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The Contemporary South African Trauma Novel: Michiel Heyns' *Lost Ground* (2011) and Marlene van Niekerk's *The Way of the Women* (2008)

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Abstract: After the end of apartheid in 1990 and the new constitution of 1994, the genre of the contemporary South African novel is experiencing a heyday. One reason for this is that, with the end of censorship, the authors can go about unrestrained to take a critical look at the traumatized country and the state of a nation that shows a great need to come to terms with its past. In this context, trauma and narration prove to be a fertile combination, an observation that stands in marked contrast to the deconstructionist view of trauma as 'unclaimed' experience and the inability to speak about it.

Michiel Heyns' *Lost Ground* (2011) and Marlene van Niekerk's *The Way of the Women* (2008) are prime examples of the contemporary South African trauma novel. As crime fiction, *Lost Ground* not only tells a thrilling story but is also deeply involved in South African politics. The novelist Heyns plays with postmodernist structures, but the real strength of the novel lies in its realistic milieu description and the analysis of the protagonist's traumatic 'entanglements'. *The Way of the Women* is mainly a farm novel but also shows elements of the historical novel and the marriage novel. It continues the process of the deconstruction of the farm as a former symbol of the Afrikaner's pride and glory. Both novels' meta-fictional self-reflections betray the self-consciousness of their authors who are aware of the symbolization compulsions in a traumatized country. They use narrative as a means of 'working through', coming to terms with trauma, and achieving reconciliation. Both novels' complex narrative structures may be read as symbolic expressions of traumatic 'entanglements' that lie at the heart of the South African dilemma.

1 Introduction

After the fall of apartheid, taking account of the ‘state of the nation’, attempting to name the perpetrators, identify the victims, and reconcile the survivors belonged to the most important tasks on the young nation’s political agenda, and in this historical and cultural context, the genre of the novel has its heyday. The contemporary South African trauma novel owes its popularity to the search for the truth, the need to ‘work through’ trauma and to come to terms with the country’s traumatizing past.

The public spectacle of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which was established in 1995 and toured the country between 1996 and 1998 (cf. James and Van de Vijver 2000; Wilson 2001), set a paradigmatic example for this kind of storytelling (cf. Cooppan 2012). In the course of its hearings, the TRC gave thousands of traumatized victims and perpetrators the opportunity to come out with their personal stories (cf. Krog 1999). More often than not, these narrations show the complex involvement of both victims and perpetrators, and the truth is painted no longer in black and white but, as Jann Turner puts it in her novel *Southern Cross*, “in a thousand shades of grey” (2002: 276).

My essay is divided into two major parts. In the first, theoretical part, I will have a look at Western trauma concepts and point out their insufficiencies with regard to a postcolony such as South Africa after the fall of apartheid. I will explain how closely trauma is related to narration, and have a short look at typical subgenres of the trauma novel and the way in which trauma can be represented. I will then take up Michela Borzaga’s suggestion to understand South African trauma through the lens of what Sarah Nuttall in a recent publication calls ‘entanglement’, a theory that refuses to view South African reality in terms of black and white and insists instead that in a traumatized environment, things are related in a more complex way, the clear distribution of roles becomes questionable, and past and present are intimately entwined.

The second part of my essay consists of an interpretation of Heyns’ *Lost Ground* as an example of the South African crime novel, and van Niekerk’s *The Way of the Women* as an example of the South African farm novel, respectively. In both cases I want to show how trauma, understood as ‘entanglement’, is represented through – or reflected in – the structural features of these novels. In the first case, the surprising role change of the novel’s protagonist from witness to perpetrator, his loss of control as a writer of a human interest story, and the deconstruction of his identity that goes along with it, do not amount to a postmodern game with narrative conventions but are compatible with realistic milieu description and a realistically conceived protagonist who entangles himself more and more in the snares of his own fate. In the second case, I want to point out how

this novel is deconstructing the conventions of the farm novel, and how the complex narrative structure of van Niekerk's *The Way of the Women* itself may be understood as a symbolic expression of what has been called 'traumatic entanglement'.

2 The History of the Trauma Concept

What is understood by 'trauma' and 'traumatization' is very much influenced by the time and by the part of the world in which these theories were developed. The railway and railway accidents played a role in the 19th century, and World War I and World War II also left their traces by producing thousands of shell-shocked soldiers who did not only bear physical but also mental wounds. Towards the end of the 19th century, ideas relating to trauma and traumatization were voiced, amongst others, by Sigmund Freud and by his French colleague Pierre Janet. These observations on trauma never took the form of a coherent theory, and especially Freud kept coming back to it and reflected on it from rather different angles. Because this is not the place to sketch in the history of the trauma concept in greater detail (for a detailed history cf. Ruth Leys 2000), I will concentrate on those aspects that are important with regard to my subject.

In the second half of the 20th century, trauma theory received two strong and important impulses that gave it a new direction. The first happened in the context of the Vietnam War when thousands of American war veterans were suffering from 'shell shock', needed psychological treatment, and were also claiming compensation from the state because they suffered this shell shock in the service of the American army. As a consequence, psychologists investigated and identified a phenomenon later called 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD), which was recognized officially as a mental disorder that expressed itself, amongst other things, through frequent flashbacks, nightmares, sleeplessness, apathy, lack of emotion, aggression, or flight impulse. PTSD was taken up in the 3rd edition of the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM III), and has since remained a major feature on the psychological map.

