the price of walking away is that of having to ‘hold all’ indefinitely, without relief, permanently maimed by a memory which imprisons as much as it is contained.

Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo uses the term ‘deep memory’ to distinguish the memory of severe trauma, which ‘resists formulation and narration’, from ‘external memory’, over which one has more control through language. She writes of sloughing off the ‘old skin’ with its ‘visible traces of Auschwitz’. But deep memory is different:

‘How does one rid oneself of something buried far within: memory and the skin of memory. It clings to me yet. Memory’s skin has hardened, it allows

nothing to filter out of what it retains, and I have no control over it.’ (Delbo, *Days and Memory*, 1990:1, in Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008: 67-68)

Eli Wiesel testifies to the same barrier:

‘Ask any survivor; he will tell you, he who has not lived the event will never know it. And he who went through it will never reveal it, not really, not entirely. Between his memory and his reflection there is a wall – and it cannot be pierced.’ (In Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008: 34)

This is the prison of the ‘hold-all’, defying articulation even when language would have been the only channel for seeking some meaning, some continuity, restoring wholeness to one’s interrupted, shattered identity and life story, and the only means of breaking through isolation and restoring human fellowship. This hardened skin, this wall, points not to an unwillingness, but a frightening inability to return to such extreme pain and loss, with its psychic defences. De Kok’s poem about stories that ‘don’t want to be told’ poignantly evokes deep memory and the conflicting inclinations of silence and disclosure.

The poem therefore seems wistful about the unburdened, ‘unweighted’ flight of language into grace and simultaneously questions its efficacy to breathe such new life into history. ‘Parts of speech’ are finite, fallible means, even for those (like poets, knowing the ‘birth-cable’ of syntax) who believe in their power.

The dilemma posed by deep memory also concerns Saul Tobias, who sees the silences and fragmentary presentation of such memories as resisting assimilation into a shared historiography. ‘The TRC,’ he writes, ‘was, to a large extent, an attempt to tell a story about South Africa’s recent past’ (1999: 3). This is possible, he argues, in terms of what Holocaust historians have called ‘common memory’, which ‘functions to reinsert (individual) experiences into a shared knowledge that provides the survivor with some measure of... control over her experiences’ (2).<sup>21</sup> Historian Lawrence Langer calls common memory ‘heroic memory – the memory of survival’ (Tobias,

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<sup>21</sup> Compare the wording of the TRC Final Report: ‘the Commission... assisted in the creation of a “narrative truth”. In so doing, it also sought to contribute to the process of reconciliation by ensuring that the truth about the past included the validation of the individual subjective experiences of people who had previously been silenced or voiceless’ (quoted by Tobias, 1999:4,5).

1999: 2). Deep memory, on the other hand, is ‘not the memory of survival, but the memory of loss,’ Tobias writes – and one is reminded again of Mrs Plaatjie’s loss, and her buried grief. For Delbo, such memory resists ‘formulation and narration’; it is not surprising, therefore, that it also ‘resists assimilation into a broader historical perspective’ (Tobias, 1999:2) and consequently remains outside of common memory.

The TRC’s aim to ‘tell a story’, to provide a shared historiography, attempted to bring a measure of closure on a painful past.<sup>22</sup> Tobias writes that ‘the TRC initiative bears many of the characteristics which historians associate with the production of common memory: features such as the orientation towards common understanding, cohesiveness, closure, and what Saul Friedlander has described as a “redemptive stance”’ (4). He speaks of a ‘genuinely “common” memory’ as one which includes the experiences and voices of those previously neglected. Friedlander’s redemptive stance is movingly elucidated by Tobias (1999): ‘For the theological idea of redemption points precisely to the expectation that those who are most lost, most abject, most without hope, will come to resume their place in a common humanity, free of division and suffering. Redemption is not for one, but for all, for the redemption of the forgotten means, simultaneously, the redemption of those who forget – the closing of the hermeneutic circle, the restoration of humanity, or at least, a community, to its wholeness’ (4). This redemptive ideal is also worded in Archbishop Tutu’s Chairman’s Report on the Commission’s work, which emphasises liberation for all:

We are sisters and brothers in one family – God’s family, the human family. Having looked the beast of the past in the eye, having asked and received forgiveness and having made amends, let us shut the door on the past – not in order to forget it but in order not to allow it to imprison us (as quoted by Tobias, 1999: 5-6).

(One could counter, here, that forgiveness was not always asked for or given, amends were seldom made, and that that restitution has often lagged and been found wanting. More especially, ‘those who forget’ – the many who supported and benefited from

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<sup>22</sup> The TRC aimed, according to Tobias, at the ‘production of a common memory in which these individual memories could find their place, and their owners, hopefully, some solace....It is, broadly speaking, the story of a movement from division to unity, from fracturedness to wholeness, from confusion to clarity, from ignorance to understanding’ (1999: 4). (Yet deep memory resists all these outcomes.)

apartheid – often preferred amnesia and failed to become part of the TRC’s redemptive project. Tutu’s ideal is nevertheless laudable and infinitely gracious.)

Yet ironically, these ideals of a shared, inclusive history are incommensurable with deep memory – those ‘dimensions of past lives and experiences which are inaccessible to historical reconstruction,’ Tobias argues (7). What responsibility does history bear, then, towards the dead, whose stories cannot be recovered, and the living whose memories cannot be articulated, and which therefore, in Tobias’s words, ‘by virtue of their obstinacy, obscurity or sheer irrecoverability do not contribute to understanding?’ (7). For history, in as much as we can reconstruct it, ‘cannot be separated from our desire... to make sense of our humanity’ (6). In fact, trying to force such stories into a coherent whole could be a travesty: Tobias argues that ‘the impetus to understanding... and to the construction of common memory risks the betrayal of what is most intimate and inexpressible in the lives and experiences of victims’ (9). While Friedlander sees fragments of irrecoverable memory as capable of being included in a ‘full historical restitution or recognition’ (Tobias, 2), he nevertheless expresses the hope that art and literature may sustain some elements of deep memory.

In terms of the dilemma of representing deep memory, Tobias sees Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull*, in its use of separate fragments of testimony, and its own fragmentary presentation, as sustaining an obligation to ‘what is most intimate and opaque’ (Tobias, 1999: 9) in victims’ stories, by maintaining their incompleteness. It might be added that her co-authored later text, *There Was this Goat*, tries to recover and make sense of one such fragmentary and incoherent testimony, that of Notrose Konile (which has been discussed earlier). Ingrid de Kok’s ‘Tongue-tied’ is perhaps the best example of recording deep memory without violating the singularity of the experience, in that it speaks of the suffering that has been experienced in the same fragments without disclosing the unspeakable, so, in the words of Maurice Blanchot, keeping ‘watch over absent meaning’ (in Tobias, 14).

The assumptions on which the redemptive view of common memory are based are, firstly, that it is inclusion in the common record that validates and accords dignity to the experience of the individual. Following from this, it is assumed that history has an

obligation to record such experience, to be fully inclusive. The dilemma for Tobias, who himself seems to question historians' assumption of 'the self-evidence of the validity of the historical task of assimilating deep to common memory' (3), is, then, how this obligation should be fulfilled without violating the uniqueness – and, I would add, privacy – of such experiences. My own view is that there is a place for silence, for restraint, particularly where indescribable suffering is concerned. Its intense privacy calls for reticence. History and the community have no right to it. Only when a victim or survivor feels prepared to dredge up pain, is speech appropriate – but even then, the individual may prefer not to have his or her story made a part of a common, public record. Those who testified before the TRC were prepared to revisit suffering, some in honouring the memory of those who had died, and to have their testimony recorded. But, as Ingrid de Kok puts it, where words are 'scraped from resinous tongues,/ Wrung like washing, hung on the lines,' before being taken up in a public record, it remains doubtful whether such witnesses were always fully prepared for the public appropriation of their most painful memories.

Walter Benjamin's view is, in Tobias's words, 'messianic' in its redemptive stance:

One could speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten them. If the nature of such a life or moment required that it not be forgotten, that predicate would not contain a falsehood but merely a claim that it is not being fulfilled by men, and perhaps also a reference to a realm in which it is being fulfilled: God's remembrance. (In Tobias, 13)

Benjamin, who sees a truly redemptive history as all-inclusive ('nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history'), nevertheless recognises its impossibility (Tobias, 13). His consideration of the divine realm, in which, as the psalmist puts it, tears are gathered in God's wineskin ('Are they not in thy book?') (Ps 56:8), is of comfort, however, only to those who believe in divine remembrance and justice – and, indeed, mercy.

