

“To speak of this you would need the tongue of a god”: On Representing the Trauma of Township Violence¹

Derek Attridge
University of York
Inglaterra

Resumo: Esse artigo trata da representação literária de traumas como os massacres urbanos na África do Sul nas obras de três autores, J.M.Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, André Brink’s *An Act of Terror* and Elsa Joubert, *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*. A comparação das respectivas técnicas narrativas coloca a questão se o autor tem, ou não, o poder e a autoridade de falar em nome do outro (oprimido).

Palavras-chave: Massacres Urbanos; Autoridade; Obra de Coetzee; África do Sul

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Abstract: This article deals with the literary representation of traumas like the township violence in South Africa in the work of three authors: J.M.Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, André Brink’s *An Act of Terror* and Elsa Joubert, *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*. Comparing the respective narrative techniques, the analysis posits the question whether the author is entitled to speak in the name of the oppressed other.

Key-words: Township Violence; authority; Coetzee’s work; South Africa

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The elderly, ailing Mrs Curren, whose letter to her daughter we are reading in the fictional world of J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* (1990) has offered to drive her maid Florence from central Cape Town to the Cape Flats in the early morning to help search for her son Bheki, who has gone missing. The pages that follow (1990, p. 83-99) are some of the most memorable in the novel, and yet at the same time they seem untypical

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of it, and indeed of Coetzee's writing more generally: they attempt to convey the horror of the violence rending the townships and settlements in the traumatic year of 1986 with a directness that brings Coetzee closer to historical reportage than anywhere else in his fiction. Mrs Curren has been taken by Florence's cousin Mr Thabane from the township of Guguletu to the edge of a nearby shantytown; the rain is beating against her face and she is shivering with cold. Her account, supposedly written once she is back home, continues as follows:

The path widened, then came to an end in a wide, flat pond. On the far side of the pond the shanties started, the lowest-lying cluster surrounded by water, flooded. Some built sturdily of wood and iron, others no more than skins of plastic sheeting over frames of branches, they straggled north over the dunes as far as I could see.

At the brink of the pond I hesitated. "Come," said Mr Thabane. Holding on to him I stepped in, and we waded across, in water up to our ankles. One of my shoes was sucked off. "Watch out for broken glass," he warned. I retrieved the shoe.

Save for an old woman with a sagging mouth standing in a doorway, there was no one in sight. But as we walked further the noise we had heard, which at first might have been taken for wind and rain, began to break up into shouts, cries, calls, over a ground-bass which I can only call a sigh: a deep sigh, repeated over and over, as if the wide world itself were sighing.

Then the little boy, our guide, was with us again, tugging Mr Thabane's sleeve, talking excitedly. The two of them broke away; I struggled behind them up the duneside.²

Mrs Curren finds herself behind a huge crowd looking down at what she calls a "scene of devastation": burning and smouldering shanties, emitting black smoke. She struggles to comprehend what she is witnessing:

² J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1990), 87. Further references are given in the main text.

Jumbles of furniture, bedding, household objects stood in the pouring rain. Gangs of men were at work trying to rescue the contents of the burning shacks, going from one to another, putting out the fires; or so I thought till with a shock it came to me that these were no rescuers but incendiaries, that the battle I saw them waging was not with the flames but with the rain. It was from the people gathered on the rim of this amphitheatre in the dunes that the sighing came. Like mourners at a funeral they stood in the downpour, men, women and children, sodden, hardly bothering to protect themselves, watching the destruction. (1990, p. 87-8)

Mrs Curren observes a man attacking the door of a shack with an axe and another setting fire to it; when stones are thrown at these men, they advance on the people in the crowd, who turn and run. One of the crowd knocks Mrs Curren to the ground, and when she manages to get up again she expresses her sense of complete disorientation:

A woman screamed, high and loud. How could I get away from this terrible place? Where was the pond I had waded across, where was the path to the car? There were ponds everywhere, pools, lakes, sheets of water; there were paths everywhere, but where did they lead? (1990, p. 89)

Mr Thabane finds her, and, before a ring of spectators, asks her what sort of crime it is that she sees. Eventually, in what David Attwell calls an “especially memorable moment,”³ she gives the answer quoted in my title: “‘To speak of this’ – I waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth littering the path – ‘You would need the tongue of a god’” (91). A little later they find the rain-beaten body of Bheki, laid out with four other victims of shooting in the roofless remains of a building. In the distance Mrs Curren sees a line of khaki-brown troop-carriers.⁴

³ David Attwell, “‘Dialogue’ and ‘Fulfilment’ in J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*”, in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly, eds., *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy 1970-1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 168.