Towards the end of the second half of the 20th century, in the nineties, trauma theory received another important impulse by deconstructionism. As it was developed by scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, or Dominick La Capra, trauma is and remains 'unclaimed' – and 'unclaimable' – experience. At the centre of their fascinating, philosophical and text-oriented observations on trauma, which more often than not include the Holocaust as a starting point, lies the idea that trauma is so overpowering for the people concerned that they cannot find the words to speak about it. According to this theory, trauma

victims keep suffering a ‘literal’ return of the past, which they cannot shake off. Trauma thus takes possession of them, and there is no escape, no way of healing.

Western trauma concepts, then, are centred on the individual and understand traumatization as a wound of the body and / or of the mind, the result of a clearly identifiable historical event. In its deconstructionist form, it amounts to ‘unclaimed experience’ that condemns the individual to endless obsessive and compulsive repetitions of the past and to traumatic suffering without the possibility of healing.

3 Trauma in the Postcolony

It is easy to see why trauma in the postcolony has to be conceptualized in a different way. Here, too, individuals are the bearers of traumatic experience, but in contrast to the Western concepts, the reasons for traumatization are provided by the colonial situation, the oppression of people, and the unacceptable living conditions, and not only by individual historical or private events. Theorists such as Frantz Fanon in *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (1952/2008) and *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961/2004), or more recently Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* (2001) have taken this into account. Also important is the fact that not only individuals but whole populations may be considered traumatized. When Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his opening address to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on 16 December 1995 claimed that “every South African has to some extent or other been traumatized. We are a wounded people [...] we all stand in need of healing” (vii), he expressed the idea that in South Africa, trauma is a communal or societal experience. The apartheid laws which actually amounted to a form of structural violence, the violation of human rights by the apartheid regime, the strict segregation of the ethnicities, unmotivated detention, torture and killings by the special police, and other atrocities invented by the system, in the long run led to the traumatising of a whole population. When Tutu claims that a whole people is traumatized, including the white population, he is not only acting as a clever politician because he is arguing for reconciliation, but also expresses a deeper truth: even if the violence was primarily directed against the black and coloured population, the whites were also traumatized, because as passive witnesses or bystanders they were also ‘entangled’ in more than one way.

4 Trauma and Narration

Trauma in the postcolony involves the consideration of the political situation of a deeply hurt people or a nation looking for reconciliation, for the opportunity of ‘working through’ and the overcoming of their trauma, even if this is a laborious and time-consuming process that cannot yield any quick results.

The most obvious reason in this context that speaks against deconstructionist trauma theory is its assumption of silence or speechlessness as a result of the confrontation with the past. While for Caruth the ‘literal’ return of the past makes this experience unclaimable, more practically oriented theorists have developed alternative strategies with regard to traumatized patients who at first cannot or will not speak about their experience. Their starting point is the conviction that traumatized people have to speak about what they have gone through, even if at the beginning they are unable to do so in a coherent way. Traumatic memory has to be translated into narrative memory, so that it can become part of a person’s life story. Narrative Exposure Theory (NET), for example, or Testimony Theory (TT) believe in the resilience of the traumatized person and encourage victims to confront themselves with the ‘old wound’, to ‘re-late’ what happened in the past, to ‘work through’ and in this way, if not to heal, so at least to become able to live with it (cf. Schauer, Neuner and Elbert 2005; Crossley 2000; Herman 1992). Attempting to tell one’s story is a first step in the process of coping; in this context, the therapist plays the role of an empathic listener to whom the narrative is addressed.

Whatever the quality of literature is like that was produced after the fall of apartheid, it cannot be denied that there has been a great increase of books in terms of new authors and works. Some critics, however, describe the contemporary situation in terms of an insurmountable crisis and see it in a negative light. For Elleke Boehmer, for example, South African writing seems to be caught in a cycle of repetition (cf. Boehmer 2012). Boehmer builds on Ato Quayson’s theory of ‘symbolization compulsions’ (2003), which in turn goes back to Sigmund Freud’s idea of ‘repetition compulsion’. Freud for the first time explained this in an article from 1914 called “Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten” (‘Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through’). He kept returning to it, amongst other things, in “Jenseits des Lustprinzips” (‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’) where he claims that the

patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it [...] He is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it. (Freud 1984: 288).

Freud here is not concerned with representation at all but with the traumatized patient who is haunted by the past that keeps returning in the present.

This is not the place to re-open the discussion of the relation between art and reality and the role played by the psychology of Sigmund Freud in literary analysis. What has become clear, however, is that repetition compulsion and the idea of art seem to be mutually exclusive. This is why Quayson's idea of 'symbolization compulsions' appears more attractive in this context. Quayson implies that there is still a compulsion of sorts, but the artist's freedom lies in the act of representation or symbolization of that which 'possesses' her or him.

Looked at more closely, even Quayson's symbolization compulsion does not leave the artist much of a choice. This is why one might want to introduce a third – less biased – term into the discussion, namely that of adaptation. Adaptations are undertaken across different media and for various reasons, and in the fine arts they are a well-known phenomenon (cf. Hutcheon 2006). On the one hand, adaptation implies repetition, but on the other hand, also variation and freedom from mimetic constraints. In the context of South Africa, repetition in the arts more often than not takes the form of adaptation. One and the same motif or situation is adapted again and again, also across different media. The iconic Hector Pieter-son photo, for example, has triggered a host of adaptations in form of novels, cartoons, paintings, monuments, light installations, T-Shirts, or TV clips (Saayman-Hattingh 2011: 176). Taken together, these intermedial adaptations start to tell a transmedial tale: This tale bears witness to South Africa's attempts of 'working through', of coping with – if not of overcoming – its communal and societal trauma. This transmedial narrative combines hitherto unrelated elements – people, events or situations from different times and places – in order to make sense of South African history. This means that, quite contrary to Boehmer's view, this form of repetition has a creative aspect and can thus be seen in a positive light, even if one might want to grant that it is still 'compulsive' in one way or the other.

