

Unburying Silences: Trauma and Recuperative Narrative in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*

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Summary

This article argues that Wicomb's novel is concerned with how to represent intergenerational trauma in South Africa. It suggests that an important element of that representation is the concept of "recuperation". This includes the action of recuperating past events that have been repressed socially and psychologically, and also the use of that "unburying" as the first step towards recuperative healing. Wicomb investigates different ways of representing both the trauma and the recuperation. Her examination is itself a commentary of how South African literature may consider representing the past and using literature as a tool of healing. She engages with different symbolic functions as adequate means of representing trauma, in particular myth and allegory, suggesting that these commonly used tropes may be useful, but are ultimately not fully adequate for recuperative narrative. As an alternative, she explores a symbolic mode which is as "real" to ordinary, traumatic, experience as it is possible to be. The South African writer, she suggests, should not seek meaning in arcane or western mythological modes, but in the traumatic life offered by the experience of the everyday, and in the objects that are strikingly "homely", symbolic of the actions of those who have found ways to recuperate from trauma.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word daar geredeneer dat Wicomb se roman gemoeid is met hoe trauma wat verband hou met verskeie generasies in Suid-Afrika, uitgebeeld word. Dit suggereer dat 'n belangrike element van daardie uitbeelding die konsep van "herstel" is. Dit sluit in die handeling om te herstel van vorige gebeurtenisse wat sosiaal en psigologies onderdruk is, en ook die gebruik van "ontgrowing" as die eerste stap na herstellende genesing. Wicomb ondersoek verskillende maniere om sowel die trauma as die herstel uit te beeld. Haar ondersoek is op sigself kommentaar van hoe Suid-Afrikaanse literatuur kan oorweeg om die verlede uit te beeld en literatuur te gebruik as 'n genesingsmiddel. Sy is gemoeid met verskillende simboliese funksies as voldoende wyse om trauma uit te beeld, veral mite en allegorie, en suggereer dat hierdie algemeen gebruikte stylfigure nuttig kan wees, maar op die end nie heeltemal voldoende is vir herstellende narratief nie. As alternatief verken sy 'n simboliese gebruik wat so "werklik" is vir 'n gewone, traumatiese ervaring as wat moontlik is. Sy stel voor dat die Suid-Afrikaanse skrywer nie betekenis moet soek in geheimsinnige of Westerse mitologiese gebruike nie, maar in die traumatiese lewe wat gebied word deur die ervaring van die alledaagse, en in die objekte wat treffend "huislik" is, simbolies van die handeling van diegene wat maniere gevind het om te herstel van trauma.

Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006) examines the trauma one woman (Marion Campbell) experiences when she discovers she is "coloured" rather than "white" in South Africa, and that her childhood has been a lie because her parents chose to "play white", a gamble which has, in effect, destroyed their marriage, taken the mother's life by cancer and removed all connection with a wider family. The novel suggests that any recovery from the effects of this "lie" is likely to happen in two parts, similar to Freudian psychoanalysis. First, the truth about the past must be excavated. Secondly, since the "lie" is facilitated by language and ideological interpellation, the recovery needs to be at least partly linguistic and ideological. The word that perhaps best captures this two-part process is "recuperation", since it implies the recuperation (uncovering) of repressed pasts and also the process of healing. The aim of this article is, therefore, to explore the means of recuperation, in both senses.

There have been a number of psychoanalytic readings of the novel in recent years. Klopper's (2011) analysis of nostalgia examined the sense of the *unheimlich* (the Freudian "unhomely") that the "othered" experiences. A similar reading of trauma in the novel is offered by Herero (2014). Other readers have focussed on the novel's use of symbols, both as tropes of revelation about the past and means of social/psychological recovery: the sea in the case of Samuelson (2013), gardening in the case of Ngwira (2016) and intertextuality itself, as in Hoegberg (2018). Other readers, like Jacobs (2011), emphasised coloured identity, while Van der Vlies (2010) offered a Derridean/Freudian reading of the historical "archive" of the narrative and the uses of memory in relation to trauma.

Our focus here overlaps with many of these, but is particularly concerned with how the novel, the act of writing itself, can be seen to become a means of "recuperating" from trauma. Its argument is therefore about Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, but also about the efficacy of the textual retrieval of trauma and its amelioration. In our view, this is perhaps the single most important question contemporary South Africans must ask themselves.