⁴In focusing on these pages of *Age of Iron*, I am omitting all reference to the mysterious vagrant Vercueil, who plays such an important part in the novel from its first page to its last (an importance I have discussed in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004)). The shift in tonality which his absence from the Guguletu episode creates is such that one feels one is reading a different novel. For an important discussion of the way in which the presence of Vercueil troubles the boundaries of the serious and the nonserious, see Patrick Hayes, *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel*:

The historical accuracy of the scene described here is not difficult to substantiate. In May and June 1986 the homes of around 60,000 people were destroyed in Guguletu, Crossroads and the neighbouring settlements, with about 60 deaths in the fighting.⁵ Florence tells Mrs Curren that “They were giving guns to the *witdoeke* and the *witdoeke* were shooting” – not in Guguletu itself, she explains, but “out in the bush” (83). There is considerable evidence, from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission testimony and elsewhere, that residents hostile to the activities of the pro-UDF and ANC youth were armed and supported by the police; their arm- or headbands made of white cloth (*witdoeke*) were the notorious emblem of their affiliation. Although Florence says at first she thinks they will have to go to “Site C” – an area of the huge township of Khayelitsha some distance from Guguletu – Mrs Curren’s description of the journey suggests that a more likely candidate, if we want to fix on a precise location, is the shantytown known as KTC. (I haven’t come across any specific evidence for the flooding which plays a significant part in Mrs Curren’s experience, though the settlements on the Cape Flats are notorious for their proneness to flooding, so this is not an unlikely scenario for morning in winter, the Cape rainy season.) The description of the journey from Guguletu appears to lack geographical precision – Mr Thabane drives through a “landscape of scorched earth” beyond the houses, then turns north, “away from the mountain, then off the highway onto a dirt road” that soon becomes sand (p. 86). If Mr Thabane’s house is near Lansdowne Road, along which Mrs Curren has driven and which borders Guguletu to the south, he would need to travel north to reach KTC. Another possibility for their destination is Crossroads, a little further away to the east. Site C is further away still, to the south-east, and I have not found any documentation of violence there in 1986 – in fact, there is evidence that it was a centre not for UDF supporters but for the *witdoeke*:

During the months of March to June 1986 a bloody and devastating territorial war was fought between Ngxobongwana’s groups and the satellite

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Writing and Politics after Beckett (Oxford UP, 2010), 144-64.

⁵ See the South African Press Association Report, <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/media/1997/9706/s970609d.htm> William Beinart also gives the figure of 60,000 rendered homeless in *Twentieth-century South Africa*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 266. See also Rodney Davenport and Christopher Saunders, *South Africa: A Modern History*, 5th edn. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 467-8.

camps. Ngxobongwana was in Ciskei at the time of the violence. The Wit Doeke from Crossroads were supported by Mali Hoza and his community in Site C of Khayelitsha. Many eye witnesses claimed that the Wit Doeke were also supported by the police and the army. It was claimed that there was identity of interest between Ngxobongwana, who wished to have the area cleared for his own people, and the State, which wished to crush the “comrades” and pave the way for the establishment of a town council and an “orderly settlement”. Many lives were lost, shacks were destroyed and almost 65% of the area of KTC way [sic] razed to the ground.⁶

Although it may not be possible to identify exactly a place and a time to which the fictional events correspond, there is sufficient historical accuracy in Coetzee’s account for this section of the novel to work as effective reportage. One could say that this accuracy is a necessary condition for the success of these pages of *Age of Iron* – had Coetzee significantly distorted the historical record he could have been accused of irresponsibility and lost the reader’s confidence – but not a sufficient one: it is quite possible to be accurate and yet fail in the task of responsible representation. What, I want to ask in this essay, is specific to *literary* representations of traumatic experiences such as the township violence of 1986?⁷ To pursue this question further, we need to examine the way the novel raises the question of representation itself – something implicit in Mrs Curren’s expression of helplessness in the face of the task of description, a helplessness which seems to be more fundamental than that of the liberal white individual faced by the extreme suffering of the non-white poor, although that is of course an aspect of her situation that cannot be ignored.⁸

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⁶ Goldstone Commission: Report on Violence at Crossroads, http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/transition/gold_crossrd.html. Johnson Ngxobongwana was a Crossroads ward committee chairman who became leader of the *witdoeke*, with covert state support.