While for Caruth trauma means unclaimed – and unclaimable – experience, which cannot be cast in form of a narrative, the South African literature scene is full of narratives that try to come to terms with traumatic experience. A resisting and unwieldy experience has to be brought into a narrative form in order to be incorporated into a traumatized individual's life story and communicated to an empathic reader. Narrative form thus makes sense of – and gives meaning to – a previously unformed and 'un-related' (in the double sense of the word) subject matter and serves the purpose of 'containment'. I am using the term 'narrative form' here in a twofold sense, namely on a macrostructural and a microstructural level.

On a macrostructural level, a number of novelistic subgenres – historical novels, farm novels, family sagas, crime novels, for example – have a special affinity

to the representation of trauma. Other forms of non-fictional narration such as autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, or testimonies, which frequently form part of the narrative set-up of trauma novels, all have in common that they struggle to 'contain' an experience within a life story that refuses to be contained, to make sense of an experience that refuses to be understood. This is even true with regard to postmodern novels which, like Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story*, openly struggle against this containment, when David vainly tries to put his traumatic past ('What happened to Dulcie?') into straightforward words, and, because he cannot come to terms with it, replaces this quest for personal and intimate 'truth' with a search for his Griqua forefathers and his own Griqua identity.

It is not so difficult to see why postmodern novels occur less frequently in the context of South African trauma fiction. Trauma needs to be contained within and by the structure of a narrative. By telling her or his story to an empathic listener, the trauma victim strives for containment. Even if containment cannot be achieved so easily, and some narratives stop short of achieving it, there can be no doubt that the goal of narration is the overcoming of trauma.

While there can be no doubt that trauma means suffering, and involves bodily and mental pain, postmodern narrative structures more often than not have a playful form that seems to be an inadequate 'container' to hold much suffering. As Linda Hutcheon (1988) points out, postmodern authors like to play with the borderlines of fact and fiction, reality and text. Fact becomes fiction, and fiction becomes fact. The readers are sometimes left with the feeling that there is no reality whatsoever behind the text that they are reading, that the text is referring to other texts only, and that reality is forever 'on the run', thus becoming – as in deconstructionist theories of trauma – 'unknowable' or 'unclaimable'. Naming, identifying and claiming, however, is the prerogative of mimetic fiction.

From a microstructural point of view, trauma has to be represented on the different levels of the novel's organization. It is easy to see why for the literary scholar this is an ideal starting point for the analysis of trauma fiction. More often than not, structural elements imitate the traumatic situation: the plot features traumatized characters (Susann Mann, *Quarter Tones* 2007), the complexity of a character is created by the trauma he / she has to live with (Rachel Zadok, *Gem Squash Tokoloshe* 2005), sudden flashbacks interrupt the novel's chronological narrative, create suspense and are only contextualized and explained in the end (Susan Mann, *One Tongue Singing* 2005), the narrative is centred on a black hole in the memory of the main protagonist (Zoe Wicomb, *David's Story* 2001), or the whole story takes the form of a testimony that is confidentially addressed to an empathic listener / reader (Mtutuzeli Nyoka, *I Speak to the Silent* 2004).

5 Popular Subgenres of the Trauma Novel

As mentioned before, among the most popular subgenres of the contemporary South African trauma novel are the historical novel, the family saga, the crime novel, and the farm novel, all of them based on a mimetic concept of fiction. There are also others such as dystopias, or satires, but it is easy to see why they lend themselves less readily to the idea of containment, or healing.

Historical novels are frequently to be found in a South African context (Brink 1998). Coming to terms with South African trauma also means coming to terms with colonialism, apartheid, and the South African past. This is why many novelists turn to the time of colonial rule to find an explanation for the contemporary situation. Sometimes they split the plot of their novels and let it shuttle between past and present (Elleke Boehmer, *Bloodlines* 2000; Zakes Mda, *Heart of Redness* 2003). This, in a way, imitates the situation of the trauma victims who have the task to confront themselves with the past situation in order to work through their own personal trauma in the present.

Family sagas are well suited to represent inter- and transgenerational trauma. They are concerned with the history of several generations of trauma victims. Maja Kriel's *Rings in a Tree* (2004), Joanne Fedler's *The Dreamcloth* (2005), and Patricia Schonstein's *A Quilt of Dreams* (2007) trace the fate of Jewish families who have fled from various parts of Europe in the course of the great wars of the 20th century and have come to South Africa to find shelter. Family sagas of this kind thematize multiple individual and communal traumatization – in this case of the Jewish people – and the phenomenon of intergenerational trauma, where trauma is handed on from one generation to the next.

Crime fiction and detective novels play a major role in the contemporary South African literature scene. South Africa has one of the highest crime rates in the world, but this is not the only reason for the popularity of this subgenre of the trauma novel. The detective's search for the culprit, his attempts to find out 'whodunnit', has become a metaphor for South Africa's search for the truth. The stories of the people who appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the unclear fate of the many victims of the apartheid regime who simply disappeared from one day to the next, the search for the bodies of missing persons suspected to have been murdered by the special police, the attempts to bring the perpetrators to justice, the role of the *impimpis* (spies) who informed against their own people, the rivalries between the political factions of the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party during the time of transition, the many bombings and killings that took a high blood toll on all sides in the eighties and the transitional years in the first half of the nineties, form a fertile seedbed on which crime fiction and authors such as Deon Meyer, Mike Nicol, and others can thrive.