Wicomb's allusion to Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1993) introduces such "recuperation". Wicomb reacts to a past reading of race which can now be seen as oversimplified. Morrison's objective is to show the "shadow" of whiteness on black lives. Wicomb's is to show that the black-white dichotomy is not adequate for "coloured" experience in South Africa. Morrison opens with an epigraph from Eliot's "Preludes": "I am moved by fancies that are curled/Around these images, and cling:/The notion of some infinitely gentle/Infinitely suffering thing." This begs the question of whether vicarious, Christ-like suffering can heal the past, or whether it is merely "fancy". It invites us to question the role of "fancy", the imagination in the healing process. Eliot himself shows his uncertainty about an answer in "The Hollow Men": "Between the emotion/And the response/Falls the Shadow."

In Wicomb's novel, that "shadow" is both the imagination and the literal "shadow" of racial classification in which the "coloured" must live. To attempt to deal with the shadow of race is therefore to deal with how it is represented imaginatively and to ask to what extent the writer's imagination can reframe its representation. By setting her novel against the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Wicomb is inviting a reading of racial representation which is national, not just a personal experience.

Intergenerational Trauma and Its Effects

The "shadow" of intergenerational trauma in the novel is layered, requiring excavation. The first layer is the classification that leaves the subject in an indeterminate condition, neither fully black nor white. A second layer is the choice that some people, like Marion's parents John and Helen, were given, simply by "appearing" white enough. It is a false "freedom" resulting in shame and guilt. A further layer is that the decisions taken by one generation have profound emotional effects on later generations. Yet a further layer is related to time. The "lie" lived by the older generation disables the succeeding generation from dealing with the trauma because its origin is in the past, unreachable in a way that is itself traumatic. In the novel, Marion experiences all these traumas progressively and largely alone, without anyone to understand fully.

Most recent trauma theory, like that proposed by Caruth (1995), Balaev (2008), Alexander (2012), Prager (2016) and others, has shown that the effects of trauma are as much influenced by how the trauma is framed as by the trauma itself. A relatively "minor" trauma may have more destructive consequences later than huge social, mass traumas. Caruth's (1995: 152) point is that the trauma's "lack of integration into consciousness," its inability "to be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge" (1995: 153) remains the primary destructive element. Her psychoanalytical model emphasises the archaeology of the unconscious mind as a way of excavating repressed memories and histories. Her views have been much contested by more recent postcolonial theorists of trauma, like Luckhurst (2010) and Visser (2015) who disagree about trauma being "unspeakable". As with sociologists like Alexander (2012) they see the experience of trauma not as unrepresentable, but precisely as something whose representation, its symbolic force, is at the heart of the experience itself, and must therefore inform the healing process.

Alexander's argument (2012: 3-4) is that while the traditional Freudian model of analysis remains important, it should be tempered by the awareness that there is no simple "truth" to dig up from the repressing mind. The unconscious is as much interpellated by ideology as is the conscious mind. The framing of the trauma is often dependent on what he calls "carrier groups" (2012: 16) which perpetuate particular ways of seeing. It takes a "carrier"

interest group (e.g. holocaust survivors and their descendants) to keep alive the memory of a particular trauma. These different approaches, trauma as “unspeakable” and trauma as “framed” by a “carrier group”, need not be seen as mutually exclusive. Much trauma is “unspeakable”, but it is also “remembered” by the “carrier group” precisely because of its unspeakableness.

To “Play in the Light” by pretending to be white, in the South African context is to accept that one’s life has become an “unspeakable” secret. So, guilt will “hover” in the gaze “like the ghost of the past” (55). The role of the TRC was to try to deal with that “ghost,” to aid a national recuperation by telling its story – a kind of national Freudian “talking cure”. But the TRC could not be expected to salve the nation’s trauma. Neither can the writer of literary fiction. Nevertheless, Wicomb suggests that the task, though never complete, must be undertaken, because to speak the unspeakable is one of the roles most postcolonial writers take up.

If one adopts a socio-psychoanalytical approach to intergenerational trauma, as we are here, two complementary readings become available. The first is suggested by Jeffery Prager (2016) at a conference held in South Africa. The second is Freud’s own use of the term *Nachträglichkeit*, (1894, 2013) or “deferral”, by which he means the “gap” that exists between the experience of a trauma and the actual manifestation of its affect sometimes years later. This can be seen as the “shadow” between event and affect, event and interpretation.

