Review Essay:


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This book of interviews is part of a research project on ‘Trauma, Memory and Narrative and the Contemporary South African Novel’ currently being undertaken by members of the University of Vienna’s Department of English. In early 2009 two senior researchers, Ewald Mengel and Michela Borgaza, along with a PhD candidate, Karin Orentes, met with seventeen creative writers, social workers and academics in the Western Cape, South Africa, in order to investigate these figures’ understanding of trauma and the part that South African narrative might play in the healing of trauma. Their interest also included the possible healing effects of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995-1998; TRC), as well as the contemporary situation generally in South Africa, and particularly the degree to which its so-called culture of violence can be laid at the feet of apartheid.

The book is in three sections. In the first, ‘Interviews with South African Authors’, are included interviews with André Brink, Zoë Wicomb, Sindiwe Magona, Susan Mann, and Maxine Case, all of whom have national – and, in the first three instances, international – reputations as writers of fiction. The first two, Brink and Wicomb, also have academic careers behind them. Magona and Case have kept away from academia. Magona is a well-known figure on the literary scene and until recently worked in the New York Department of Public Information, a far cry from her first employment, in South Africa, as a domestic worker. All five writers can be said to have written about trauma – their characters are South African, after all – although it is only Susan Mann who devotes a novel primarily and rigorously to the question of trauma and the possibility – or in this case the impossibility – of its healing.

The second section includes three interviews with what are called ‘South African psychologists’. The first of these is with figures employed at the Cape Town Trauma Centre (social workers, in some cases, rather than qualified psychologists). They speak with considerable interest of the three kinds of trauma they are called on to assist with: the political trauma that the TRC first addressed (torture, disappearance of family members, forced betrayals, and so on); the present-day domestic and community violence against women and children which is seen as traumatic in itself but also as perpetrated by those traumatised in the past; and the trauma experienced by migrants from other African countries seeking refuge in South Africa, whose traumatised condition in their countries of origin is now exacerbated by the inhospitable responses dealt them by resentful, envious or traumatised South Africans. The other two interviewees in this section are well known South African academic psychologists who have researched and written in the field of trauma studies, Don Foster and Ashraf Kagee, both of whose theorisations of trauma make important contributions to this book.

The third and longest section, ‘Interviews with South African Academics’, opens with Alex Boraine, who became nationally and internationally well known as deputy chair of the TRC. The second interview is with Neville Alexander, imprisoned from 1963 to 1974 on Robben Island, at the same time as Nelson Mandela and many of the


key African National Congress figures. Both these interviews stand as significant analyses of the current social situation and as suggestions about future political directions. Happily, neither is pessimistic in the long view, although Boraine has radically revised his initial optimism about the TRC’s reconciliatory effects. Boraine speaks of the ongoing governmental incapacity to reap advantage from the country’s cultural pluralism, but invests his hope in the ‘young vibrant minds’ (145) he encounters when he speaks at universities. Alexander invests his in the rural youth and the township youth, and looks forward to the forging of a union of South African states similar to the European Union, and – like Boraine – to a time when the country will utilise the resources offered by all of its various races. Both of them see in the TRC a model of stock-taking that other countries should imitate. Boraine confronts head-on the question of consistency in world justice, where no one – not even those who give orders to drop bombs (his examples are the bombing of Dresden and Japan) – should be let off the requirement to account publicly for their actions in full acknowledgement (the implication is) of the human suffering caused. Alexander suggests that it become standard procedure for countries to look back on their past practice, and to do so every generation or so.

There follows a dual interview with Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and Chris van der Merwe. The former is an academic psychologist and one of the TRC commissioners; she is – something like Boraine – an international advocate for truth commissions, and – controversially, especially among black South African youth and rural people, for reconciliation. Chris van der Merwe is an academic literary critic who teamed up with Gobodo-Madikizela in order to research the possibilities of healing trauma through narrative. The last three interviews are with two university academics, Annie Gagiano and Sam Raditlhalo, and one ‘freelance academic’ (an editor, primarily), Helen Moffett, all of whom trained primarily as literary critics. Gagiano speaks particularly interestingly of a novel by the exile South African writer Bessie Head (1937-1986) called A Question of Power, and thus – like Mann, though from a different perspective – focuses on the representation of trauma.

On the whole, then, the interviewees constitute a well-informed and interestingly varied group, though they are not necessarily representative of all the creative writers, social workers and academics engaged in the broad field of trauma in South Africa: that is, of those who write creatively about trauma, or who pursue academic trauma studies, or who are involved with helping patients recover from trauma. For one thing, they draw only on people living in or (in one case) visiting the Cape Town area. This was no doubt justified logistically, but it is not theoretically justifiable.