Yet there were also narratives of suffering at the TRC which, in their emotive content, were anything but incoherent and even tended toward the lyrical. One account given before the TRC, that of an illiterate shepherd, so moved Antjie Krog, herself a poet, in

its poetic simplicity that she presents it as verse. She calls it ‘The Shepherd’s Tale’.

An extract follows:

LEKOTSE: Maybe you’re right – you know my problem is

I was a shepherd.

I cannot write

and I forget all these days, but still...

Now listen very carefully,

because I’m telling you the story now.

On that day

it was at night,

a person arrived and knocked.

When I answered the door just opened

and I said, ‘Who’s knocking so terribly?’

He answered, he said: ‘Police.’ (Krog, 1999:321)

Krog’s personal account of the TRC hearings, *Country of My Skull*, first published in 1998<sup>23</sup>, became one of the most-read TRC texts, translated into many languages and converted into a film – and it has invited its share of controversy. Krog’s role during the hearings was an important one: as a reporter for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), using her married name, Antjie Samuel, she was heard almost daily by South Africans, and transmitted moving and terrible accounts from the hearings into the lives of many. Radio is the medium reaching the greatest number of people in South Africa. Because of the noted absence of white South Africans at the hearings (a factor which will be discussed more fully later), her broadcasts became a vital conduit. The fact that she was a celebrated poet of the Afrikaans literary establishment made her contribution especially significant (she records hate mail that she received from right-wing Afrikaners).

In the Free State, where she grew up, she walks to the local Co-op to get an impromptu interview with one of the locals, and asks a farmer, ‘Sir, how do you feel about the Truth Commission’s visit to Ladybrand?’

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<sup>23</sup> The American edition was published with the subtitle, *Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (2000).

He stops in his tracks. He looks me up and down, while his lip curls in disgust. ‘The SABC and the Truth Commission. *Fokof!*’ he explodes with such venom that passers-by look in our direction.

‘*Fokof! Fokof!*’ he screams as he storms into the Co-op.

I find myself on the pavement, my blood thick with humiliation. God, has nothing – nothing! – changed? (1999:327)

It is Krog’s personal involvement in her account – often presented in physical terms, as here, in the reference to blood, and in her title – that lends a particular strength to the telling. She describes, for example, her conflicted emotions about the Afrikaner policemen applying for amnesty: they are familiar as brothers and yet alien in their values and actions. It is her face that appears on the South African paperback’s front cover, and it is her story on its pages (‘The land belongs to the voices of those who live in it. My own bleak voice among them’ [1999: 319]).

Krog admits to some conflict about writing this story at all. During a period at home she finds herself numb, suffering a breakdown from covering the TRC hearings. In this context she writes:

No poetry should come forth from this. May my hand fall off if I write this.

So I sit around. Naturally and unnaturally without words. Stunned by the knowledge of the price people have paid for words. If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don’t, I die. (1999:74)

Consciously invoking Adorno’s words that no poetry could be written after Auschwitz, Krog also recontextualises her mother’s earlier, rather melodramatic, outpouring of Nationalist fervour:<sup>24</sup> After the assassination of Dr Verwoerd (known as the architect of apartheid), Dot Serfontein had written:

And I prayed that my hand should fall off if ever I write something for my personal honour at the cost of my people and what has been negotiated for them through years of tears and blood; that I will always remember that to write in Afrikaans is not a right but a privilege bought and paid for at a price – and that it brings with it heavy responsibilities. (Quoted by Krog in *Country of My Skull*, 1999: 148)

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<sup>24</sup> Krog’s mother is Dot Serfontein, an established Afrikaans writer, and a powerful figure in her life. Some estrangement seems to have occurred between the two when Krog joined the ANC.

But Krog moves in an opposite direction: her dedication of the text is to ‘every victim that had an Afrikaans surname on her lips’, and she invokes the suffering (through ‘years of tears and blood’) of the disenfranchised people of South Africa under colonialism, then the apartheid policies and party of the same Dr Verwoerd. And, though she writes *Country of My Skull* under her maiden name, Krog, the ‘signature’, as Carli Coetzee (2001:686-687) has argued, of the successful Afrikaans poet, the name of the father, she chooses to write in English, so departing from what she has called the ‘language of the heart’ (2003:249) – which is also the language of her ancestors. Krog has been commended for not absolving herself from guilt – as some white writers have tried to do – and for recording her own journey (traced by Carli Coetzee) of departure from the establishment of her youth and heritage. The question which nevertheless comes to mind is: Why does it have to be about Afrikaners? Certainly, Afrikaner nationalism sustained the apartheid state, was inculcated into Afrikaans children by church, school and state – and, as Krog testifies, in many families. Certainly, many of the perpetrators who applied for amnesty came from this background. But political and moral guilt had its roots in colonialism, and extended across the spectrum of South African white people. More importantly, of a book overtly dedicated to the victims who testified at the TRC, one praised for giving a voice to those who had been silenced, Shane Graham warns, ‘Krog’s narrative thus threatens from the outset to expropriate the stories of victims for her own narrative of being displaced from her country and traumatized by the knowledge of the horrible deeds committed in the name of her people’ (2009: 56). I believe that this is exactly what Krog does.

Krog’s dilemma, her being torn between the compulsion to write and the fear of exploitation should she do so, is resolved later when, after the commissioners have weathered their umpteenth crisis, she pays tribute to the Commission in a wave of tenderness and decides to write:

With all its mistakes, its arrogance, its racism, its sanctimony, its incompetence, the lying, the failure to get a reparation policy off the ground after two years, the showing off – with all of this – it (the TRC) has been so brave, so naively brave in the winds of deceit, rancour and hate. Against a flood crashing with the weight of a brutalizing past on to new usurping policies, the Commission has kept alive the idea of a common humanity.

Painstakingly it has chiselled a way beyond racism and made space for all of our voices. For all its failures, it carries a flame of hope that makes me proud to be from here, of here. But I want to put it more simply. I want this hand of mine to write it. For us all; all voices, all victims. (1999: 422)

Krog's eloquent tribute highlights the TRC's lasting legacy. To preserve this, it seems, she wants her hand, previously kept from writing, to put it down – and it is clear that this will be a deeply personal account. Her resolve to write 'for us all' and especially for 'all victims' – in itself highly contentious – issues in an untitled poem:

because of you  
this country no longer lies between us but within

it breathes becalmed  
after being wounded in its wondrous throat

in the cradle of my skull it sings, it ignites  
my tongue, my inner ear, the cavity of heart  
shudders toward the outline  
    new in soft clicks and gutturals

of my soul the retina learns to expand  
daily because of a thousand stories  
I was scorched

a new skin

I am changed for ever. I want to say:  
    forgive me  
    forgive me  
    forgive me

you whom I have wronged, please  
take me

with you.

Krog pays tribute to the victims, whose willingness to allow their pain to become the pain of the nation itself, has 'scorched' (l.11) her but also healed her (giving her 'a new skin' (l.12) – possibly darker, or unmarked by the skin colour which excludes her from the larger community) and has given her a new, inclusive, more African language, 'soft in clicks and gutturals' (l.8). In stilted diction ('it breathes becalmed/ after being wounded in its wondrous throat' [ll.3-4]) the wounded nation, at first unable to speak, is now seen to sing within her, moving her heart, her ear, her tongue

to give expression to a shared narrative. (This physiological imagery of internalised experience is characteristic of *Country of My Skull*.) It is the victims who have made this happen: the country that was torn ‘between’ blocs wrestling for possession, can now lie within. In taking the country into herself, Krog also takes responsibility for the sins of the past, and responds personally to those who have been wronged:

forgive me  
forgive me  
forgive me

It is the victims of apartheid who can, through the power of forgiveness, make her a part of the nation, taking her ‘with them’.