Prager suggests traumatic memory can become an “unconsciously organizing principle passed on by parents and internalized by children The result is a life constricted by perceived difference, specific perceptions dominated by strong echoes of the past” (2016: 14). He values (2016: 15) Cathy Caruth’s insight that the traumatised person becomes a symptom of an “impossible” history they cannot entirely possess, and proposes two ways of understanding this: introjection and incorporation. “Introjection” is the ability given to a child by its parents, to have a language and tools with which to deal with the world and so become an independent being. Trauma interferes with introjection. “The facilitating environment is thwarted” (2016: 19). What results is a negative form of “incorporation”, in which the individual loses his or her differentiated identity and is unable to extricate him or herself from the one constructed by the earlier history. “Those who know ghosts, ... tell us that they long to be released from their ghost life and led to rest as ancestors. As ancestors they live forth in the present generation, while as ghosts they are compelled to haunt the present generation with their shadow life” (2016: 17). The ghost image is appropriate. The traumatised often resort to fantasy as a means of escape. “When words cannot be found to stand in for the person missing ... introjection is replaced by the fantasy of incorporation, the insufficient provider now taken wholesale into the psychic life of those who encounter silence” (2016: 19). What Prager means here is that when trauma

has interrupted the process of introjection, the fantasy of incorporation, of being part of the group, takes over, but it is always inadequate, and all too often leads to a neurotic silence.

Marion's experience mirrors Prager's description. She is tired of her family's "slavish devotion to the past" (16), its secrets, the acrimonious marriage of her parents that "grew silent and brooding with grief" (23). Her introjection of a balanced life has been thwarted by the trauma of experiencing her parents' anger towards each other. This has led her to silence and loneliness, an awareness of a ghostly past, mostly in the form of Tokkie, her long-dead maid (who eventually turns out to be her maternal grandmother) and her long-lost friend Annie Boshoff. The suspicious and inexplicably guilt-ridden demeanour she develops reflects her mother's racist moralising, though she does not understand it. "Ashamed, said her mother, as they should be, of being neither one thing nor another", (47) is an example of her mother's only partly unconscious denial of her own double life. It is the secrecy in the family that destroys. "Her father, no, both her parents, have always kept something from her; something they did not want her to know. That is why John has drawn her since childhood into the nonsense of myth, in order to drown his secrets ..." (58). The secrets are replaced with fantasies, myths, as in the idea of the mermaid, to which her father compares her, an endearment but also an infantilisation (46). "Secrets, lies and discomfiture – that was what her childhood had been wrapped up in. Each day individually wrapped, lived through carefully, as only those with secrets live" (59).

Because of the secrecy surrounding her childhood, like a "ghost" of something felt but not openly discussed, her trauma is less the memory of what had happened than the absence of the memory, the ghost of an unburied past she cannot bring into the "light". This is not, like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the ghost of the lost millions, but rather of the present results of past choices willingly made. How does the traumatised individual expunge such a presence that is in truth an absence, not an external absence of lost people, but an internalised one, of lost and repressed selves?

In the Freudian paradigm, the moment of discovering the repressed absence is the first stage of healing. Freud fills this absence with the experience of the transference. It is only when one is able to transfer onto another, who can act as a symbol of the self, that the subject can step out of its own conflict. Prager (2016: 21) quotes Freud: "'This struggle between the doctor and the patient, ... between intellect and instinctual life, between understanding and seeking to act, is played out almost exclusively in the phenomena of transference'." Freud portrays the transference as a battle of wills between doctor and patient, until they, in a sense, exchange roles so that the patient is given the freedom to act as if he or she were the doctor (or another, not-self).

Wicomb mimics the transference in the relationship between Marion and Brenda. It is Brenda who acts as the foil who eventually allows Marion to see what she has been repressing, how she has adopted her parents' neuroses. And

it is Brenda who becomes the representative of the community Marion's parents have rejected. She is the unwelcome mirror, the inevitable object of projected resentment and anger. In her, the cycle of repetition is, at least partly, broken. It is Brenda who encourages Marion to read, the first step towards acting: "To live vicariously through other people's words, in other people's worlds, is better than not living at all" (163). This is a version of transference, of adopting a view of the world other than the one held. But to understand the mechanism of the transference better, one must investigate Freudian *nachträglichkeit*.

Freud's *nachträglichkeit* (1894, 2013) has been defined variously as "deferral", "afterwardness", "belatedness", "latency" and "retrospective attribution" (Bistoën 2014: 672). It is the gap between the original (repressed) trauma and the event that takes place later, which triggers the memory of the first trauma. *Nachträglichkeit* requires "two etiological moments" (Bistoën 2014: 672), the initial traumatic event and another which triggers the memory of the first event. It is into that gap that analysis must enter, working backwards to the original event, to attain an "abreaction" – the release of traumatic memory. In the same way, it is into that gap that the literary artefact steps to bring the trauma of the repressed memory to the surface, not unlike the therapist who becomes the "transferee" in the psychoanalytic relationship.