From the time of Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883), farm novels have always been popular in South Africa. The explanation for this is that the farm novel negotiates the identity of Afrikaners, their relationship to the land, and, in the present, the changing historical situation and their fall from power. Van Wyk Smith's essay "From Boereplaas to Vlakplaas" (2001) indicates the direction that this development has taken. Vlakplaas is the name of a notorious farm where, during apartheid, the special police hid, tortured and murdered their victims. No longer a paradise which, in reality, the *plaas* never was, the farm becomes a microcosm that shows as if in a magnifying glass the shifting problems of contemporary South African society: the still troubled relation between blacks and whites (Lisa Fugard, *Skinner's Drift* 2005) 'have-nots' and 'haves' (Lewis DeSoto, *A Blade of Grass* 2003), males and females (Rachel Zadok, *Gem Squash Tokoloshe* 2005), homosexuals and heterosexuals (Mark Behr, *Kings of the Water* 2009).

6 Trauma as Entanglement

The idea of trauma as 'entanglement' that is used in this essay allows us to describe in a more differentiated way the situation of people in a state of communal or societal trauma, which seems to be a characteristic feature of the South African nation in the time after the fall of apartheid.

Building on Sarah Nuttall's *Entanglement* (2009) Michela Borzaga (2017: 2) has pointed out that the idea of

entanglement enables us to move away from trauma as an abstract idea or merely as an 'event' and brings us closer to trauma as a dynamic, lived and profoundly inter-subjective experience; it is a particularly fertile tool when used in connection with the phenomenology of everyday life and the way in which traumatic memory can ramify across various registers of life and of the social. It allows us to read what we could call trauma 'on the move', trauma as a set of relations – of the self to the 'Other', but also of the self to the self, and to the polis at large. It works with complex models of subjectivity and time; it takes into consideration what is latent, unexpected, unforeseeable. To think trauma through the idea of entanglement means to take into account new critical pedagogies and how daily gestures, relations and practices – writing, gardening, walking, the relation of people and things – might transform and take trauma onto unexpected trajectories.

A first cursory inspection reveals many examples for narrative conventions representing personal, spatial, or temporal 'entanglement' in the contemporary South African trauma novel: perpetrators and victims become intimately related (the Stockholm syndrome); a South African leaves her / his mother country and goes into exile, only to be yearning to come back home; the *rondavels* of the black

workers are moved to the periphery of the farmland, but they are still situated on the white farmers' ground; for the traumatized, the past returns in the present, and past and present become intimately 'entangled'.

In the following, I want to turn to Michiel Heyns' novel *Lost Ground*. What seems to be an interesting example of postmodern crime fiction, because, in the sense of Linda Hutcheon's *Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988: 10–11 et passim) there is a continuous blurring of boundary lines between fact and fiction, more precisely, between detective and criminal, innocence and guilt, black and white, is in reality a faithful and realistic milieu description, a case study of a South African who returns to his country and belatedly gets to know what it means to be entangled over one's ears in the trauma of the nation.

7 *Lost Ground: A Play with Clichés*

At the beginning of Heyns' novel, there is a deliberate play with clichés. The journalist Peter Jacobs, who is the first-person (homodiegetic) narrator of the novel, is an ex-pat South African who has come to Alfredville, a little (fictional) village in the Karoo, situated somewhere between Swellendam and Knysna. In his hotel he meets the black psychologist Nonyameko Mhlabeni who pretends to know who he is and teases him about the purpose of his visit:

'You are a novelist who is having trouble finding a subject in England, and now you have come out here to write a novel about an ex-South African, coming back, let me guess, to be by the bedside of a dying parent – yes, the dying parent is obligatory, like a necklacing in the novel of the eighties – a man who is forced to revisit the past, or confront the past, more particularly his own tortured past, the torture usually figurative, sometimes literal, involving the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. At the end of the novel, he will go back to England vaguely defeated and strongly relieved.' (2011: 28)

Many novels illustrating Nonyameko's (fictional) plot summary come to mind in this context, even if there are always some variations. The protagonists can be female, they might return from the States, or the parent died in the meantime. Andre Brink, *Imaginations of Sand* (1999), Lisa Fugard, *Skinner's Drift* (2005), Susan Mann, *Quarter Tones* (2007), or Mark Behr, *Kings of the Water* (2009) illustrate in one way or the other the truth of Nonyameko's claim. All of these novels are based on the protagonists' exile and return and feature a dying parent, plot elements that thus necessarily become clichés because they are repeated so often. The examples quoted above show that the authors seem to be labouring under Quayson's 'symbolization compulsions', but as I have explained earlier, the many repetitions and adaptations of situations and motives may also be seen in a positive light.

Heyns' self-irony is evident at this point in the novel. Actually, he is also writing a text constructed along these lines, but, as I want to show, he simultaneously attempts to do something different. His detective novel is not only a gripping thriller but also a meta-fictional self-reflection on how to write novels under these 'compulsive' circumstances and in a state of societal or communal traumatization.

8 Othello Script and Change of Roles

When Peter Jacobs comes to Alfredville, the freelance journalist, who intends to be writing a 'human-interest' story for the *New Yorker* about the murder of his cousin Desireé, has a ready-made script at the back of his mind. It is based on the Othello story: a black man murders his innocent white wife out of jealousy. For himself, Jacobs has reserved the role of a distanced observer toeing the sidelines. However, in the course of the novel's plot, he becomes a double 'murderer' instead – if not literally so, at least in a moral sense. He is the one who makes his formerly best friend Bennie Nienaber kill himself, and he has to find out that somehow or other he also caused the death of his cousin Desireé – at least indirectly, by turning his back on South Africa in the eighties to avoid conscription, and ignoring selfishly the secret (and unacknowledged, because homosexual) love which Bennie felt for him at the time. While he went into exile to comfortably study at an English University, the not so resourceful Bennie had to face the atrocities of the Angolan war and multiple traumatization that went along with it – although he was able to get away with his life.