Yet my slight uneasiness with the self-absorption of this sometimes turgid poem is more pronounced when it comes to other aspects of the text Krog has produced. Having taken upon herself first the role of the faithful reporter, followed by her assumption of the questionable burden of making the victims’ stories known – thereby electing herself to speak for the other – Krog then shifts roles. Graham mentions that, when Krog was first asked to document her experience of covering the TRC, she refused, ‘because when you tackle something as a writer rather than a journalist, you become a vulture. Journalists are also vultures to a certain degree, but there are journalistic ethics’ (Graham, 2009: 55). And she was right: journalistic ethics protect both the subject from exploitation, and the journalist from stepping over the line into misappropriation. Yet she shifts roles. As Antjie Samuel, journalist, she had become a familiar and trusted voice to many. But her memories are recorded under her pen name, Krog, which enables her to bring her lyrical powers to bear on her telling. As a writer she questions the notion of truth, so central to the process she has reported on, and subverts it. Truth was already an embattled concept legally, as the testimonies before the TRC were not tested by cross-examination and were therefore not legally valid. Krog herself praises the Commission for having ‘its teeth firmly in the jugular of the only truth that matters’ (1999:259). But the writer, who includes much verbatim testimony from witnesses – a great deal of it without attribution – also provides her own post-modern improvisations in her text, and tells her reader so:

‘Hey, Antjie, but this is not quite what happened at the workshop,’ says Patrick.

‘Yes, I know, it’s a new story that I constructed from all the other information I picked up over the months about people’s reactions and psychologists’ advice. I’m not reporting or keeping minutes. I’m telling. If I have to say every time that so-and-so says this, it gets boring. I cut and paste the upper layer, in order to get the second layer told, which is actually the story I want to tell. I change some people’s names when I think they might be annoyed or might not understand the distortions.’

‘But then you’re not busy with the truth!’

‘I am busy with the truth... my truth.’ (1999:259)

The ‘story I want to tell’; ‘*my truth*’ (the first person pronoun recurs throughout) – these are telling statements, anathema to a journalist, as is this entire passage: ‘a new story I constructed’; ‘I’m not reporting’; ‘I cut and paste’; ‘I change’. Freedom of speech is founded on the public’s right to know – to know the truth, however much a site of contest that might be. Journalists know that their stories, as a ‘first draft of history’, are reconstructions, based on the fallible perceptions and memories of subjective and unreliable sources, yet, like courts of law, they strive for the functional truth of the most comprehensive and accurate reconstruction possible. They know that they themselves are neither neutral nor objective. Krog explains that her material is ‘(s)een from my perspective, shaped by my state of mind at the time and now also by the audience I’m telling the story to. In every story there is hearsay... there are assumptions...’ (259) But for all these reasons journalists strive to serve truth through a rigorous discipline of verification, and nitpick for accuracy down to the correct spelling of a subject’s middle name – because the credibility that their profession lives by is at stake. ‘*Truth is mos jou job*,’ Krog quotes a colleague as reminding her earlier (1999: 36) (After all, truth is your job). In manipulating and fabricating material so as not to be ‘boring’, she has grievously betrayed her journalistic ethos. ‘What gives the story its real character is the need to entertain – to make the listener hang on your lips,’ she purportedly tells Patrick. But to ‘bend’ truth at all to make a story more interesting is taboo for the journalist. Krog was also prepared to accept the *Sunday Times* Alan Paton Award for non-fiction for *Country of My Skull*, again blurring the boundary between truth and fiction.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Although selection and unreliability scupper any claims that non-fiction might have to being ‘the whole truth and nothing but the truth’, a book that openly subverts truth was a dubious choice for a non-fiction prize, in spite of its undoubted quality in other respects, and its historical importance.

More importantly, Krog's licence with the material she, as Samuel, had reported on undermines the veracity of her entire enterprise – in which she has appropriated throughout the lived experience, often deeply painful, of the victims whose stories she wanted to write. For Krog to undermine her own story is her right. For her to quote TRC testimonies is unproblematic: the TRC report is a matter of public record. But for her to merge these revisitations of trauma into her own project and then to subvert its veracity – in a text dedicated to victims – becomes the very thing she first feared: abuse and exploitation, cheapening testimonies recounted at great personal cost (what she herself calls 'the price people have paid for words'). 'One has no right to appropriate a story paid for with a lifetime of pain and destruction,' she herself has argued (quoted by Tobias, 1999: 9). So, while Tobias praises her work as 'exemplary' for its sensitive treatment of deep memory – for not violating victims' pain in her representation – it is nevertheless the case that she exploits and betrays their testimony in her subversion of the concept of truth, making the entire concept more relative than it need have been.

Shane Graham argues, however, that Krog's concept of truth is 'considerably more nuanced than what many of her critics would allow' (2009: 54). He warns, on the one hand, that Krog 'embraces a conception of truth that threatens to play into the hands of the very right-wing forces who wish to cover up the crimes of the past under a convenient veil of relativism' (51), quoting her confession, 'The word "truth" still trips the tongue....I prefer the word "lie."....Because it is there... where the truth is closest' (Krog 1999:36, quoted by Graham, 51). Yet, on the other hand, he understands Krog to be questioning consciously the notion of a 'recoverable', empirical truth, and in this spirit, for example, deliberately presenting different versions of a Vlakplaas murder. (This phenomenon of different versions of the same event is familiar in media ethics and is known as the 'Rashomon effect'<sup>26</sup>; it is countered by a rigorous attempt to gather as much evidence from as many sources as possible.)

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<sup>26</sup> The name, the Rashomon effect, is derived from the title of a 1951 Japanese film, which 'explores the different views, reactions, and perceptions of four people who are all involved in the same moment of violence. "The Rashomon effect is an informal term taken to mean a case where the viewpoints of the participants color their interpretations of events to such an extent that sifting out a 'fair' representation is all but impossible"' (Retief, 2002:97, quoting Hausman).

Graham therefore cautiously endorses Krog's 'ambivalent relationship to the truth' and her invention of a fictitious extra-marital relationship. 'For Krog to convey the subjective truth of her reactions to covering the TRC, it was necessary for her to distill emotions and invent situations dramatizing complex interpersonal dynamics,' he writes, quoting Anthea Garman: 'By insisting on poetic licence claimed for a book situated within the public... confessional space created by the Commission, in order to reveal the truths that liberate and make history, Krog unsettles the reader's trust in what would be considered to be "the truth" in the book itself' (53). Graham believes that the 'concept of truth as multiplicity' does not need to imply that the search for truth is abandoned, or ambiguity 'fatalistically' embraced – rather, he implies, some ambiguity should be tolerated in view, perhaps, of the very fragmentation of traumatic memory that makes a coherent or complete account difficult, if not impossible (53-54). Certainly, Krog achieves a distance from her material and keeps the reader at arm's length through this distancing technique. But for me as a white South African – having experienced the TRC process in much the way described by Albie Sachs, as a 'deeply engaging, profoundly affecting, brilliant, difficult, dark, intense process that we all participated in and watched and argued about' (Sachs: 2005), having been stricken by the testimonies of victims and perpetrators alike, and having been dependent on Krog's work as a journalist for almost daily bulletins – such distance, such licence, still seems a betrayal of both her journalistic mandate and her contract with the South African public with regard to the TRC, and an exploitation of the costly testimonies of those who had suffered.

For the Truth Commission, truth – some truth – was the ideal. But what could be attained was always going to be an incomplete patchwork of testimony from survivors and perpetrators. Zapiro's image of the unreachable goal of reconciliation is equally appropriate for truth itself (although in his cartoon a map with the legend 'You are here' [in Verwoerd and Mabizela, 40] indicates that Truth has been reached). The search takes one through an underground labyrinth, an image of lostness and path-finding, but also of burrowing underneath that which has been covered over, hidden away, remaining in darkness. This dark passage may also represent the unconscious and the unreliable elements of memory. In the cartoon the only guides are an unhelpful map, and one small lantern carried by the archbishop.

Nevertheless, important truths were uncovered by the TRC, providing some closure for the first time for a large number of survivors. Many more amnesty applications were received by the Commission than had been expected (7127 in total, of which 1312 were granted). Those seeking amnesty provided previously unknown information; perpetrators often confessed, for instance, to having lied in court when deaths in detention were investigated. For the entire nation the TRC hearings for victims and perpetrators became a sickening revelation of some of the worst acts of inhumanity imaginable, most of them committed by state-sponsored agents. Such truths forced South Africans to confront their past and the pain caused: a necessary process if a shared future was to be realised.