⁷ I am using the term “trauma” in its ordinary sense, not in the more specialised sense enshrined in “trauma theory”: the novel does not suggest that the experiences portrayed in these pages produce the unacknowledged mental wound and consequent repetition compulsion described, for instance, by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996). Of course, the historical events themselves probably had traumatic effects of just this kind.

⁸ Paul Rich sees Mrs Curren’s inability to speak as an indication of the failure of “liberal discourse” which, “in a situation of acute crisis and polarization, is stretched to the point of silence”, “Literature and Political Revolt in South Africa: The Cape Town Crisis of 1984-86 in the Novels of J. M. Coetzee, Richard Rive and Menan DuPlessis,” SPAN 36 (Oct 1993); while Sue Kossew states that “the language of the colonizers with its eurocentric classical allusions is shown to be inadequate and evasive” (*Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996): 195). These comments are undoubtedly true, but the scene also raises more general questions about language’s

After a dozen pages giving an account of the violence and its aftermath as witnessed by Mrs Curren, written in a fairly conventional novelistic mode with vivid description and plenty of dialogue, we are suddenly reminded that we are, supposedly, reading a letter meant not for us, but for another person. Mrs Curren breaks off her account of her experiences in the squatter camp and township, and addresses her daughter directly:

I tell you the story of this morning mindful that the storyteller, from her office, claims the place of right. It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. Through me alone do you find yourself here on these desolate flats, smell the smoke in the air, see the bodies of the dead, hear the weeping, shiver in the rain. (1990, p. 95)

The reader of the novel may not be the addressee of the letter, but it is hard not to take this passage as having him or her directly in its sights. At first it may sound like a version of the classic statement of the realistic novelist's purpose; as Conrad famously put it in the preface to "The Nigger of the Narcissus," "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*. That — and no more, and it is everything."⁹ But Mrs Curren is not, in fact, making a realist writer's assertion at all: the emphasis here is on the storyteller, not the story – the key phrases are "through my eyes ... through me alone". And because the story is not, cannot be, an objective representation – least of all, of such scenes as these – the responsible reader is obliged to mistrust the story-teller at every point. Mrs Curren – and we might say Coetzee – expresses this powerfully in the next paragraph:

I am the one writing: I, I. So I ask you: attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye. (1990, p. 95-96)

capacity in the face of trauma. Hayes, in *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel*, sees Mrs Curren's inarticulacy as the result of a clash of genres, emphasising "the way she is confronted by the divergent forms of sociability asserted by the countergenre that is unfolding around her" (149); in doing so, he unconsciously duplicates Mrs Curren's own tendency to interpret her experience in literary terms.

⁹ Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus': A Tale of the Forecastle* (New York: Doubleday, 1924), xiv.

Even the warning that in her writing she may be being less than completely honest may itself be less than completely honest – we only have to turn to Coetzee’s essay “Confession and Double Thoughts”¹⁰ to find a compelling account of the impossibility of a true confession in a secular context, since it is necessary to confess that one’s confession is not as full and pure as it might be, and so on *ad infinitum*.

We are thus not allowed to forget that *Age of Iron*’s pages on township violence are the representation, firstly, of a (fictional) middle-class white woman who has benefited from an extensive education and, secondly, of a (real) middle-class white man who has similarly benefited. This does not, of course, render the representation invalid, but it does encourage us to examine it for its limitations and biases. The most obvious of these arises from the fact that Mrs Curren is a retired classics teacher, and in attempting to describe what she has just witnessed, she cannot but fall back on literary passages that have become part of the texture of her thinking. If we examine these echoes, we will find that they signal a very particular consciousness, with its own way of seeing.

As they approach Guguletu, the mist swirling around the car prompts a memory of Book VI of Virgil’s *Aeneid*: “Wraiths, spirits. Aornos this place: birdless” (83). This is a recollection of Aeneas’s arrival at the cave leading to the underworld:

There was a deep rugged cave, stupendous and yawning wide, protected by a lake of black water and the glooming forest. Over this lake no birds could wing a straight course without harm, so poisonous the breath which streamed up from those black jaws and rose to the vault of sky; and that is why the Greeks named this place “Aornos, the Birdless.”¹¹

And when their ten-year old guide to the shantytown arrives, Mrs Curren thinks back to the innocence of her own childhood, prompting another memory of a passage from the *Aeneid*, this one describing the weeping of the infant souls at the entrance to the underworld:

¹⁰ *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 251-93.