Although this review will on the whole be positive, let me at this point say that it is not difficult to point to the shortcomings of the publication. Both senior researchers are, like the PhD student, foreign to South Africa, and the interviews were initially conducted simply for the purposes of ‘background’ to their research. Their self-positioning as information-gatherers, conducting interviews intended to help them define in their later research their key concepts – trauma and healing, most specifically – means that they allow the interviews to discuss the general South African situation, both past and present, and the development of their own careers and thinking, as well as the concepts they are exploring. The interviews therefore are often not well-focused and can even be somewhat meandering. They all appear to have been conducted verbally, and
rather than being cut and trimmed, have had their orality preserved. This not only means that we sometimes witness conversational dead-ends but also that we are at times subjected to discussion interviewers might have preferred to delete, and even on one occasion to a failure by the editors to correct one interviewee’s erroneous remark that ‘one in three women can expect to be raped in her lifetime’ (229). Since numerous women are raped more than once, the ratio is in fact considerably lower. Of course, unedited interviews do offer certain pleasures, and readers can always fast-forward by speed reading or skipping. Thus, while the topics at hand – trauma and its possible healing through narrative – are sometimes not advanced by the discussion, the wide-ranging conversations have other uses, and it is hard finally to disagree with the editors’ justification of the publication on the basis that the interviews, ‘of interest to a larger readership’, will ‘provide fascinating insights into the present condition of the South African soul, the country’s hopes and anxieties, and the state of a nation that is still struggling with the burden of the past’ (vii).

Somewhat touchingly, the editors betray their own uncertainty about the project when they say they hope the interviews will ‘be read critically, and sometimes even between the lines’ (xiii). But what is thought-provoking about the book as a whole is not reading between the lines so much as comparing the different takes on trauma, writing and healing between one interviewee and another. The differences that occasionally surface between an interviewer and his or her interviewee are also interesting. For example, Raditlhalo and Wicomb (both of whom are black) find it necessary to remind these white European outsiders of the situation in South Africa regarding literacy and illiteracy, and one is left to wonder what it will mean to the research project as a whole if it continues to speak of the novel as healing in a society where many of the traumatised are not able to read and write. Thought-provoking, too, are the widely divergent views expressed by the interviewees on the nature of trauma and on literature’s capacity to heal. Raditlhalo and Wicomb, to return to these figures, may agree on the primary importance of literacy, but they disagree on the matter of healing; indeed, Wicomb finds the assumption of healing naïve. Few of the interviewees do actually take up a positive position on the healing power of art (Brink and Magona are two other exceptions), and, while one of the academic psychologists is equivocal (this is Gobodo-Madikizela), the other two represented in this book speak strongly about how difficult it is to proclaim ‘cure’ even after years of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy (Foster), and about how both writing and reading can bring on the recurrence of trauma, if they are not carefully monitored (Kagee).

Also instructive is the divergence between the interviewees in relation to sexual violence. In the final interview, provocatively entitled ‘Gender is a Matter of Life and Death’, Moffett suggests that we see South Africa’s transition as a shift from an ‘institutionalised, infrastructural violence of apartheid’ to an ‘institutionalised, almost structurally shaped patriarchal violence’ (228). But the book allows us to set against this theory Brink’s recognition of the ‘twisted and tortured childhood’ (17) that white Afrikaner families produced as part of the patriarchal bedrock of apartheid. As a child Brink witnessed domestic violence perpetrated by white masters not only upon black servants but also upon the white women in their own homes. Both these views are given additional substance when one reads in other interviews about the recursions of trauma, where the one-time victim readily adopts the position of the victimiser. Foster speaks...
compellingly, and chillingly, of the sense of bodily ‘entitlement’ held by those caught up in ‘a kind of … gang masculinity’ (118-19), which helps explain sexual and other forms of violence.

At the forefront of most of the interviewees’ minds is the profoundly unequal society South Africa has continued to be, despite the demise of apartheid and the establishment of the country’s first democracy, and running through many of the interviews is an insistent question about the rootedness of present-day conditions in the apartheid past. A general view is that the benefits of the TRC were limited, and its narrative capacity to reconcile and heal was, at worst, illusory and at best, merely the start of a long process. Alexander’s invaluable interview offers the most nuanced critique, a critique that may turn out to be particularly useful for the interviewers’ research project: getting the two opposing sides into dialogue, says Alexander, was a stage-managed affair, and before it could occur there had first to be an utterly changed power structure. Mutatis mutandis, perhaps, for the healing power of narrative: the contexts in which stories are told need at least as much attention as the stories themselves.