In Wicomb's text, the space of *nachträglichkeit* becomes the space of psychic destruction because it is constructed as an emptiness, a trauma that is not meant to be a trauma, since Marion's parents don't think being construed as white is traumatic, but rather a fortunate accident. "Caught accidentally in a beam of light, he [John] watched whiteness fall fabulously, like an expensive woman, into his lap" (127). Only a truly evil society can make a person desire what is inimical to them, deny that the trauma they experience is actually a trauma at all.

The salacious image in John's head suggests the unsavoury, hidden, but the word "fabulously" refers as much to a fable, the unreal, as it does to his amazement at his good fortune. Trauma can be replaced by self-delusion, as a defence mechanism. His subconscious forces him to evoke the fabulous, a mermaid, when he tries to define his daughter. To consider how one might escape such constructionism, such negative "incorporation" in which even the language one chooses must fit the myth by which one is forced to live, Wicomb engages with the writing process itself. Trauma's construction may be forced upon the unwilling, driving them not only to silence, but also to a world of make-believe. So, to deal with that trauma, one must deal with the narrative form it takes.

Nachträglichkeit therefore becomes not only the space of self-delusion, but also the space in which the retrieval of trauma may happen, the space of maelstrom in which literature works. It is a "deferral" that allows the entry of "différance", as Derrida (1978) would say, the upsetting of the status quo. It is where the unconscious is mined. Marion's dreams, her mental pictures of

Tokkie floating on the water (55), the newspaper picture of Patricia Williams (54), the strange occurrences like speckled birds falling out of the sky, like Brenda's presence egging her on to surprising encounters, the "accidental" encounter with the up-market black businessman Vumi – these all serve as agents upsetting the repressing status quo, forcing the "image" of the past to come to the surface, just as the picture in the water rises to the surface. It is by excavating the shadow of these images that recuperation as healing may begin.

Myth, Metaphor and the Language of Recuperation

"To live vicariously through other people's words, in other people's worlds, is better than not living at all" (163), may be taken as the central philosophical point of investigation in the novel. To take on the category of whiteness as one's own identity is to accept a metaphorical status (a stereotype) as the norm. Brenda's words therefore become ironic when considered in the context of South African racism, where entire peoples are forced to live vicariously through the "words" (ideologies) of others. But her assertion is also about literature, its ability to step into the shoes of the Other, and about reframing the way one sees things. So, what is negative, can also become positive, depending on its framing. If language is used to confine ideologically, to categorise, fix allegorically into certain state apparatuses, can language also break the shackles. If so, how?

Helen suffers in silence for her choice and ultimately dies a "self-willed and efficient death" (4) by internalising her self-hatred. To internalise an imposed metaphor (racial classification) is to embody *nachträglichkeit*, the deferral of a relationship with oneself, to become a cancerous Other to oneself. Any excavation of racism's effects must bring to the surface the assumptions behind racist tropes and then reframe them. Wicomb, it may be argued, focuses on three different symbolic forms in her examination of this ideological interpellation and its possible reframing. Each has its own expression in a mythical story or the use of myth as a trope. The one is the body itself and, in this case, its mixed-race physical identity. The other is liminal geographic location, a kind of mirror of social and psychological liminality. And the third is the function of art and narrative itself.

She adopts as the dominant mythical trope the same symbolic form used by most western epics, the Homeric journey into the past. If her parents journeyed originally from *plaas* to city, Marion's journey is in reverse. It is both physical and literal, but also, of course, into the unconscious. Brenda acts not only as therapist, helping the transference, but also as a mythical guide to the repressed "underworld". Like Vumi (205) who is described as Hermes, Brenda herself can be seen as a kind of Hermes, a messenger of the gods. The Homeric journey back to Marion's origins turns out to lead not just to an old

Rhenish (German) mission station in the Karoo town of Wuppertal (92), but also to Mrs Murray, a mother figure who washes Marion's painful foot, with all the quasi-religious meanings such a washing contains, including service, homely greeting and cleansing. She bears the name of other famous, but Scottish, missionaries in South Africa, (Andrew Murray) suggesting that Marion, as a Scottish Campbell, is a version of the prodigal daughter returned to her roots, but now South African roots. The ironic nuances of this are not likely missed by Wicomb, who now lives in Scotland and whose own name's origin seems to have been "Witcomb" (white) from the Isle of Wight.