¹¹ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, tr. W. F. Jackson Knight (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), 154. Further references will be given in the main text. Laura Wright also highlights the importance of Virgil in *Age of Iron* in *Writing “Out of All the Camps”: J. M. Coetzee’s Narratives of Displacement* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 68-72.

White as grubs in our swaddling bands, we will be dispatched to join those infant souls whose eternal whining Aeneas mistook for weeping. White our colour, the colour of limbo: white sands, white rocks, a white light pouring down from all sides...*In limine primo*: on the threshold of death, the threshold of life. (1990, p. 85)

In the episode she is recalling, Aeneas has crossed the river Styx and escaped the three-headed Cerberus when he hears cries:

These were the loud wailing of infant souls weeping at the very entrance-way; never had they had their share of life's sweetness, for the dark day had stolen them from their mother's breasts and plunged them to a death before their time. (1990, p. 160)

In the passages describing the encounter with the burning shantytown, there are no classical allusions as specific as these examples, but there is throughout a sense that the particularities of what Mrs Curren is witnessing are being understood through their relation to a long history of literary representations of the experience of horror and suffering. The wading across the pond is a factual matter, yet with the *Aeneid's* depiction of the underworld already alluded to it's hard not to hear echoes of Aeneas's crossing of the River Styx into that place of otherness, of misery, of deathliness. ("They crossed the river; and Charon eventually disembarked both the priestess and the hero, unharmed, on ugly slime amid grey reeds" (p. 159)). The extraordinary sighing that Mrs Curren hears – "a deep sigh, repeated over and over, as if the wide world itself were sighing" – is more than a realistic detail (indeed, it may not strike the reader as particularly realistic), but draws some of its remarkable power from its suggestion of the myriad souls encountered by Aeneas in the underworld, such as those grieving in the "Fields of Mourning," which "stretch in every direction" like the shanties straggling over the dunes as far as Mrs Curren can see (p. 160). When she is able to identify the source of the sighing as the shack dwellers gathered on the edge of the amphitheatre – itself a surprisingly classical word in this context – she compares them to "mourners at a funeral" (1990, p. 88). Later she will think "Hades, Hell: the domain of ideas. [...] Why

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can hell not be at the foot of Africa, and why can the creatures of hell not walk among the living?” (1990, p. 101).¹²

The other literary presence in this scene is Dante’s *Inferno*, itself full of allusions to the journey to the underworld described by Virgil in the *Aeneid*, with Virgil himself, of course, acting as guide to the nether regions.¹³ To emphasise the way in which Mrs Curren sees these scenes of horror and misery through the lens of her classical and post-classical reading is not to find fault with her, or with Coetzee; it is to highlight the fact that to witness an event of this kind is inevitably to struggle to interpret it (as Mrs Curren struggles to interpret the action of the men doing something to the shacks), and to draw on whatever frames of reference one has available. It is also a reflection of Coetzee’s own perspective, an acknowledgement that he cannot speak for those more intimately involved in the violence he represents. In these pages of *Age of Iron*, Coetzee manages both to convey a traumatic experience by literary means – there is undeniable power in the classically-inflected account written after the event by Coetzee’s fictional character – and to reveal the degree to which these means fall short of the experience itself. It might be argued that Mrs Curren’s actual experiences of the events is coloured by her classical training, but this is unknowable; Coetzee, as we have seen, emphasises that we can have access only to the subsequent written testimony.

A comparison with another literary evocation of the trauma of the townships in that period will help to bring out the distinctiveness, and the special power, of Coetzee’s literary methods. Here too the onslaught of the *witdoeke* on the residents of the Cape Flats settlements, with the complicity of the police, is witnessed by a white middle-class character. This character is the major protagonist of André Brink’s *An Act of Terror*, Thomas Landman, an Afrikaner whose increasing awareness of the injustices of

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¹² The crossing of the Styx in Book VI of the *Aeneid* is still in Mrs Curren’s mind as she approaches death: she quotes four lines to Vercueil on the host of unburied souls clamouring to cross, though she gives him a jokily false translation (176).