Peter Jacobs' return to South Africa after 22 years, his "meddling" (2011: 294) with the people he left behind, opens up old wounds that have not been healing but are festering under the surface. When he confronts his former friend Bennie with his suspicion that Bennie is Desireé's murderer, the policeman draws his revolver – and shoots himself. Jacobs is shocked, but also feels confirmed in his suspicion. He goes to the police to tell his story, in which Bennie is doubtlessly the murderer. Although the Othello script proves worthless – the coloured policeman Hector Williams, Desireé's husband, is innocent, we have a white perpetrator instead, and "butter would [...] melt between Desireé's legs" (2011: 157) – the journalist Jacobs still has a human interest story to write, even if there is a role change in the casting, and, morally speaking, black has become white, and white has become black.

His personal Waterloo, however, is still to come. Visiting Benny's widow Chrisna, partly to crave for understanding and apologize for Bennie's death, but also to justify himself, he has to find out that it wasn't Bennie after all who killed

Desireé but Chrisna herself in her desperate attempt to regain her husband who, too, had fallen into Desireé's snares. Chrisna's information leaves him first breathless, and then triggers a self-reflection process that centres on the question of why Bennie would kill himself in the first place. Peter Jacobs has no clue, but Chrisna who has been married to Benny and knows him intimately is so 'kind' as to tell him. Only a few days ago, Bennie had confided to her that Peter Jacobs was the "first person who ever believed" (2011: 287) in him and that "he's still the one man in the world whose opinion matters" (2011: 287). As the story proves, Peter Jacobs' opinion does still matter to Bennie, even after 22 long years of separation: Jacobs believes his former friend to be the murderer, and this lack of trust makes Bennie commit suicide.

What looks like a showdown taken directly from melodrama continues to be a sophisticated meta-fictional reflection on the relation of fact and fiction, on reality and textual representation, on journalism and the novel which may be found throughout this text. Peter Jacobs, who came to South Africa with a prefabricated script about the relation of black and white, innocence and guilt, meaning to be an impartial journalistic observer of South African race relations (which continue to be difficult after the fall of apartheid, especially in a *dorp* like Alfredville in the Little Karoo), has to find out that his own actions have shoved him from the sidelines into the centre of things, have turned him from an innocent bystander into a perpetrator. The story he wanted to write and which he saw before him in clear-cut outlines, the South African Othello story with its clear distribution of roles, has become all convoluted, everything is suddenly "deurmekaar" (2011: 214). His story is getting out of hand, as he has to admit to Nonyameko:

'So,' she says, as we turn and start walking back, 'how is the story going?'

'I don't know whether to say it's going well or it's not going at all. Let's just say it's not going as expected.'

'Isn't that the mark of a good story?'

'Perhaps, from the reader's point of view. As a writer, I'd like to have a bit more control.' (2011: 208)

His belief that he hasn't mixed himself up in it and that it's still "only a story" (2011: 209) is wrong, which is recognized by Nonyameko, when she responds: "In which you seem to be taking a leading part". (2011: 209) Jacobs half agrees when he says: "I'm not *taking* it. It's been inflicted upon me". (2011: 209) As it later turns out, this is truer than he realizes at this moment, because he is no longer master of his own decisions. On the contrary: a different 'script' seems to have taken over, and ironically, he can't even go to the police and revise the tale he told them before because they wouldn't believe this new story anyhow. And what would be the profit for himself of bringing Chrisna into prison and turning

her two children into orphans, having already caused the death of their father? All for the sake of doing justice to the law, an abstract form of justice, which causes further damage to the family and increases his feelings of guilt? For Jacobs, life has written a script of its own, and in this script, he is playing a different role from the one he had laid out for himself. Heyns has based the structure of his plot on the idea of contingency: Men do make their own history, but because of the fortuitousness of the whole process of causation, the result is never predictable, and the outcome may well be different from anything the ‘actors’ had planned beforehand.

9 Journalism and Novel Writing

The piece of journalism that Jacobs had in mind can no longer be written. What can be written, however – and has been drafted out by Michiel Heyns, the novelist, – is a well-meditated, complex novel about an ex-pat South African who is visited by his own past which he thought to have left behind but which returns in the present with a vengeance. Writing this novel for Heyns also implies self-analysis, self-accusation, even self-immolation: It comes as no surprise when in the novel the failed journalist Peter Jacobs pours both the bits and pieces of his aborted story – “a sorry tale of a stuff-up” (2011: 294) – together with the shards of his broken life into the lap of the psychologist Nonyameko: He wishes “never having to repeat the story that I now have to go and spill into Nonyameko’s lap like some foul relic of a disastrous exploit” (2011: 293). Especially the last phrase reminds one of the idea of a quest that Jacobs mentions earlier: “My job – not to call it a Quest! – is to trace that pattern, or perhaps rather, first to establish what that pattern is” (2011: 116). This is can be read as an intertextual allusion to Marlow from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Later, comparable to Kurtz, Jacobs sees at the bottom of his own soul “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 1902/1994: 100).