And reconciliation? Piet Meiring recalls the bewilderment of a black minister at the first hearings in East London:

There must be a mistake somewhere. I brought nearly my whole congregation along to be here today. They had to come and listen to what the victims say. They wanted to stretch out their hands to all the white people of East London, to forgive them, to be reconciled with them.... But I see nearly no white people to talk to today. There is nobody with whom we can be reconciled. Where are they? (Meiring, 1999: 28)

The case of the absent whites, the silent whites, is noted by Krog as well. She quotes an unnamed black academic writing to a newspaper: ‘We have Mandela pleading reconciliation, we have Tutu pleading reconciliation – where, oh where is the White Prince of Reconciliation?’ Krog agrees: ‘Indeed, where is he?’ but adds, ‘And, of course, it can be nothing else than a “he”’ (Krog, 1999:439). (By far the greatest number of victims who testified before the Commission were women, and of those who reached across barriers, most were women.) She herself comments: ‘The failure of Afrikaner leadership to say that something is owed has not only deprived the Afrikaner, trapped in anger and guilt, but it has, somewhat deviously, deprived the oppressed from [sic] the opportunity to say, clearly, this is what you owe’ (437). No reparation, no forgiveness is possible where guilt, the debt owed, is denied; and, as Krog notes, both parties are then deprived of the opportunity to reconcile.

In this regard Tutu's comment on Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden* (1990), set in a comparable Truth Commission context in Chile, provides some understanding of the frustrated victim. In the play a woman whose husband has just been appointed to his country's Truth Commission encounters and recognises, in her own home, the man who had tortured her during the Pinochet era. She now has him at her mercy, and holds a gun to his head while he denies being her former tormentor. Yet when he admits his guilt, she sets him free. 'His denial,' comments Tutu, 'hit at the core of her being, at her integrity, at her identity and these were all tied up intimately with her experiences, with her memory. Denial subverted her personhood. She was, in a real sense, her memory' (Tutu, 1999:32). One is reminded of the unfreedom of the unforgiving servant – but in this instance it is the opportunity to forgive that is denied.

Krog also quotes the inimitable archbishop's speaking of going the extra mile ('many, many miles'), saying to whites, 'we want you, we really want you' (1999:240). Of former president F.W. de Klerk's denials before the Truth Commission – his failure, perhaps, to become that Prince of Reconciliation – Tutu says, 'You see, we can't go to heaven alone. If I arrive there, God will ask me: "Where is De Klerk? His path crossed yours..." So I cried for him, I cried for De Klerk – because he spurned the opportunity to be human.' (In Krog, 1999: 240)<sup>27</sup>

Tutu's views, informed by his faith as well as by a communal African ethos of humaneness, may not have been representative of all black South Africans. Yet in that period, guided by President Mandela and Archbishop Emeritus Tutu, South Africans were given an excellent example of the possibilities of reconciliation. That era has passed. Their successors have been less conciliatory. For many white South Africans, who had been subject to disinformation, steeped in the belief that South Africa was a Christian country with a Christian government, the horrors revealed at the Truth Commission came as shocks that needed time to be absorbed. Many – most – whites, whether stricken, ashamed, suspicious, or hostile to the process, lost an opportunity to participate more fully in a significant rite of passage, and, in the words of the generous pastor, to be forgiven and reconciled.

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. the words of Desmond Tutu: 'My deepest sadness is that by and large, the South African white community has yet to acknowledge the incredible generosity that has come from the black community. I would say the white political leaders should tell their supporters: "You don't know how damn lucky you are."' (Quoted by Cole, 2010: 121)

Yet Ingrid de Kok expresses a hope of healing. Evoking the many references to injuries inflicted, permanent disabilities, death and exhumed bodies, she writes in ‘Body Parts’:

may the wrist turn in the wind like a wing  
the severed foot tread home ground

the punctured ear hear the thrum of sunbirds  
the molten eye see stars in the dark

the faltering lungs quicken windmills  
the maimed hand scatter seeds and grain

the heart flood underground springs  
pound maize, recognize named cattle

and may the unfixable broken bone  
loosened from its hinges

now lying like a wishbone in the veld  
pitted by pointillist ants

give us new bearings. (2006: 102)

Healing, even if it is not physical healing, engenders new life and a rooted wholeness, evoked here in references to underground springs, home, ‘named cattle’ (1.8) and the scattering of seed, the hope of a future. But for those who have died, represented by the ‘unfixable broken bone’ (1.9), the only hope is that their deaths have not been futile, that their remembrance will allow the nation to embark on a new course, never repeating the atrocities of the past. Yet this one-sentence poem is a prayer governed by the auxiliary ‘may’ (1.1): the future remains open.

Krog, in a poem she includes after describing the presentation of the TRC report by Tutu to Mandela, also asks, ‘where does one go from here?’

so much hurt for truth  
so much destruction  
so little left for survival  
where does one go from here?

voices slung  
in anger  
over the solid cold length of our past  
how long does it take  
for a voice  
to reach another  
in this country held bleeding between us? (1999: 431)

In a poem in which the only punctuation consists of two question marks, the country bleeds again, and is ‘between’ rather than ‘within’ – though ‘between us’ suggests some inclusivity. After the devastation of the past (‘so much destruction/ so little left...’ [ll.2-3]), after the reopening of ‘so much hurt’ (l.1) for truth and the expression of anger for a past that seems immutable, a ‘solid cold length’ (l.7), how long will it take for people to be reconciled? The importance of the speaking voice on both sides is suggested by synecdoche (‘how long does it take/ for a voice/ to reach another?’ [ll.8-10]): reconciliation is the fruit of confession and forgiveness. The American subtitle of the book, *Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*, is evoked in this poem, which questions whether forgiveness and reconciliation are truly possible. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission provided a public forum for such exchanges between individuals and, to some extent, for representative groups (political parties, businessmen and -women, churches) to confess their debt. Whether the model given by generous-spirited people will be followed by groups, by the nation, remains to be seen.

### **2.1 Touching the leper: Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela’s *A Human Being Died That Night***

Of the many texts emerging from the TRC, the most outstanding is a non-fictional work, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela’s *A Human Being Died that Night* (2003), which she has subtitled *A story of forgiveness*. The text itself is an exercise in grace. Gobodo-Madikizela seeks to understand and tell the story of the other, the enemy, and finds it in herself to feel empathy for the man held up as ‘apartheid’s henchman par excellence’ (121) in the brutality suffered by her people. The man in question is Eugene de Kock, whom the media had dubbed Prime Evil, and who was sentenced to two life sentences and 212 years imprisonment for innumerable crimes committed on behalf of the apartheid state. (Colonel de Kock was in charge of the so-called counter-

insurgency unit based at Vlakplaas, and led death squads both in South Africa and in neighbouring countries.)

De Kock was given a criminal trial – his crimes were on his own head, with no recourse to the fact that he was following orders from his political masters. (He was, the writer points out, one of the most decorated officers in the old South African Police Force.<sup>28</sup>[Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003: 60]) Politicians such as F.W. de Klerk distanced themselves from him (59-60). Politically and legally he was cast adrift, and morally he was made a monster, to place a safe moral distance between him and the rest of humanity, especially apartheid’s beneficiaries. ‘He was exposed and alone in a country that, ironically, had employed mechanisms of denial to enable a regime of terror to thrive, and was now using denial to avoid facing responsibility for the past’ (41). (Verbeeck [2007], in discussing these views, describes De Kock as a ‘lightning conductor for the collective responsibility of the white minority, of whom a sizeable majority had supported the NP’s apartheid policy’ [2007:263; my translation]).

Gobodo-Madikizela is a psychologist and ethicist, whose work in the TRC and especially with De Kock, who had applied for amnesty, led her to write this penetrating study of guilt and forgiveness. Ricoeur writes that learning to tell the story of the other facilitates communal memory (2000:15), and this work has received the notice of historians. Verbeeck sees Gobodo-Madikizela’s ‘perspective on De Kock as aggressor’ as a ‘valuable contribution which will be underwritten by historians’ (2007:261; my translation)<sup>29</sup> and describes her work as a form of ‘people’s history’.