¹³ For a discussion of these allusions, see David E. Hoegberg, “What is Hope?: Coetzee’s rewriting of Dante in *Age of Iron*”, *English in Africa* 25.1 (1998): 27-42. Hoegberg’s assertion that the act of leaving Florence’s daughter Hope behind is “a clear reference to the sign on the gate of Dante’s Hell” (31) (“Abandon all hope ye who enter here”) seems a little far-fetched, however. But then again, Mrs Curren does comment that being accompanied by children called Hope and Beauty is “like living in an allegory”... (84). Hayes argues that the name “Vercueil” in some pronunciations sounds like “Virgil”, and that Mrs Curren wants to cast him in this role, though he rejects, refusing to “escort her to the ‘underworld’ of Guguletu” with a curt “Fuck off” (82); see J. M. Coetzee and the Novel, 144n. For Hayes, “this particular trip to the underworld...owes rather more to Cervantes than to Dante” (p. 149).

apartheid leads him to attempt the assassination of the State President. Although the event he recalls near the beginning of the book is not explicitly dated, it bears the hallmarks of the 1986 attacks. The second section of the first chapter is an extended recollection by Landman of an experience that has had a profound effect on him:

– It’s the wind I remember first of that day in Crossroads, the wind, even before the noise and the movement comes back: the phalanxes of yellow Casspirs (the ‘Mello-Yellos’), the brown Buffels, the troop-carriers, like prehistoric animals rumbling and lumbering in the gloomy winter day below fast-drifting tattered clouds; the jeering of the people, the hail of stones and bottles and other desperate projectiles; the plumes of teargas; the first houses bursting into flames; the vigilantes with their distinguishing white cloths tied to their arms, storming in, flanked by police; then the shooting (“My God, they’re using real bullets today”).¹⁴

Just as Mrs Curren is afflicted by the rain, Landman remembers the wind (though the fact that this is the first memory that should come back to him seems more a literary device than a psychologically convincing detail); after that, the sequence of memories is a familiar one from descriptions of the townships during the States of Emergency of the mid-eighties, and is a little too much of a list to evoke the scene with any real vividness. Landman continues to harp on the wind:

The wind cutting like a blade through one’s anorak and layers of clothing (and what about those people in the dunes, scarecrows with sticks for arms and legs, bare-bottomed snot-nosed kids among the shacks and shanties and haphazard shelters of black plastic sheets and corrugated iron and cardboard insufficiently protected by windblown Port Jackson willows?) and driving the sand of the Cape Flats into one’s eyes and right through one’s body. Yesterday was bad enough, with its pelting rain, but at least nothing could burn in the wet. In this wind there is nothing to prevent the police and the army and their *witdoeke* collaborators from setting fire to the squatters’ huts

¹⁴André Brink, *An Act of Terror* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 3-4. Further references will be given in the main text.

and smoking them out of their wretched ‘illegal’ settlements in Crossroads and KTC. (1990, p. 4)

Again we have the image of burning shacks, the work of *witdoeke* assisted by more official representatives of the state. (These shacks, unlike the ones in *Age of Iron*, don’t burn in the rain.) Landman emphasises the role of the police:

Behind us, in front of the first row of burning shanties, a row of *witdoeke* are lined up, armed with *kieries*, with pangas, with automatic rifles (I have photographs of the police distributing these guns, and their brand of napalm, among them). And from ahead the blue rows of riot police are approaching, a front line of men with sjamboks and dogs, followed by those with teargas and guns. Our first reaction is to stand our ground, convinced they are merely out to intimidate us: it must be obvious to them that we are from the press. But after the first sudden salvo – strange how almost detachedly one registers it, as if it is happening very far away; like a star streaking through the sky light-years after it has burnt out – we scatter in all directions. (1990, p. 5)

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The description is vivid, physical, energetic; and it gives the sense of a particular white perspective (presumably we’re meant to be uncomfortable with the mention of ‘scarecrows with sticks for arms and legs’ and ‘bare-bottomed snot-nosed kids’, just as we are with Mrs Curren’s reference to the ‘huge backside’ of the girl who has knocked her down). The allusions to prehistoric animals and shooting stars don’t engage with any particularly potent cultural memory (but then the writer is a journalist, not a classics teacher). The reader is invited to register the deep unpleasantness of the scene being witnessed and the shock of being shot at, but is not, I would argue, taken through an experience of reading that is itself disturbing, as it is with Mrs Curren’s account in *Age of Iron*. Coetzee’s pages are an invitation to stretch one’s mental and emotional capacities to take in a horror that is barely articulable, whereas Brink and his protagonist experience no limits to language’s effectiveness.