‘To think,’ I say, ‘that I have left South Africa originally not to get embroiled in the bloodshed and share in the guilt. And here I am embroiled up to my ears.’
She sighs. ‘Embroiled up to one’s ears. That’s the condition of living here.’ (2011: 295)

Even the option of returning to London where he had been living for 22 years is no longer valid. He has broken up his homosexual relationship with James, the Jamaican, and resuming this relationship is no longer an alternative. The ex-pat Peter Jacobs has been stranded in South Africa, has become “a foreigner in two countries” (2011: 237), a fate which he shares with many other emigrants. At the moment, at least, he is living in an emotional ‘no man’s land’, being “hollow at the core” (Conrad 1902/1994: 83).

The novel has an open ending. We do not know where Peter Jacobs will go on from here. Staying is one option: “embroiled”, or, as I have suggested, ‘entangled’, its condition. The only consolation that is left for him is the presence of the black psychologist Nonyameko: “But to hold on to Nonyameko’s hand, for all the world as if I could thus anchor myself to some saving vestige of identity, as if her grasp could keep me from being swept away into oblivion.” (2011: 297) Here, we have come a long way from the apartheid novel, where such a scene wouldn’t have been possible, and it is owing to the art of the novelist Michiel Heyns that the reader is able to swallow it and to realize that things, even if they haven’t changed completely, are slowly beginning to change. A novel such as *Lost Ground* regains some of this lost ground in an – admittedly – entangled human environment.

As far as the role changes from witness to perpetrator, from detective to culprit are concerned, *Lost Ground* is reminiscent of Paul Auster’s postmodern *New York Trilogy* (1990). The difference is, however, that Heyns’ surprising turn-arounds and switches come about in an otherwise realistically described South African milieu that has been apostrophized before as ‘convoluted’ or ‘*deurme-kaar*’. In this condition, the distinctions between black and white, guilty and not guilty cease to make sense. My last reflection, therefore, concerns the relation of journalism and novel writing.

Investigative journalism abounds in the contemporary South African literature scene, both literally (Krog, *Country of My Skull* – 1999; Steinberg, *Midlands* 2002) and as a prominent motif in novel writing (Turner, *Southern Cross* 2002; Jayes, *For the Mercy of Water* 2012). This has to do with the fact I mentioned earlier, namely the quest for truth, the urge to discover what was covered up in the time of apartheid. Crime fiction as a genre and journalism almost naturally take their place in this regional, literary landscape. It also has to do with the fact that some of the novelists were journalists before they turned to novel writing. This gives them a handle to reflect on the relation between journalism and fiction.

What Michiel Heyns shows is that the novel is the medium to bring out a more complex and ambivalent truth: while it is the task of day-to-day journalism to build on a factual reality and distinguish between right or wrong, the novel as a genre is able to show reality’s complexities in an entangled environment. The popular genre of South African crime fiction is thus put to the test: Literature proves to be an “elaborated inter-discourse” (Link 2013:15; my translation) that combines and structures other special discourses in such a way that it is able to do justice to the complexity of reality.

10 *The Way of the Women: The Deconstruction of the Plaasroman*

Marlene van Niekerk's *The Way of the Women*, originally published in Afrikaans under the title *Agaat* (2004), continues the deconstruction of the forms and conventions of the farm novel that began in the 1970s with writers such as Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee and was followed up by Karel Schoeman and Edwin van Heerden in the last two decades of the 20th century (cf. van Wyk Smith 2001). *The Way of the Women* focuses on the fate of a female farm owner, Milla de Wet, who lies on her deathbed and looks back on the last fifty years of her life, which comprise both the time of apartheid and the new dispensation of the nineties. Milla's life story is complemented by that of her maid Agaat (engl. Agatha), whom Milla picked up in a township slum in 1953. The name 'Agatha' comes from the Greek and originally means 'the good one'. But agates are also semi-precious stones of different shapes, colours and sizes, with crystalline structures, found all over the world in areas of volcanic activity.

The little, disturbed girl with the crippled arm, who is initially nicknamed 'Assgate' or 'Ashgate' because she keeps sitting on her ass in the ashes of the fire in her mother's hut, turns out to be a 'gem' indeed: Agaat learns the farm business from scratch, and soon becomes an indispensable helper that not only knows how to do her household chores to the satisfaction of her white mistress but also has a special way with the animals.

From the time they meet, the lives of the two women become invariably 'entangled'. In the present, Agaat's main task is to look after Milla, who is completely paralyzed and has to communicate by the flickering of her eyelashes. Milla's testament decrees that Agaat will inherit the farm from her and be its owner until she is eighty years old. Thereafter, Milla's son Jakkie (to whom Agaat is like a second mother) is to take over, but the fighter pilot Jakkie who deserted the South African Army in the eighties and built a new life for himself in Canada shows no inclination to do so. The lifelines of the two women, however, are joined in a significant way. The farm will become the possession of the coloured Agaat, a legal act that seems to be a symbolic prediction of South Africa's future.

The novel takes its English title from a mountain pass (the Tradouw), also known as the "way of the women" (*WW* 154 et passim) because it was easier to walk in comparison to the way the men took, and this is one of the metaphorical meanings of the novel's title: Women often take the 'lower way', which nevertheless might bring them quicker to their goal. But the 'way of the women' also refers to the female birth canal (vagina). Jakkie is born in a car on the Tradouw where Agaat has to cut Milla open with a pair of scissors to bring him into this world, a

traumatizing incident that creates a special bond between Jakkie, Milla, and Agaat (*WW* 156).