On the mission, western shoes have been swapped for *veldskoene* ("bush shoes"). The symbolism is heavy, but clear. The European ancestors adapted to the South African bush. Now Marion must learn to re-adapt to her suddenly revealed past which is both European and African. When her foot becomes inflamed, it is not only an Oedipal symbol, a fear of, yet secret desire to "kill" this newly-discovered "parent" metaphorically, but is also to be associated with Helen getting her feet pedicured regularly so "the beast [i.e., non-whiteness] was tamed" (148). The Oedipal conflict within the self only becomes obvious when it recognises parental authority, an authority the subject wishes to overcome. It is the first stage of healing, escaping imposed meanings. She must walk metaphorically in "new shoes", a reaction to discovering hidden ancestries: C. Louis Leipoldt at his burial nearby (Afrikaner heritage) and the Khoi-San cave paintings and Scottish/Rhenish missionaries. She is all of these.

Like every developing child struggling to accept authority but also to be independent of it, Marion now has a new struggle, not only the rejection of her whiteness, an unreal and distorted "chimerical thing that we strive for" (151), but colouredness, a version of the monster in *Frankenstein* (175) if she wants to read it that way. "Once I was white, now I am coloured. If everything from now on will be different (which is also to say the same), will the past be different too?" (106)

The problem is the mythical and allegorical nature of the imposition. Categorisation becomes a linguistic, but also a mythical, decree. It imposes myth-like labels in the way Roland Barthes (1972) has shown to be a metalanguage, a symbol created from an object or action aimed at providing a particular emotional substrate, like his famous example of the black African soldier appearing to salute happily under the French flag (1972: 115). Its distortions create a "saving aphasia" (1972: 153) whose end is to "immobilize the world" (1972: 154). As such, it replaces one reality with another, more ideologically palatable one. This mythical metalanguage can only be deconstructed, Wicomb is suggesting, by unpicking its imposed significations and recovering its lost memories or aphasias. "Colouredness" is a distortion of whiteness and blackness, which are themselves distortions, chimeras, "inflections" that have become "naturalized," as Barthes says of myth (1972: 128).

Wicomb unpicks the mythology by using the patriarch as the dominant mythmaker. The mermaid (46) is the dominant myth, a version of the dark (female) shadow in the male psyche. It is a “saving aphasia” for John, but a radical loss of identity for his daughter, even, as Samuelson (2010) has shown, a symbolical “binding” of her legs, another way of turning the self into an Other. This amphibious, ancient, mythical figure is linked to sailor narratives (the journey motif), to Homeric Sirens luring ships to destruction, to Andromeda (Greek Goddess chained in the sea) and various naiads, Greek ocean creatures that were both attractive and dangerous. It represents the mixed body, but also the liminal, amphibious space which is an unhomed one. Mermaids belong nowhere. This is why, like sirens, they bear a destructive force. But they are also cartoon characters, unreal. While John chooses the myth as a European one, there are African variants too, such as the folkloric “Mami Wata” (African mermaid). Marion has followed the European tradition, but only half-heartedly. The repressed history represented by the myth is, however, about to rise out of the sea and show itself, as she stands on her balcony.

The balcony is a symbol of geographical liminality, as well as social detachment. Marion exists half-in her own western tradition, like a mermaid. She has (unconsciously) chosen to live in geographical spaces equally indeterminate, be a “fairy princess” living in “gauzed limbo” (2) in an apartment “here by the cool waters of Bloubergstrand” (3), suggestive of the Babylonian exile (a founding myth of many nations, including the Afrikaner one), somewhere between the suburb of Observatory (where she grew up, always “observing” from a distance) and Robben island, Mandela’s prison home. Being “white” Marion can live where she chooses. But she chooses liminality, to escape the house of “choked history” (149) her parents inhabit, as if her unconscious is telling her more than she realises about her origins.

One might use, as does Klopper (2011), Freud’s “unheimlich” to explain the psychology behind this desire for the liminal. For Freud (2003) the German “heimlich” (home) in its opposite sense, “unheimlich” (unhomely) can be equated with “uncanny,” strange and eerie (2003: 124). It is both a physical experience and an emotional one; to feel “unhomed.” Freud stresses the link between “heimlich” and “geheim” (secret). Homes, like histories, carry secrets, which can develop into feelings of alienation and carry the burden of the “uncanny”. The houses in which Marion lives, are literally “unhomely”, with “choked history” (149), or lacking balconies, “between the private house and the public street” (9), so she spends much time on her adult balcony, neither inside nor outside (55).