Both Coetzee and Brink, through the use of witnessing narrators, avoid speaking for those caught up in the violence they represent.¹⁵ (Brink, on other occasions, has no qualms about speaking in the voice of the oppressed racial other; Coetzee is always circumspect.) I want now to discuss a third representation of township violence in which this gap between experience and narration is closed, a work that may have influenced these two writers. Elsa Joubert, an established Afrikaans novelist, published *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* in 1978;¹⁶ it was a huge success, and was garlanded with Afrikaans literary awards and praised in numerous Afrikaans publications. Joubert and her husband translated it into English as *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* in 1980.¹⁷ It provoked a great deal of discussion, particularly on the subject of its presentation as a novel by Joubert when it was in fact the record of a series of conversations with an Afrikaans-speaking Xhosa woman who had worked for her (and who chose the pseudonym “Poppie Nongena”), as well as with other members of the woman’s family. Most of it is told in “Poppie”’s voice. Joubert’s own denial that she had written a political work, and the echoing of this denial by many Afrikaans commentators, provoked strong essays by David Schalkwyk and Anne McClintock on the book’s overlooked political dimension in demonstrating the appalling impact of the apartheid system on black families and individuals.¹⁸

I’m not entering any of those debates in this essay; my purpose is to examine the way in which Eunice Msutwana – her true name was only revealed much later¹⁹ – and Elsa Joubert represent the terrible events in Nyanga township (not far from KTC and Crossroads) on Boxing Day 1976. Although we’re now dealing with a period of violence ten years earlier than that depicted by Coetzee and Brink, in the aftermath of the Soweto Uprising of 1976, and the conflict this time is between local residents and hostel-

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¹⁵ In another novel by Brink’s reflecting the township violence of 1986 (and written during that period), *States of Emergency* (Faber & Faber, 1988), the narrator reports the clashes from a distance; the only street violence described from the perspective of someone directly involved is that of the Paris *événements* of May 1968 – events at which Brink was present.

¹⁶ Elsa Joubert, *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1978).

¹⁷ Elsa Joubert, *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1980).

¹⁸ David Schalkwyk, “The Flight from Politics: An Analysis of the South African Reception of *Poppie Nongena*,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12.2 (1986): 183-95; Anne McClintock, “‘The Very House of Difference’: Race, Gender, and the Politics of South African Women’s Narrative in *Poppie Nongena*,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 196-226. In an interview with Stephan Meyer, Joubert makes it clear that she wanted her readers – especially her Afrikaans readers – to be appalled and moved to action by the injustices of apartheid described in the book (“Creating a Climate for Change,” in Judith Lütge Coullie et al., *Selves in Question: Interviews on South African Auto/biography* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 183.

¹⁹ See Joubert, “Creating a Climate,” 174.

dwelling migrant workers from the rural areas (Poppie calls them ‘people of the location’ and ‘men from the special quarters’), there are striking similarities. In particular, there is the same willingness of the police to arm and support a black group hostile to the ANC supporters and their families, so that instead of black solidarity against white oppressors we have the tragic spectacle of a divided black community (something that hits Mrs Curren with the shock of a revelation in the later novel). And as in the later works, we have the notorious emblem of the white cloths identifying those doing the dirty work of the state against their fellow men and women.

Here, then, are some extracts from the pages describing the events on that terrible day; it will be evident that Joubert has not attempted to convert Poppie’s oral narrative into something more obviously literary, and although one has no way of knowing to what extent the language has been massaged, the particular power of the writing comes from the sense of direct testimony to a traumatic experience:

Now I could see the city-borners [Joubert’s rather odd translation of “lokasiemense”] stand in a line in front of their own houses to protect them from the migrants [“die special quarters se manne” in the original]. It was just like that, Poppie tells, like a hand dropping. Suddenly the riot squad was there, and we heard shots, and the special quarters men shielded themselves behind the riot squad to break through our lines.

The police came in, together with the men from the special quarters. They shot in between the people of the location, and that is why the location people had to fall back.