The upshot of the interviewees’ discussion about the distinctiveness of South African conditions is that the editors in their introduction offer a definition of trauma different from the currently accepted one, what they call the ‘Western’ model. This Western model is provided in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, usually known simply as DSM-IV (it is in its fourth edition). Here trauma is defined as a specific event, and is distinguished from stress through the victim’s reaction: fight or flight, in the case of stress, and, in the case of trauma, a terror and helplessness so radical that some kind of biological rewiring takes place, giving rise to what the DSM-IV calls alterations of consciousness. So, in their introduction, which is in effect a product of the interviews, the editors speak usefully of trauma South African-style as two kinds, the first of which is not strictly speaking an event, but rather a ‘continuous traumatic stress syndrome’, and the second of which is not a singular event but ‘multiple events that constantly entrench themselves in the lives of the more disadvantaged’ (x, emphases in original). The first kind of trauma – where there is a continual psychic and/or physical re-emergence of affect at what might seem to be the slightest reminder of earlier conditions – opens up a question that keeps entering the interviews about whether literature (reading it, or writing it) might be re-traumatising instead of healing. The other kind of trauma refers to the fact that many South Africans are compelled to live their entire lives as a series or overlapping set of traumatic events, one after or on top of the other, with no occasion for relief. The healing power of narrative seems far from such a situation.

One interviewee (Foster) seems to me to pinpoint yet another way of seeing trauma, and – as in the case of Alexander’s comment about the power structures that contextualise dialogue – seems also to offer a possible direction in trauma studies and the potential (or not) of narrative to heal. Dissidents who were tortured by the Special Branch, notes Foster, could turn to no authority, not even a medical clinic, without suffering further persecution. The entire social order was hostile to such figures, who were perceived above all as a social threat rather than as human beings in need. This comment might also serve metaphorically as a cautionary note for the researchers, this time about the ambiguously healing powers of language and of story-telling. Or to put it...
another way, again using an insight from Foster as a (possible) metaphor for writing, if
one of the self-healing strategies of the traumatised victim is to adopt the discourse of
the victimiser, at least in part, what might this tell us about the kind of literature that is
said to be healing? This is not to suggest that narrative or literature or language itself
constitutes an oppressive system, or nothing but an oppressive system, but simply to
suggest that in their research the three researchers might subject the term ‘healing’ to
the same degree of scrutiny as occurs with the term ‘trauma’.

The difficulty of the task faced by these three editors in their research project is
also pointed to by Gobodo-Madikizela’s interesting (if seemingly impossible) attempt to
reconcile the thinking of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman. Although Gobodo-
Madikizela does not put it this way, Caruth in her book Unclaimed Experience sees
trauma as a non-event, as something which cannot be spoken of as having been
experienced at all, since the self under trauma – if one can even use the term ‘self’ here – is
not operating at that moment as what one might call an experiencing self. To have an
experience is to know it as an experience; to stand outside the experience in some way.
Caruth’s implication is that if one talks about the trauma one has suffered, one is
actually only talking about one’s retrospective representation of the trauma. In contrast,
Herman feels able to speak of the way that narrative deals with trauma, empowering the
traumatised victim, although she recognises the need for a zone of safety for the story-
teller as well as the essential connection between the biological, psychological, social
and political dimensions of trauma. (Her works are not listed in the chapter’s Works
Cited, but would include Trauma and Recovery, first published in 1992.) But Gobodo-
Madikizela seems to me to be having profound difficulty about reconciling these two
very different thinkers. For one thing, although she does (in fairness) note that truth, like
healing, is to be thought of always as a goal, and perhaps never achieved, she
nonetheless speaks somewhat blithely of the possibility of learning ‘the truth from
narrative’ (180). The editors seem to be on a similar track, and to be up against similar
difficulties. They voice their antagonism to or at least hesitancy about postmodernism,
even of post-structuralism. And they hold on to narrative as having an ordering function,
but then without asking questions about how it might perhaps even rewire the mind, to
use the DSM-IV terminology. But we are led to such questions, I believe, by the
statements made by Alexander, Boraine, Foster and others about the very world order
which we inhabit – about the whole sweep of history that has brought us, and not just
South Africa, to a crisis point. Perhaps the more productive route for the researchers
would be not to launch into questions about narrative and healing without first being
open to the variety of cultural representations of trauma, the different formal choices,
including generic choices, and the different linguistic registers selected for the somatic
and psychic references. To an extent, the interviews with Mann and Gagiano offer such
a lead. Only with that kind of open-mindedness, I think, which is of course an extreme
intellectual vulnerability, could one start to address those fundamental questions: What
language does one need to speak in order to feel, or to be proclaimed as, healed? What
has to be repressed?

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