Unsurprisingly, this “uncanny” will manifest in the unconscious and in dreams, where houses are such a standard symbol. It is from the balcony’s liminal space that she imagines the picture of “a disfigured face, undulating in the water” (55), another version of the mermaid, Tokkie’s face, her “maid”/grandmother long forgotten. The sea of dreams will not let her go, she

is part of the collective unconscious, both African and European. Her imaginings open mythical doors into the unconscious, her repressed underworld. So, doors are also frequent images in the novel. The dominant one for Marion is the dream of the loft (symbol of “mind”) and a black wooden door, and of a strange, half-veiled figure of an old woman, eventually sitting down with coffee (29-31). This repressed memory from childhood is eventually revealed as Tokkie. Most South Africans reading the novel would associate the name with “Tok-Tokkie”. This has three possible allusions: to the children’s game where the child knocks on the door and runs away before it is answered, leaving the sound of “tok-tok” (reminiscent of *Macbeth’s* “whence is that knocking?”); to the African beetle making a “tok-tok” sound (as if from some hidden place), and finally to the Tokoloshe, the African mythical figure, morally and sexually ambiguous, who hides under the bed, another suitable image of the unconscious. The point both Freud and Wicomb are making is that the recognition of the uncanny, the “unheimlich” is the first step towards excavating repressed memories and the truths that lie hidden with them.

Freud associates the uncanny with the *doppelgänger*, that same-other allegorical figure, who reveals the self’s hidden side. It is a psychological version of the biologically ambiguous mermaid. Marion, never quite herself, sensing a hidden past, only begins to encounter that past when she is in touch with Brenda, and later with Outa. Brenda is Marion’s foil, but also her *doppelgänger*. “This relationship [between *doppelgängers*] is intensified (Freud says) by the spontaneous transmission of mental processes from one of these people to the other ... so that one becomes the co-owner of the other’s knowledge, emotions and experience The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged. Finally, there is the constant recurrence of the same thing ... the same characters, the same destinies ... through successive generations” (2003: 141-142).

But Wicomb also has a wider question for South Africa itself and for writing in particular. How, in the afterlife of the TRC, can South Africa deal with repressed histories, their “uncanny” unhomeliness and their trauma of being not only racially split but psychologically too, with white and black *doppelgängers*? She turns to the function of writing itself. If the TRC can be interpreted as a formalised process of witnessing what has been repressed by the previous state, a re-writing of hidden histories, then it makes sense to explore how the writing process can be used as a tool of exploration, and how the mythologies it adopts can be healing rather than merely constrictive.

Recuperative writing is about dealing with memory. Derrida’s “Archive Fever” (1995) sheds light on Wicomb’s novel, as Van der Vlies (2010) has shown. Derrida shows a contemporary world obsessed with archiving and with creating memorials to protect memory. The fictional work is such a space. But fiction, like the archive, must enact, as Derrida (1995: 14) says, copying Freud, a kind of “destruktion,” a death drive. “The archive takes place

at the place of originary and structural breakdown of memory.” To remember one thing is to choose what to remember, and so to forget some other related thing. The archive is, then, a form of suppression (23). This is Paul Ricoeur’s (2006: 404) point too when he suggests that there is no remembering without first forgetting, and that the rupture between memory and history takes place the moment memory becomes fixed as history. Wicomb is looking for a way in which the process of memory and writing can be creative, not just a process of forgetting.

She uses intertextuality to explore the nation’s archive, so that the mythical journey is not only into Marion’s unconscious and her history, but into South African literary history. Is the frame we have used to interpret the past fixed forever, or can it be changed? South Africa’s historical frame is built mostly on the Bible, on the allegorical conflict between those thinking themselves “chosen” and those left out as God’s “stepchildren” (111), a reference to Sarah Gertrude Millin. The intertextual elements of the novel have been carefully explained by Hoegberg (2018). But what interests Wicomb is the misreading that has made the framing of the past so “destruktive” (à la Derrida), so that the “archive” in fact replaced “truth” with ideology. Like Helen’s long-kept bible card showing two men with a lamb (118) ironically misquoting Acts 8.22 when it should be Isaiah 53.7, the prophetic text about a lamb led to the slaughter. The Acts text is really about repentance for wickedness. The card used by the church therefore changed the bible (Old Testament into New Testament) to suit its own ends, denying its own sinfulness.