At the window I was looking through I saw the bottle coming. I saw the arm with the white cloth round it that threw the bottle which burnt Mamdungwana’s house. I heard the bottle fall on the roof, then we ran out of the back door. (1990, p. 332)

Poppie then describes their escape:

I had Vukile on my back, Mamdungwana carried the cripple child; she was seven but she had to carry her tied to the back. She had the other

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children by the hand and we escaped by a back way to other people's house behind us.

We saw men coming with the white cloth on them; they carried stones and bricks, kieres and other sharp things. Our people ran away because the police had shot at them....

We ran past a man lying dead there on the ground, and I do not know if he had been beaten to death or shot. We couldn't stop to look who he was, but Mamdungwana saw he had on a biscuit-coloured suit and her children hadn't any clothes that colour. At that moment you couldn't stop to look at a corpse, you couldn't turn round to see who it was, you just had to run for your life, you and your children with you....

Another woman ran past us, but she was completely mad in the head. She was shouting: They have chopped my two children to death; they threw the youngest one into the fire to burn. She ran into the bush; we could not help her. (1990, p. 332-34)

It would be wrong, I think, to say that this is not a literary achievement, though it's not easy to say whose. The sudden appearance of the riot squad, for instance, is described in a memorable phrase: 'It was just like that, Poppie tells, like a hand dropping.' (Interestingly, the phrase is not in the original Afrikaans: 'En toe ek weer sien, vertel Poppie, toe is die riot squad by ons'(258) – does this difference reveal Joubert's subsequent addition, or something left out of the original version of Eunice Msutwana's oral account?) For a moment we're present at the act of testimony rather than the scene being described – a complex back-and-forth movement that Joubert sustains throughout the book. There is drama in the account of the bottle, thrown by the arm bound with the tell-tale white cloth, as if in close-up. The incident of the corpse with the biscuit-coloured suit gains affective force by being told in a sentence which only gradually reveals its true significance – not so much the sight of another death, but of a death that can be thankfully ignored because it is not that of a family-member. The woman driven mad by the savage murder of her children is like a moment in a Shakespearean tragedy, though there is no sense that any literary analogues are being evoked.

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I don't want to exaggerate what I see as the literary quality of this passage, however; it remains true that a large part of its power derives from our sense that this is reliable testimony, its reliability guaranteed by its lack of obvious literary technique – and this is evidence of Joubert's skill in conveying a distinctive and convincing voice (even more evident, I would say, in the Afrikaans original, in which Poppie's characteristic dialect, with its smattering of English words, is plain to hear). A final comparison will highlight the difference between even this minimally 'literary' testimony and actual testimony: the final passage I wish to look at is a 1997 victim statement from the TRC that returns us to KTC and the dark days of June 1986. Lennox Sigwela attended the hearing in a wheelchair, and was asked about the events of 6th June 1986. (It should be noted that this is a translation from an original deposition in isiXhosa, so some of the linguistic features that stand out here may have been absent from the actual testimony.)

Lennox Sigwela: On that Monday I was not at work, I had gone to the X-ray check at Groote Schuur. Then from the hospital I went to the terminus. When I got to the terminus I heard that the Witdoeke were there. I had heard the previous day that the Witdoeke would come (indistinct). So I went from the terminus I went straight home. When I got home I noticed that there was some fire and my grandmother and an uncle and my aunts, they were not there. Their houses were there, but they were not there. The kids were there. So when I found my people at home, the people were busy taking their belongings away to New Crossroads, and I helped. I went for the first trip and we dismantled the houses and the others were already on fire. I loaded the household goods, my uncle, my father and other people from 7 took the other trip, went to the second trip. On the second trip the car was full and there was no space for me. So I was going, I remained, I was going to walk on foot.

Again, the burning shacks and the occupants moving their belongings to safety. But Sigwela had much more to endure still.

As I was walking, there was some angry shouts, the Witdoeke are there and they already are in site KTC and we ran with a number of comrades who were there and we went towards KTC, next to the

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(indistinct), to stop at (indistinct). There were two Hippos. They came very close to me. So I decided I am not going to run away, because they have come to stop this. So I stopped running and then I just walked. And then there was a tap and then I went to the tap to drink some water.