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<sup>28</sup> Jeremy Gordin also makes this clear in *A Long Night’s Damage*, which he co-wrote with De Kock. In an introductory Chronology, entries read as follows:

**1983, May:** As a captain, ([D]e Kock) joins counter-insurgency unit at Vlakplaas under then Lieutenant-Colonel Jack Cronje.

**November:** Takes part in raid into Swaziland. Kills Zweli Nyanda, MK commander, in Swaziland. Police Star for Outstanding Service from Minister of Police Louis le Grange.

**1985, July:** Takes command at Vlakplaas....

**September:** With Willie Nortje, murders Japie Maponya.

**December:** Attack on houses in Maseru. SAP Silver Cross for Bravery.

(The Silver Cross was the highest South African award for bravery.) (De Kock and Gordin, 1998:10)

<sup>29</sup> Verbeeck writes that the emphasis generally falls on aggressors in research on political violence: ‘Victims generally deserve the fruit of an honourable remembrance, but aggressors the sharp edge of the dissecting blade’ (2007:261; my translation).

The writer is brought to interview De Kock by the response to him of two widows of his victims in the Motherwell bombing. De Kock, testifying before the TRC, had asked to meet with them in private, to apologise, and Gobodo-Madikizela is intrigued: ‘What would he say? “I’m sorry I killed your husbands”?’ (2003: 14)

One of the widows, Mrs Pearl Faku, says of the encounter, ‘I couldn’t control my tears. I could hear him, but I was overwhelmed by emotion, and I was just nodding, as a way of saying yes, I forgive you. I hope that when he sees our tears, he knows that they are not only tears for our husbands, but tears for him as well.... I would like to hold him by the hand, and show him there is a future, and that he can still change.’ (14-15)

Both Tutu and Gobodo-Madikizela deal with the possibility of change and restoration. Turning people into monsters puts them beyond the pale, beyond the reach of restoration. This is the question that intrigues Gobodo-Madikizela: ‘Was he too evil... to be worthy of... forgiveness?’ Was forgiveness ‘wasted on him’? (15) She considers Hannah Arendt’s concept of radical evil, referring to that which is beyond human forgiveness, but feels that the environment which creates those who commit atrocities must be taken into account. Whether to forgive, she argues, might be a purely academic question – except in a society where former enemies now have to live together: ‘How can we transcend hate if the goal is to transform human relationships in a society with a past marked by violent conflict between groups?’ (15)

Telling the story of the other, seeking understanding, may lead to a reinterpretation of past events, as Ricoeur has suggested. Gobodo-Madikizela understands the peril of her project, noting that trying to understand how societies create these ‘monsters’, trying to understand the perpetrator’s story, has ‘deeply disturbing implications’ (16) (This is akin to the narrator’s predicament in Bernhard Schlink’s novel *The Reader*, in seeking to understand the holocaust crimes of a woman he has loved: ‘I wanted simultaneously to understand Hannah’s crime and to condemn it.... But it was impossible to do both’ [Schlink, 2003:156].) Gobodo-Madikizela even quotes Claude Lanzmann (whose film *Shoah* (1985) details testimonies of holocaust survivors) on the ‘obscenity of the very project of understanding’ (173), as though understanding – even seeking to understand – would be equivalent to exculpation. She understands

this view as to ‘suggest that no language should be created to understand evil’ (17). For an alternative view, she quotes Christopher Browning, who suggests that understanding implies the possibility of empathy. ‘What I do not accept,’ Browning says, ‘are the old clichés that to explain is to excuse, to understand is to forgive’ (in Gobodo-Madikizela 2003:16). Gobodo-Madikizela herself turns to Emile Fackenheim’s ‘double move’ (17) of seeking, yet resisting an explanation, so as to avoid being drawn into the exculpation of evil (‘not to resist all or any inquiry... but to resist the misleading exculpatory corollaries of explanation’; she quotes Rosenbaum’s elaboration of this view, ‘(t)o resist the way explanation can become an evasion or consolation’ [in Gobodo-Madikizela 2003:17]). What she is acutely aware of is the fact that seeking to understand the history and context of someone who has done evil may well lead one at least some way in that direction. (‘Does understanding not send an implicit message of mercy born out of compassion for the murderer in view of the circumstances found to have influenced his behaviour?’ [16]) And this is indeed the risk she takes.

Since she will be, not a neutral witness or scientific observer, but a participant in an engagement with another, Gobodo-Madikizela introduces herself by prefacing her study with three telling personal anecdotes. The first is of voting, for the first time in her life, for a new South African government, in April 1994, in Boston. ‘I was the first person to vote,’ she recalls, ‘and my emotions were so intense that I seemed to feel them concretely as something that flooded through me’ (6). She is acutely aware of the historical significance of this moment, of being transported ‘from one historical moment, where I’d been a second-class citizen in my country of birth – where my parents and their parents had been sent from this place to that... to another historical moment of power, pride, and affirmation’ (6). For the first time, she is able to call South Africa ‘my country, my home’ (7). It is from this new position, which the writer has clearly made her own, that she is able to engage with De Kock.

The other two anecdotes are remarkable in that they seem both to have been chosen to suggest the writer’s fallibility, including the unreliability of memory and an awareness of her own ethical shortcomings. She recalls vividly the events following the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 (she was then five years old), when country-wide protests were put down by force. Gobodo-Madikizela’s recollections are of local men,

‘fathers’, running and hiding, and of army trucks in the streets of Langa township, sometimes firing at people. ‘The image I was to recall many years later was that of a street covered in blood and bodies lined up like cattle in a slaughterhouse’ (9). However, when she joins the TRC in 1996, she discovers that archival records account for one death only from police shooting in Langa on that day. Even though the record could have been falsified by authorities, Pan-African Congress leaders cannot verify what she remembers, and the writer is forced to conclude that her recollection – so vivid and indelible – was incorrect, and her memory therefore unreliable. Though a five-year-old may easily be forgiven such a lapse, since a young child would probably not be considered a reliable witness in any event, Gobodo-Madikizela establishes the unreliability of memory, not by pointing to error in another, but by exposing her own. ‘What does this tell us about remembering traumatic events?’ she asks (10).

Her third chosen anecdote concerns moral choice within the context of available information. Within the nominally independent ‘homeland’ of Transkei, where she was lecturing in psychology at the time, the ban on political organisations like the ANC was lifted by the homeland government under Bantu Holomisa in 1990. An attempted coup soon afterwards, to remove Holomisa from office, was believed to have been instigated by the South African government. (‘Most people at the time,’ she writes, ‘myself included, had no doubt...’ [10]) The people of Umtata, hearing gunfire, aware of dramatic events unfolding in Holomisa’s office, celebrated when the coup leader, Captain Craig Duli, was captured – and Gobodo-Madikizela celebrated with them.

Later she was to hear that Captain Duli’s mutilated body had been thrown into the trunk of an army vehicle, and that he had died, either from his wounds or because he was shot together with his comrades. She realises that, though she could not have stopped these events from happening, her celebration had made her a party to them: ‘I had been party to the killing of another human being. I had knowingly participated in an incident that would certainly have resulted in the taking of a life’ (11). Later, serving on the TRC in the Eastern Cape, Gobodo-Madikizela hears the testimony of Duli’s widow, Nontobeka Duli. ‘How could I with honesty convey words of comfort

(as a facilitator) without first addressing my shame and guilt for having celebrated her husband's death?' she asks (12).

Taken together, these three 'linked stories' (6) prefacing Gobodo-Madikizela's account of her engagement with Eugene de Kock suggest a composite point of departure. She is able to write from a position of strength, affirmed in her identity as a 'first-class' South African citizen. Yet she is fully aware that memory, and particularly that of traumatic events, is unreliable, that it is difficult to reconstruct events in retrospect with accuracy, that even an honest witness may therefore be unreliable. Finally, she sets out with the humility of what Karl Jaspers (1947) calls existential guilt, a knowledge of her own moral fallibility – and this is evident in the rest of the text in her generous attempts to understand the context of others' moral choices, and in her unwillingness to judge. The fact that the second and third anecdotes end with rhetorical or unanswered questions establishes an openness, a willingness to consider views other than her own without prejudging them. Far from making her an unreliable source, Gobodo-Madikizela's openness about her own fallibility establishes trust in a writer who presents herself as humble, non-judgmental, and self-aware, with a finely developed moral sense and honesty.