Marlene van Niekerk's *The Way of the Women* is an interesting mixture of historical novel, farm novel, and marriage novel. Looking back from the present to the past, it straddles half a century and records the important events and the spirit of this time; it is set in a specific region, on a fictional farm in the little Karoo between Swellendam and Heidelberg with the name of 'Grootmoedersdrift', which, for generations, has been in possession of the female line of Milla Redelinguhuis's family; and it also chronicles Milla's and Jak's marriage from 1947 up to Jak's death in a car accident in 1986. As far as family history is concerned, Milla's lineage is dominated by strong women: even the name 'Grootmoedersdrift' is ambivalently pointing to the power of the female sex. In the prologue, Jakkie says: "Translate Grootmoedersdrift. Try it. Granny's Ford? Granny's Passion?" (*WW* 5) There is no doubt that van Niekerk is highly creative with regard to language and style, and Michiel Heyns, who is a well-known novelist himself, shows his great sensibility and skill as translator, for in his English version, van Niekerk's reflections on language are not lost but translated adequately.

11 Complex Narrative Structure

Can the subaltern in this novel speak? (Spivak 1988) She cannot do so at the beginning, because her discourse is represented by Milla's, so that she does not have a voice of her own. In the course of the novel, however, Agaat finds more and more ways of expressing herself, while Milla is losing all the different forms of self-expression because the illness deprives her not only of the use of her limbs but also of her voice. The subaltern has to do the speaking for her in the present, and act as her interpreter and translator. The flickering of Milla's eyelashes is translated by Agaat into a language that has meaning: mostly orders and requests that still mirror the former master / servant relationship. 'Translation' between the women – and this is very close to modern translation theory – is a matter of power.

Agaat has the choice of understanding Milla's commands, or pretending not to do so. When Milla 'flickers': 'Fetch me the maps of the farm!' Agaat pretends not to understand. At least, this is Milla's interpretation: the old power game between master and servant is continuing, even on Milla's deathbed. Or does Agaat understand her perfectly? As a matter of fact, the maps are finally presented, and Milla can – for the last time – in her mind revisit all the nooks and crannies of her farm and reassure herself of her possession.

The reader is faced with a complex narrative structure: technically, the narration is moored in the present and mainly uses the paralyzed Milla as a reflector. In

reality, the novel is about what happened in the past. Milla's thoughts, which she imparts to us by way of interior monologue, focus on her present situation, which is characterized by her complete immobility, her bodily decay and her progressive paralysis. But Milla's reflections are also directed towards the past, to her marriage with Jak, the fights she had with him, and the misfortunes which threatened to annihilate the farm and which had to be fought in order to survive. In her memories, Milla addresses herself as 'you', thus emphasizing the contrast between her former self and her present self, the past and the present. The Milla who lies on her deathbed in 1996 is different from the Milla who said 'yes' to Jak's advances 50 years ago, or who decided to adopt Agaat "in 1953, mid-December, Day of the Covenant" (*WW* 559), take charge of her and install her in her household.

However, the parts written from the perspective of the paralyzed Milla are not the only ones written from her first-person point of view. Interspersed occasionally are stream-of-consciousness passages that confront the reader even more directly with Milla's inner life. It might not be going too far to claim that the stream-of-consciousness techniques lends itself easily to the idea of entanglement: everything becomes related to everything else, the present narrating consciousness consists of a tangle of thoughts, memories, sense impressions, feelings, emotions which in the course of the novel, becomes more and more incoherent. This incoherence is clearly an indication of Milla's decay and approaching death, the last flickering of her consciousness before the curtain is drawn forever.

12 Diaries and Embroidery

Another narrative technique of capturing the past and representing memory in this novel is the employment of diaries. The diary entries are added achronologically in the course of the novel's plot. The first diary entry is dated Wednesday, 12 May 1960, and concerns Milla's (long-awaited) pregnancy (*WW* 43) (her wedding took place 13 December 1947) (*WW* 38). Especially the year 1960 but also the sixties in general, when Jakkie is growing up, are the focus of Milla's diaries. The entries continue into the seventies but become less frequent. Only in the last third of the novel is the number of diary entries rising again. Now they relate to Agaat and the progress she is making under Milla's guidance from 1953 onward. They show from Milla's point of view how she tried to turn Agaat – a kind of female Kaspar Hauser – into a human being, to teach her sit on the toilet, to speak properly, and to read and write (*WW* 535). In a way, Agaat is indeed Milla's 'creation'. Although the still childless Milla develops motherly feelings towards her and partly treats her like a daughter, she also turns her into a perfect domestic servant who not only knows how to cook and to clean but is finally capable of running the

farm herself. When Jakkie is born, however, she teaches Aagaat her proper place: that of a servant that lives in the outhouse (*WW* 190), although she has every reason to be grateful to Aagaat: If it had not been for her, Jakkie – and in all likelihood, also Milla – would have died. On their drive to the hospital (with Milla behind the steering wheel because Jak is once again absent on one of his canoeing events) Milla goes into premature labour. There are complications, and Aagaat has to cut the child – literally – out of Milla's womb in order to bring him into this world. In the following weeks and months Aagaat, initially 'adopted' by her white mistress as a 'daughter', is pushed back into the hole where she crept from, and again becomes 'the abject' (Kristeva 1982), while Jakkie takes her place in her mistress's heart. We can only guess at what Aagaat might feel about this, because most of what is told is narrated from Milla's perspective, but we can imagine that it must have been a traumatizing experience for Aagaat.

When Aagaat has learned to read and write, she writes her own text into one of Milla's diaries, admittedly in broken English, but this is just a first step. Not only can the subaltern now speak, she can also read and write. She can do even more in this line: the older Aagaat, who has to bring Milla her diaries so that she can read up on the past and remember her life, edits and – comments on (*WW* 13–14 et passim) – Milla's diary entries, a clear sign that in the meantime the subaltern has mastered the cultural techniques of editing, which are part of the white masters' system of knowledge and power, and is now able to inscribe herself into history. The white and the coloured texts in this way become 'entangled'.