And then I noticed there was a Hippo that was open. I noticed that this Hippo was full of Witdoeke, who disembarked and they came directly to me. So I didn't go out of KTC. I went back and then they were shooting some things at the shacks to ignite them, fire. And as I was running the shacks surrounded me were burning, so I had to go back to them, so that if I could escape I could escape amongst them. But I tried and tried but it was all in vain. And the person who shot me was a white man who was inside the Hippo, he shot me here. I fell and when I fell it was for a couple of seconds and then I woke up and then I ran and then I was hacked and brought down by axes. Then they came and hacked me and they left me for dead, because when I fell, I fell on my back. As they were coming, one of them hit me with a sabre on my head, and then I turned and slept on my stomach and then they started hacking me and they thought I was dead.²⁰

This is a testimonial account of raw directness; its power relies on our conviction that it is unmediated by any authorial manipulation. The story is told as a series of events, not always easy to follow as a logical sequence but all the more effective as a representation of the confusion produced by a traumatic experience. This is the opposite of “the language of a god,” largely paratactic (“So...So...And...And then...”) and often repetitive (“then I was hacked...Then they came and hacked me...As they were coming, one of them hit me...and then they started hacking me”); the fact that it is so clearly *not* literary is what gives it its power. One cannot imagine Mrs Curren speaking like this, both because she is a character in a novel and because, within the novel, she is only a spectator. Poppie Nongena's speech in Joubert's rendering comes closer to Sigwela's, and, like his account, gains force from our willingness to believe that it records not an imagined reality but reality itself; but we're aware always of its

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²⁰ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission: KTC Hearings 9 June 1997: Lennox Sigwela.* <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/ktc/sigwela.htm>. Sigwela's reference to “site KTC” is suggestive of Florence's “Site C,” as reported by Mrs Curren.

craftedness – whatever stylistic clumsiness it betrays is *deliberate* clumsiness, left unaltered for effect.

The testimony of victims like Lennox Sigwela clearly had a significant impact both in South African and internationally; we don't, however, read it for pleasure, which I take to be an indispensable feature of anything we would want to call literature. *Poppie Nongena* played an important role in opening the eyes of white South Africans, Afrikaners in particular, to the effects on ordinary families of apartheid legislation; at the same time, Joubert's skilful handling of the material she was offered provides a positive experience for the reader (which doesn't diminish the pain it records). Brink and Coetzee, writing overtly literary novels, foreground ways of telling as much as the content of what is told. Brink, however, more than Coetzee, writes to inform and persuade – in *An Act of Terror* to explore what could turn a scion of an old Afrikaner family into a would-be assassin and perhaps thereby change the views of his South African readers. Coetzee appears more sceptical about the instrumental effectiveness of literary representations, and perhaps about linguistic representation itself, if we take him to be sympathetic to Mrs Curren's failure to describe what she sees in the shantytown – though we should note that her interlocutor in the crowd is far from convinced by her excuse. His response is merely to repeat his earlier exclamation: “‘Shit,’ he said again, challenging me” (1990, p. 91). Classical allusions – “a god” implies the Greek or Roman pantheon – carry no weight in this time and place, and Mrs Curren is forced, by what she experiences in Guguletu, to revise her understanding of what is demanded by an “age of iron”. Her later “confession” to Vercueil (who is probably asleep) encapsulates that revision, requiring that she acknowledge her inability to speak: “I have no voice; I lost it long ago; perhaps I have never had one. I have no voice, and that is that. The rest should be silence” (149). Yet, like character in a text by Samuel Beckett, she understands that that is not the whole story: “But with this – whatever it is – this voice that is no voice, I go on. On and on” (1990, p. 149).

If Coetzee's novel, because of its circulation around the world, spurred some readers into action as a result of their being made aware of the evils perpetrated during the 1986 Emergency, it did so as an extra, a by-product of its literary value, as it were, and not as a consequence of its readers' experiences in engaging with it as a work

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of literature. But if in linking the traumatic experience of an elderly woman in the burning settlements of South Africa in 1986 to one of western culture's profoundest imaginings of the place of the dead – and Virgil is of course echoing Homer, and will be echoed by Dante and a hundred other writers, painters, composers, and film-makers – the novel succeeds in taking readers through their own psychic and emotional underworld journeys, so that they continue to be haunted by the scene of the flat pond, the repeated sigh, the gangs of men at their terrible work, it will have succeeded as literature. And this is not, as I've been arguing, because it universalises the particular historical moment, but because that historical moment *in its particularity* gains cognitive and affective force from millennia-old cultural narratives that register the trauma of exposure to an underworld, or other world, of suffering and death.

Nota

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