The writer presents her interviews with De Kock as a dialogue – something she sees as important on a wider scale in a formerly divided and polarised society. Through dialogue, she believes, 'victims as well as the greater society come to recognize perpetrators as human beings who failed morally' (119). Such recognition of offenders' humanity, she believes, holds them accountable for their deeds: 'Sustained, engaged, ordered dialogue thus forces an offender to unearth what moral sensibilities he has buried under a facade of "obedience to orders"... and to face what he has done, not in the heady climate of the period of mayhem but in the sobering atmosphere of reflection on ordinary human lives now shattered' (119-120). Regarding serious offenders as monsters without conscience removes such moral responsibility from them.

Gobodo-Madikizela witnesses the effect on De Kock of dialogue and sober reflection. What set him apart from his former colleagues as well as from Eichmann, Gobodo-Madikizela feels, is what she calls an 'inner stirring'. He says of his first testimony at

the TRC that it was like ‘shedding a cloak’ (17). ‘And this was his burden, his struggle. The cloak had been removed to reveal not only what had been hidden before, not only from the public eye but from himself as well’ (23) – and he does not try to dignify his behaviour by denying moral guilt. Her own response is empathetic: ‘Watching [D]e Kock struggling with his past was what mattered. It gave me a sense of hope that he was in some emotional pain about the things he had done’ (44). This hope testifies to the writer’s belief in the possibility of change.

There are two occasions when Gobodo-Madikizela expresses empathy as a response to pain. The first shakes her profoundly. During her first visit, she asks De Kock about his meeting with Pearl Faku and Doreen Mgoduka. She describes his reaction as she observed it, careful to minimise interpretation:

His face immediately fell, and he became visibly distressed. I could hear the clatter of his leg chains as he shuffled his feet. Sitting directly across from me in the small prison consulting room, his heavy glasses on the table that separated us, he started to speak. There were tears in his eyes. In a breaking voice he said: ‘I wish I could do much more than [say] I’m sorry. I wish there was a way of bringing their bodies back alive. I wish I could say, “Here are your husbands,”’ he said, stretching out his arms as if bearing an invisible body, his hands trembling, his mouth quivering, ‘but unfortunately... I have to live with it.’ (32)

As a trained observer of human behaviour, able to detect evasiveness in De Kock and to analyse his word choice, the writer would quickly recognise pretence. There is none here. The fact that she recreates the scene and describes, rather than tells, the effect of her question on him, makes it possible for the reader to understand her instinctive response:

Relating to him in the only way one does in such human circumstances, I touched his shaking hand (32).

‘Such human circumstances’: Gobodo-Madikizela responds to De Kock’s pain as one person to another. Later she will write of empathy as the response to the pain of another – any other: ‘The power of human connectedness, of identification with the other as “bone of my bone” through the sheer fact of his being human, draws us to

“rescue” others in pain.... We cannot help it’ (127).<sup>30</sup> But on the occasion of her reaching out to touch De Kock’s hand, as thoughtlessly as Wiesenthal waves away a fly, she places this human connection in its larger context almost immediately as she recasts the act as incompatible with the fact that this man, this hand, had directed and executed ‘unspeakable acts of malice against people very much like myself’ – he is, in other words, or was, the enemy. But then she returns to the prison interview room, ‘sitting across from a trembling man in chains’, and feels reassured that there was ‘nothing especially incongruous’ in his vulnerability or her response to it (32). Nevertheless, the conflict and fluctuations do not cease: she feels guilty and wonders if her heart has ‘actually crossed the moral line’ from compassion to ‘actually identifying’ with De Kock. (33). The repetition of ‘actually’ conveys disbelief, as though such identification must be taboo, but it also speaks of the act or physical reality of crossing a divide, the enacted gesture of identification.

On her way home from this first encounter with De Kock, Gobodo-Madikizela finds herself sobbing as she drives, her feelings confused, suffused with loss – including a sense of loss for De Kock, the loss of ‘what he could have been’, something she feels she has touched, a side that was ‘not allowed to triumph’ over what he was to become: ‘apartheid’s killing machine’ (34). It has taken one encounter for this woman to see the ‘monster’ as a human being in need, to see ‘what could have been’, and to be deeply aware that ‘good and evil exist in our lives, and that evil, like good, is always a possibility’. ‘And that,’ she concludes, ‘was what frightened me’ (34).<sup>31</sup> (It is interesting that, on her next visit, she prepares to meet both sides of De Kock, yet it is not the evil [known] side that she fears, but ‘the other... a human being capable of feeling, crying, and knowing pain’ [38] – such an encounter creates far more turmoil, as she shows.) Still shaken, she decides not to take her scheduled flight that evening, but to spend the night with a friend and her family, ‘[p]eople who were doing regular

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<sup>30</sup> Compare Wiesenthal’s act of brushing away a buzzing fly ‘without thinking, simply as a matter of course’ (1998: 37), forgetting, for a moment, the political context in a simple interpersonal gesture. Gobodo-Madikizela’s gesture is, however, more significant and far-reaching.

<sup>31</sup> At one point Gobodo-Madikizela quotes Peter Malkin, who captured the fugitive Adolf Eichmann and spent time guarding him. Unlike De Kock, Eichmann showed no sign of remorse or conscience. Yet Malkin is changed by the experience and becomes aware of his own potential for evil: ‘[T]hose sessions caused me to reflect on my own actions in ways I never had before.... I would never be that easy on myself again... For the fact is as simple as it is inescapable: If the conscience stops functioning, even occasionally, one is in mortal danger of losing oneself’ (*Eichmann in my Hands*, quoted in Gobodo-Madikizela, 68).

jobs and had husbands and lovers and children... people who inhabited the world I was familiar with' (36). One foray into De Kock's world, one moment of relative intimacy with that world with its reminder of the possibility of evil, but also with remorse and pain, has been a profoundly disturbing experience.

The aftermath to this one unpremeditated gesture is recorded in detail, as the writer analyses her own feelings. But it is by no means the end of the matter. During a subsequent appearance of De Kock before the TRC, he asks to speak to Gobodo-Madikizela, and tells her, 'Pumla, that was my trigger hand you touched' (39). A chapter is devoted to this, as the writer describes her own reaction and speculates about De Kock's motives for the revelation, as well as what her gesture has meant for him. The effect of his words on her is chilling: 'I had touched his leprosy.... I was from now on infected with the memory of having embraced into my heart the hand that had killed, maimed, and blown up lives' (40).

The image of leprosy follows on Gobodo-Madikizela's earlier conjecture that one possible motive for De Kock's revelation was that of the 'self-shaming confessional, the cry of the leper... shouting, "Unclean! Unclean!"' (40) It evokes his evil as defilement and sickness, and more especially his untouchable outcast status. (She may be thinking of a parallel action by Jesus, in an encounter with a leper who had broken the taboo and had come up to Him, begging to be made 'clean'. Jesus does the unthinkable: 'Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I will; be clean"' [Mk 1:40,41].)

Yet the 'infection' had been registered unconsciously: the writer's own right forearm had been numb, temporarily paralysed on the morning after the meeting with De Kock, and this recollection leads her into an analysis of 'splitting' as a psychological defence mechanism. De Kock, too, she speculates, may have unconsciously 'split off' his trigger arm from himself. 'By touching the troubling murder "weapon", I had simply opened the floodgates of unwanted memory' (46). Now, in his imprisonment, he is haunted by the killing: 'They may not be alive but they are there. They are there in the day, they are there in the morning. They are there at night when the sun sets. You can forget about forgetting' (46). She sees him as burdened still by layers of the cloak he had begun to shed through his testimonies, but recognises too that 'the cloak

was part of him. Condemned and isolated under it, perhaps when I was drawn under its shadow for a brief moment of communion [D]e Kock saw some hope' (47).