Literature, like history, and like readings of the bible, can be taken to mean what best suits the reader’s ideology. Despite the references to Leipoldt, to ancient Khoi-San paintings, to Gordimer, Coetzee, Conrad, Burns, Eliot, Mary Shelley, and others, including mythology, who make up versions of South African history and culture, it is not a given that any reading of them will result in a single, universally accepted interpretation. Like Kurtz, in *Heart of Darkness*, (the companion text in a way to Wicomb’s with its journey into a dark self) it may be that one can only truly “see” the horror when one is outside it, travelling back up the river. Helen sees herself, probably, as the lamb, her life sacrificed to a higher calling. By denying her blackness, she makes whiteness into darkness. Marion sees herself simply as a victim. She must travel up her own metaphorical river, back to Scotland, to begin to see the “light.” But even that light is relative, it plays on the wall in her London flat like a dance, like her mother’s gown, a “ludic” light, forbidden and sumptuous at once (192). If the European light is ambiguous, can we use its mythical, cultural and symbolic forms to unpick the ways they have been applied in and to Africa?

The “Fiction” of Recuperation

Wicomb explores two, related, options open to South African literature in the face of this relativism. Symbolism can take two forms: allegorical, fixed meaning, as in racial classification, or a more complex, nuanced multivalency, where the symbol opens meaning, rather than closes it. Both South Africa as a country, and the South African writer, Wicomb is suggesting, must choose which form to adopt.

South African culture and politics have been underpinned by allegorical fixity since inception. As with most allegory, it is obsessed with the ethical, but with fixed interpretations of what ethical means. But there is a darker side to allegory every soldier and every victim knows. Excessive use of the allegorical leads to what Bakhtin (1941, 1984) describes as the carnivalesque, the medieval form of writing he analysed in Rabelais. It appears celebratory and free, but since it fixes meaning as “Gargantuan” or “Pantagruelian” and revels in the playfully unethical, it remains outside social accountability. Conrad, in *Heart of Darkness* used a similar carnivalesque when depicting the horrors of African slavery. The carnivalesque seeks to exist outside ordinary ethical norms, as if it has a life and meaning of its own. Outa Blinkoog (“bright eye”) is the carnivalesque, allegorical, Rabelaisian harlequin who, like the harlequin in *Heart of Darkness* acts as a kind of guide into the river of darkness that is Marion’s past as she enters Wuppertal. In South Africa he would be called the *smous*, a travelling salesman, the outsider (“*smous*” is Yiddish for “Moses”, who leads to the Promised Land but never gets there himself). He may also suggest the wandering Jew, fated to wander forever for cursing Christ on the cross, symbol of the morally divided being. He plays with his “lights” in the form of trinkets such as the lantern he gives the women after their (carnivalesque) “picnic.” The fact that his eyes are different colours can be read as inclusive of difference, but also as symbolic of playful indeterminacy.

To “play in the light” is to explore this carnivalesque. But it is also to ask if the light is true and if it is enough. Outa’s embroidered cloths are his private story, made by the community of women, shared. Similarly, the lantern suggests the open-ended, multi-coloured, a romantic life, with its “dome of many-coloured glass” (to quote Shelley’s elegy for Keats). The ungraspable sublime is the essence of art/life in this reading. Outa believes his words are outside history, “fresh, newborn, untainted by history,” (90) as in a kind of dream. With him “The women are transported to another world” (90). The real world is ugly, so one must *make* “the pragtige goeters” (88), suggesting a version of romanticism that disregards suffering.

This multivalent “coloured” could be creative, but it could also be a version of relativism, of the *isolato* that harks back to figures like the Kafkaesque, allegorical Michael K, alone and disconnected from anything but himself. Michael K plants at least. Outa wanders. The lantern has its equivalent in

England, the “ludic light” (192) playing on the wall of Marion’s bedroom, like hieroglyphs, enabling her to see as she has not been able to see while in South Africa, and to cry cathartic tears, because she is outside her own story. The romantic sublime and its narrative do help the traumatised to gain perspective, as if from the mountain top of sublime distance. They provide the space of *nagträchlichkeit* for a kind of recuperation to work. In Scotland she can live an isolated but also self-indulgent life, unburdened by the rigidities of classification, even manage to become flirtatiously friendly with Vumi, a black South African. Otherness is neutralised. But this same sublime distance can separate the individual from reality. There is a great deal of truth that is not beautiful, and cannot be construed to be.