Looked at more closely, Aagaat has even more ways of expressing herself: Milla has taught her to stitch and embroider, skills that are part of what is called 'Bantu education' at this time. Aagaat uses these skills to express herself and define her identity. Like Philomela in the ancient Greek myth, who has been violated by her brother-in-law (who cuts out her tongue so that she cannot speak about the rape), Aagaat uses her newly learned skills to express herself and establish her identity: by embroidering the stiff white caps (*WW* 333) she has to wear as maid in Milla's household, or by embroidering Milla's shroud (*WW* 499) which she has sewn in many hours. Doing so, she uses the technique of 'shadow-stitching' that is self-effacing in so far as it does not show the contours of what is represented very clearly. Nevertheless, it is there, white on white, distinguishable from the background like the figures that Philomela wove into her carpet.

13 Prologue and Epilogue

As far as the narrative structure of the novel is concerned, it is also worth noting that it is framed by a prologue and an epilogue. Both are written from the point of

view of Jakkie who is deeply traumatized by his duties of a soldier flying a jet plane and killing people in the unacknowledged South African wars of the eighties against what was claimed to be external ‘terrorists’.

Jakkie is the heir of his father Jak but has no intention of taking over the farm (WW 583). The idea of patrilinear descent does not play a great role in this novel. Jakkie is a deserter from the South African army, a common motif in contemporary South African literature (Behr, *Kings of the Water*; Mann, *Quarter Tones*; Heyns, *Lost Ground*). Jakkie has built a new life for himself in Canada, and he is happy with it. He loves Agaat as his ‘second’ mother, and makes the farm over to her. His position as a narrator is marginal, but his function is an important one. He is the representative of the younger generation, and in this respect, of the future of South Africa. Jakkie narrates the prologue and the epilogue from his subjective point of view. In the prologue, he is on a plane flying to South Africa for his mother’s immanent death and burial – thus fulfilling Nonyameko’s prediction from Heyns’ *Lost Ground*; in the epilogue, he is flying home again, to his new home in Canada. Embedded – ‘nested’ – in this epilogue is the story Agaat has told him many times before when he was a little child: her own story, which fuses in a fairy tale-like manner Agaat’s life, and the lives of Milla, her husband Jak, and his own. Jakkie’s combining of these stories in the epilogue is important because it shows that Milla’s artificial separation of them does not work (WW 584–591). The nesting of the life history of a coloured person in the white framing story has a symbolic relevance: it shows that the lives of these persons were actually intimately entangled. From the standpoint of the author van Niekerk, it is a final narrative attempt at overcoming apartheid, and a gesture pointing toward reconciliation.

14 Conclusion

Michiel Heyns’ *Lost Ground* shows contemporary South African crime fiction at its best. The reader is not only presented with a thrilling story full of plot turns and surprises but also gets a deep insight into the soul of provincial South Africa. Heyns’ plot is set in a region far away from the big metropolitan centres such as Cape Town or Johannesburg where crime usually seems to reside, but in the backwater of the Little Karoo, in a predominantly white, Afrikaans speaking environment amongst decent ‘burghers’ who usually do not get into conflict with the law. By writing this novel, Heyns has succeeded in creating the ‘human interest’ story that the journalist Peter Jacobs fails to create. This human interest lies in the surprising turns of fate that Jacobs has to suffer, in his progressive entanglement in a story he wanted to control but which starts to control himself. The aesthetic structure of the novel by

which this entanglement is expressed is reminiscent of postmodernist fiction's play with reality, its surprising twists of the plot, its role changes and its borderline walk between fact and fiction. While all this is doubtless also characteristic of Heyns' novel, it never creates postmodern literature's feeling of unreality, or that the reader is part of a game played by the author. On the contrary, we come away from the book with the feeling that we have been introduced to an authentic side of South African life in a provincial town in the Little Karoo, and people entangled in – or embroiled up to their ears – in the attempt to get on with their lives in an environment that has been created by the apartheid past.

In van Niekerk's novel *The Way of the Women*, which is also set in the Little Karoo, roughly in the same region as *Lost Ground*, the lives of the two female protagonists, Milla and Agaat, are shown to be intimately entangled. The narrative structure of this novel emphasizes this point. Separating tales, using different points of view and stressing the difference between all the constructions of 'self-life-writing' that turn up in the novel is only seemingly van Niekerk's intention. Agaat's fairy tale in the epilogue – and the novel as such – inevitably bring the stories together. These stories are all 'entangled' in one way or the other, because in reality, the characters all have their share in the communal trauma of this time. The narrative structure of van Niekerk's novel takes care that this point is made clear. The fates of the whites, blacks, and coloureds in South Africa cannot be separated and form part of an undivided whole. The fate of the mistress is dependent upon that of the subaltern whom she has 'made', while the subaltern becomes the master / mistress of the farm. In this role, interestingly enough, she will continue the white policy of her former employers and fall into the same patterns of thinking that keep her coloured brothers and sisters in subjection.

Both Heyns and Niekerk are using the same cliché-like conventions that also other South African authors have been using in their fiction. The high degree of metafictional self-reflexivity in both novels emphasizes the fact that the authors are aware of this. As readers, we are made to feel that these repetitions, although they may have a compulsive aspect, have already become part of the landscape of contemporary South African novel writing, something to be expected rather than to be loathed.

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