What stands out in this chapter, called 'The trigger hand', is the fact that Gobodo-Madikizela's overriding response to De Kock's words, for all her sense of violation and concomitant anger (40), for all her suspicion that he may be manipulating her, is one of pity, which leads to understanding born of empathy: 'for all the horrific singularity of his acts, [D]e Kock was a desperate soul seeking to affirm to himself that he was still part of the human universe' (47). In choosing the word 'communion' rather than 'contact' lies the intimation that she has, for a moment, touched and shared De Kock's burden. (One is reminded by contrast of Damon Galgut's fictional Adam Napier in *The Impostor*, withdrawing his hand from that which has committed evil and refusing to listen to a troubled confessant – while the moral distance between them is actually slim.) The writer has broken the 'skin barrier' (42), the traditional awkwardness of touch between black and white South Africans – more unusual still when the black woman touches the white man out of compassion. But she has also broken through the barrier of his moral isolation – something neither his former superiors nor the beneficiaries of apartheid were prepared to do.

A second incident Gobodo-Madikizela records, in which her empathy is evoked, occurs later, in April 1998, at the end of one of her last visits to De Kock. Though the visit has gone over the allotted time, De Kock uncharacteristically lingers, and Gobodo-Madikizela stalls a little to give him time. Again she describes his behaviour:

De Kock came over and stood in front of me, arms folded and shoulders raised in a stiff, tense posture. He first looked away, then looked back at me, biting his lower lip as if about to admit to something terrible he had done. A heavy silence hung in the room. 'Pumla,' he began. "I've been meaning to ask you this, right from our second interview. Have I ever killed any of your friends or family?' (114)

Gobodo-Madikizela is taken aback: '[H]ad I just imagined it? Standing there stunned, in conversation with a broken man who had been an angel of death, I felt as if I were in the midst of a collision of scattered meanings within these prison walls that had enclosed our conversations.'

She looks at De Kock, seeking signs of malice.

His eyes were filled with suffering. I felt nothing but pity... I stared at his face again and for a moment I thought I might touch him – *again?* – to offer him some respite from the tortured emotions... De Kock stood in front of me, his shoulders bearing the weight of struggling with the memory of his own evil. I felt then that even if [D]e Kock had killed my loved ones, I would never have been able to tell him. I would have had to spare him. There was something in his face that I hadn't seen before, something utterly despairing. I finally found my voice. I said to him, 'No, Eugene. No one close to me.' (114, 115)

Like the prodigal's father, who is filled with compassion, Gobodo-Madikizela feels 'nothing but pity'. Though she has not been directly injured by De Kock, she has always been conscious of the injury to her people. 'But *I* cannot absolve [D]e Kock from what he did. That role belongs to those whose lives he cut short... and to those they left behind,' she realises (115; author's emphasis). Like the Jews who felt they could not vicariously forgive the Nazis for the deaths of those who had no say – raising again the spectre of murder as the unforgivable crime – she nevertheless allocates that role to survivors who, through bereavement, are also victims. Pearl Faku and Doreen Mgoduka are such victims. 'What does Pearl Faku forgive [D]e Kock for?' the writer asks elsewhere, and answers her own question: 'Forgiveness, while not disregarding the act, begins not with it but with the person. Forgiveness recognises the deed... but transcends it' (95). Gobodo-Madikizela's own pity and kindness certainly recognise the suffering of the culprit, as her record, with its detailed observation, testifies.

Though her simple answer may, she hopes, bring De Kock 'some solace' (115), the writer recognises that he could only salvage a 'sense of having done something right for once in a life gone to waste' (115). Small comfort, one might say, in having missed potential victims. The incident highlights the personal importance Gobodo-Madikizela holds for De Kock, but most of all his despair, the absence – indeed, the impossibility – of absolution. And it is here that Gobodo-Madikizela does take sides, introducing her account of this exchange as follows: 'White people could escape the ravages of the past and leave it "behind" or "buried". But [D]e Kock's past was following him. *He* was paying the price in shame' (113; author's emphasis). Earlier she had referred to the belief among apartheid government operatives in the 'tacit but powerful support they felt they were receiving from the beneficiaries of apartheid

privilege – the polite churchgoers, the cultured suburbanites, the voters. It is at their feet that the responsibility for apartheid, ultimately, can be laid’ (110, 111).<sup>32</sup> Nor does she spare the government, which created the counter-insurgency unit, provided generous funding for covert operations, decorated operatives like De Kock, and never investigated the crimes committed until revelations forced them to appoint a commission, the Harms Commission, which in 1990 found no evidence of death squads at Vlakplaas (De Kock and Gordin, 1998:11). She walks out of a meeting addressed by former president F.W. de Klerk at Harvard University, after he has answered her question about De Kock with the words, ‘My hands are clean’ (2003: 60). Her eloquent articulation of De Kock’s anger reiterates this reaction: ‘De Kock was clearly angry that he had been made a scapegoat –that while he had been sought after as a master counterinsurgency strategist and treated like a hero under apartheid, he had become the most despised white person in post-apartheid South Africa’ (111).

De Kock’s scapegoat status also bothers Jeremy Gordin, who writes, ‘De Kock was thrown to the wolves while others escaped’ (De Kock and Gordin, 1998:291). He concludes his Afterword to *A Long Night’s Damage* with these words:

I hope Eugene de Kock is given amnesty. If he is not, then I hope that he will at least have some company in Pretoria Central. I am thinking of men whose military, police and civilian ranks place them well above that of a colonel (303).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, even in this instance, Gobodo-Madikizela’s reluctance to judge is evident in her earlier analysis of the factors creating apartheid’s foot soldiers: ‘that one was not a member of the privileged class in apartheid South Africa (is a matter) of sheer grace’ (57).

<sup>33</sup> Compare the ‘sentence’ handed down to a three-headed dog, Brutus, in Jane Taylor’s satirical play, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997):

With regard to the first case: a head of political cannot always foresee how his vision will be implemented. We thus exonerate you, and retire you with full pension.

With regard to the head of the military: there is no evidence to link you directly to these barbaric acts. Nonetheless, an example must be made of you, or who knows where we’ll end up. You are thus sentenced to thirty years at the head of the new state army.

Finally, to the dog who allowed himself to become the agent of these ghastly deeds: you have been identified by the families of victims; you have left traces of your activities everywhere. We thus sentence you to two hundred and twelve years imprisonment. (In Graham, 2009:46)

Shane Graham has pointed out that this was the sentence, together with two life terms, handed down to Eugene de Kock.

Gobodo-Madikizela, in seeking to understand how De Kock became De Kock, examines his childhood (that of a stuttering boy whose conservative father, a magistrate, was distant, emotionally abusive, and sometimes violent) and especially the political and socio-religious context which caused him to see his death-squad role as that of a ‘crusader’ (2003: 53). Though she never steps over the line by denying personal conscience and culpability, her analysis does spread the blame and goes some way towards creating understanding. She includes the ‘Message from the President P.W. Botha’ inscribed in Bibles distributed to soldiers of the Defence Force (‘Of all the weapons you carry, this is the greatest because it is the Weapon of God’ [53]). This appropriation of divine sanction is further emphasised by the embossed SADF emblem on the front cover – as indeed it was in state propaganda and in deeply flawed, if not heretical, teaching from the churches supporting apartheid. Gobodo-Madikizela answers her own question, whether de Kock should have resisted ‘such forces as apartheid’s legalization of violence’ in the affirmative, but adds another question as a rider: ‘But could he have? Did he have the conviction to oppose the system he served?’ (57) If his upbringing pre-disposed him to violence, she argues, his social environment would not have equipped him to resist participating in state-sanctioned counterinsurgency operations (where ‘he belonged to a world where morality meant the same thing as hate’ [19]). Having entered this world, De Kock found, in his own words, that, in a war ‘fought in the shadows’ there were ‘no lines drawn to mark where you cannot cross’ (20). His own limit involved not hurting children, and for this, the writer finds, there is corroborating evidence (24-25).

Nevertheless, personal conscience must out, even in one as completely immersed in a dirty war as De Kock was, and he confesses, when asked for his ‘worst memory’, that he returned from one cross-border raid deeply disturbed by an acrid smell on his body, one which continued showers could not remove – ‘the smell of blood’ (50-51). The ‘killing clothes’, torn off, and the first of a series of towels were dumped in the refuse bin. ‘A human being died that night in the murder operation,’ Gobodo-Madikizela concludes (51), seeing in the suppressed conscience a destroyed man, whose humanity had to be denied for him to do the apartheid state’s dirty work.