The door is quite literally slammed shut on this carnivalesque on the last page of the novel. Marion throws Brenda, her therapeutic guide, her *doppelgänger*, who has rediscovered her writing ability via the lantern, out of the car. She is angry that Brenda has adopted her story for her novel, become a version of a daughter to her father. In a carnivalesque world this kind of mutual sharing might be seen as recuperative, an allegory of renewal. So why the rejection?

Wicomb’s suggestion is that such a sharing is both too simplistic a response to South African trauma and its literary representation, and also too much too soon. The pain is not only communal but personal, and one story cannot simply replace another. Neither can textuality replace human experience. “Telling” (as Brenda tries) does not necessarily cure. The TRC experienced much of this same problem between the words of the victims and the perceptions of their hearers, to the point where some were simply not understood because their stories did not fit the frame created for them by the hearers (see Mengel & Borzaga 2012). Brenda and Marion become, ironically, an allegory of the “New South Africa” and its difficulty to “tell itself”. This is why it is Tokkie’s face playing “Tok-Tokkie” with her in the water, in the sea of dreams, and Patricia Williams’ face in the newspaper demanding her attention, not as allegorical symbols, but as real people with personal histories.

There is only really one other option open to Wicomb. It is partly allegorical, but is also a revaluation of symbolism in the South African context. It is the return “home”. Not to a meaning so equivocal as to be “floating” or to one so unequivocal as to be restrictive, but rather to a transcendence arising from an acceptance of real experience, without the need to escape reality, as her parents had done, as Outa seeks to do, and even as Brenda tries via her (vicarious) writing. Elsie is presented as perhaps the most balanced and “transcendent” character in the novel. She provides the image of catharsis Marion seeks in her own history but cannot see, and transcends her trauma by living it. And this is, perhaps, Wicomb’s point. The site of recuperation is really closer than one might think – not in Scotland or Wuppertal or any of

the literary texts she encounters. It is in one's own history, and it lives down the road. But it requires the correct mental frame to be encountered.

Elsie has suffered incalculably during apartheid. She has lost a son, her house, her brother John, and recently her husband before he could see the fruits of his struggle. But her laugh of equanimity and endurance is different from Outa's disconnected one. No one is more connected to the land, the history and even the language of struggle and survival than Elsie. She laughs "uproariously" (166) and it sounds like "running water" (169). She can forgive her brother his rejection of her because she knew that time would change things. She lives in the real, not the imaginary. She symbolises renewal. The deferral, the *nagträchlichkeit* she endures, waiting for her life to become better, is taken as a normal passage of existence, one over which the individual does not always have control. It is not the deferral, the Derridean aporia that destroys, Wicomb suggests, but rather what a person does with it. One can allow it to become cancerous or one can "laugh". Elsie's resilience is symbolised by the prickly pear, the "fruit" of struggle. It is symbolic, but also a real fruit. It is not beautiful. It is the "veldkos" Outa despises (88). It grows on "ugly prickly disks" (169) in the back yard, where the "wounds of childbirth, of motherhood, are proudly displayed," as a symbol of rebirth. Rebirth is not beautiful. The pears have been planted as a "buffer zone" (169) after the removal of non-indigenous Port Jackson Willow, replacing the droopy tearfulness of feeling foreign in one's own land. Elsie makes konfyf from them, as if to say "when life gives you prickly pears, make konfyf". "Konfyf", of course, is an Afrikaans/Dutch word, derived from French, adopted by Malays (originally slaves) in Cape Town. One must work by hand, carefully, with prickly pears, just as the writer must work with her prickly history.

Conclusion

This handcraft has particular implications for the literary representation of recuperation in South Africa. Wicomb's suggestion is that if it is taken too much for granted, recuperation may be a fiction. Too many multi-coloured lenses compete for authority, either imposing master-narratives or responding with a dangerously relativistic "play" with words that may not take morality seriously enough. Language imposes restrictions, as in apartheid classifications, but language can also help to break those restrictions, if it takes morality into account. It is not the domain of harlequins.

Elsie does not discount morality or the hard work it takes to remake the world. Her sense of justice remains precise. There must be accountability. But it is neither monological nor bitter nor offered with self-satisfaction. It takes the shadow of the past within itself and becomes Eliot's imagined "infinitely gentle/Infinitely suffering thing". She must recover from being the outsider to

write. Planting, in the city, the indigenous, prickly fruit of one's own history, is perhaps the only way to move forward as a nation and as a literature. It is not an allegorical or even symbolic action. It is a literal one, which is the only way human action can become symbolic and engender healing.

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