The writer’s concern is not only to examine the conditions that could create – or destroy – a man like De Kock, but also with the post-apartheid context: ‘The question

is... whether we – our symbols, language, and politics, our legal, media and academic institutions – are creating the conditions that encourage alternatives to revenge’ (118). Within a conducive context, she sees the examples of forgiveness by individuals as encouraging reconciliation between previously hostile and polarised groups. Her own project is an attempt to contribute to this rapprochement.

Having examined dialogue and empathy through narrative, Gobodo-Madikizela also reflects on forgiveness, drawing on a wealth of sources as well as examples. She pays tribute to Pearl Faku, who ‘responded to [D]e Kock’s apology with the fullness of her humanity’:

Her statement of forgiveness was profound. As an invitation to [D]e Kock to turn the page, to come onto the path toward the road of peace, it had no equal that I was aware of... in the history of atrocities in the twentieth century. Her response surpasses much of what we know about people who have been victimized when their victimizers ask for forgiveness. It is hard to resist the conclusion that there is something divine about forgiveness expressed in the context of tragedy. How else can we understand how such words can flow from the lips of one wronged so irreparably? (94-95)

Like Ricoeur, Gobodo-Madikizela attributes the surprising element of forgiveness to divine grace – but she nevertheless sets out to understand the possibility of forgiveness. As she has shown in her narrative, she sees forgiveness evoked by compassion for the offender, which enables the one injured to transcend the injury, rather than overlook it. She quotes Nyameka Goniwe, widow of Matthew Goniwe, one of the ‘Cradock Four’: ‘Victims are looking for signs,’ Goniwe says, ‘and when they see those signs, they are ready to forgive’ (97-98). Yet Goniwe’s own experience at the TRC was unsatisfactory, in the absence of adequate information: ‘I can’t forgive and forget, or go on with my life until I know the actual killers.... We cannot close this chapter yet. Our lives have been involved in this case for years. I don’t know how it feels to be without it’ (96). Gobodo-Madikizela argues the possibility that trauma, and the emotions associated with it, become so much a part of one’s life that they become ‘part of the identity’ of one who has suffered loss: ‘The emotions stand in the place of what was lost’; to let go of them would mean to be vulnerable once again (97). Forgiveness, she argues, is a choice ‘to let go of the bitterness’, and it benefits both the one forgiven and the one who forgives, who is placed on a ‘new path toward healing’ (97). In this regard she quotes Doreen Mgoduka who, with Pearl

Faku, forgave De Kock for murdering their husbands: ‘Now I can mourn properly because this has helped me retrace his [her husband’s] steps in life in order to let him go in death’ (97). Not knowing the truth had impeded the necessary mourning process; with the help of De Kock’s testimony as well as his apology, Mrs Mgoduka can both grieve and forgive the loss of her husband. Goniwe, on the other hand, without truth, without a person to forgive or any sign of remorse, cannot close the chapter of her loss and ‘go on with’ her life.

The writer sees an apology as a speech act which, in order to ‘perform’, has to ‘name the deed, acknowledge wrongdoing, and recognise the pain of the victim. Such an apology conveys a sense of regret and deeply felt remorse. “Saying it makes it so.” A remorseful apology inspires empathy and forgiveness’ (99). Empathy, she argues, is the response to the pain of another; ‘pain cannot be evil’ (100). This is why forgiveness begins with the person, rather than the deed: ‘When criminal offenders, even the most egregious kind, show contrition and apologize, they are, quintessentially, *acting as human beings*’ (127, author’s emphasis). Once again, the spoken word, ‘saying it’, is given weight in the irreversible act of speaking remorse. Nevertheless, ‘apology’ seems to be a very weak term in the light of some of the injuries brought to light at the TRC, as Gobodo-Madikizela’s first reaction to De Kock’s request to apologise to the Motherwell widows shows.<sup>34</sup> ‘One begins to appreciate the magnitude of forgiveness,’ she writes, ‘when the “wrong” for which an apology is tendered is an atrocity’ (98). Dealing with Hannah Arendt’s concept of radical evil, which Arendt sees as beyond forgiveness, she acknowledges that there are acts ‘for which the language of apology and forgiveness may be entirely inappropriate’ (124). She argues, however, that such acts should not be isolated from the context giving rise to them – something better understood through dialogue. Moreover, the future of a society riven by violence and evil is more hopeful where reconciliation occurs. ‘Thus, while there may be value in recognizing and (positing) limits of forgiveness, if such exist,’ she writes, ‘some societies are finding it more constructive to focus on discovering and nurturing the conditions that make forgiveness first conceivable, then possible’ (124).

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<sup>34</sup> ‘What would he say? “I’m sorry I killed your husbands?”’ (14)

In contemplating forgiveness in relation to power and powerlessness, Gobodo-Madikizela argues that, while ‘powerlessness is the affliction of the traumatized’ (100), they are empowered when their forgiveness is sought. ‘The victim becomes the gatekeeper to what the outcast desires – readmission to the human community’ (117). (I would add that the injured holds the key to liberation from the psycho-spiritual prison of guilt, that ‘uncleanness’ that no cleansing can remove – as De Kock found.) Just as she argues that dialogue with offenders recognises their humanity, thereby holding them to account for their deeds, becoming ‘both punishment and rehabilitation’ (120), so forgiveness is a form of vengeance: ‘revenge enacted at a rarefied level’ (117). This is because the one with the power to forgive refuses to return the hatred that dehumanised the offender in committing the offence. “‘This is what it means to be human,’” it says. “I cannot and will not return the evil you inflicted on me”” (117). Perhaps this is tantamount metaphorically to heaping burning coals on the offender’s head. Nevertheless, the writer understands and has experienced the discomfort of engaging with the offender, a discomfort born of the fear that one is compromising one’s own morality. Her own turmoil after touching De Kock stemmed from the fear of identification, of ‘stepping into the shoes of a murderer through empathy’ (120).

Yet Gobodo-Madikizela finds vindication for empathy in that shown by those who have the moral authority to give or withhold forgiveness, the widows of De Kock’s murder victims: ‘(T)he grace-filled gestures of forgiveness I had witnessed from people who lived with psychological scars as daily reminders of their trauma gave me even greater hope. In wrestling with my empathy, somehow I found solace in these gestures of forgiveness by victims. They validated my own feelings of empathy toward [D]e Kock’ (44-45).

Verbeeck (2007), while praising the study, faults it for not adequately covering De Kock’s offences – but these are exposed in De Kock’s own *A Long Night’s Damage*. Gobodo-Madikizela refers to this text, and also to Jacques Pauw’s television documentary, *Prime Evil* (1997), so she is not ignorant about the extent of De Kock’s guilt. She also deals with questions about her motives for dialogue. Asked at a conference whether she is not simply being manipulated by De Kock, Gobodo-Madikizela passes the task of answering to Albie Sachs, waving his arm in the

audience. ‘Sachs spoke about how important it was to “see these men’s humanity,” and how much our hopes as South Africans depended on reaching out to such glimpses of humanity in a spirit of compassion instead of revenge. Albie Sachs’s words were all the more nuanced because, as he spoke, he was gesturing with his cut-off arm’ (2003: 45).<sup>35</sup>

Grace is an unexpected, unwarranted gift; there is, as the writer stresses, no duty to forgive. It is the victim who has the prerogative to choose between mercy and vengeance. For her part, Gobodo-Madikizela finds grace in empathy, and in a generous recognition of her own fallibility: ‘That one is not confronted with the choices [D]e Kock could have or could not have made, that one was not a member of the privileged class in apartheid South Africa are matters of sheer grace’ (57). Mercy, she concludes, ‘should be granted cautiously. And yet society must embrace those who, *like Eugene de Kock*, see... the road of shared humanity ahead. Our capacity for such empathy is a profound gift in this brutal world we have created for one another’ (139) (my emphasis). The writer’s emphasis on the healing of a brutalised society and on the possibility of change in the individual makes this study a testament to hope.

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<sup>35</sup> Sachs lost his right arm and the use of one eye in a car-bomb explosion in Mozambique.