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Tobias, Saul

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History, Memory and the Ethics of Writing: Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*

Saul Tobias
Emory University
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I

In a number of recent works, historians of the Holocaust have made use of the ideas of "common" and "deep" memory to highlight the difficulties of reproducing, in the manner of historical narrative or description, experiences which resist recuperation into a conventional logical or temporal order. In the work of these historians, common memory refers to memories orientated within a comprehensible social and political context and informed by subsequent historical knowledge. These may be memories of past experiences as they have been constructed from the "normal" perspective of the subject's life prior to or after the specific event. Common memory thus functions to reinsert these experiences into a shared knowledge that provides the survivor with some measure of mastery and control over her experiences. Common memory, in the words of Holocaust historian, Lawrence Langer, "is heroic memory" - the memory of survival.[1]

Deep memory, on the other hand, resists assimilation into a broader historical perspective, is unresponsive to the orientating co-ordinates of here and there, now and then. Deep memory is not the memory of survival, but the memory of loss. Fragments of such memory, when they appear, may be difficult to make sense of, or fail to find adequate expression within the limited confines of language. In describing his impression of video testimony offered by Holocaust survivors, Langer writes that,

> the efforts of memory in these testimonies liberate a sub-text of loss which punctures the story with fragments of chagrin, a vexation that co-exists with whatever relief one feels from the fact of survival. The evidence of these testimonies...suggests that such a relief is less substantial than we have been led to believe.[2]

In the view of another Holocaust historian, Saul Friedlander, "deep memory and common memory are ultimately irreducible to each other."[3] For Friedlander, what is most worrying about this incommensurability is that with increasing temporal distance from the event and the death of survivors, fragments of deep memory will never find their way to a full historical restitution or recognition:

> Individual common memory, as well as collective memory, tends to restore or establish coherence, closure and possibly a redemptive stance, notwithstanding the resistance of deep memory at the individual level. The question remains whether at the collective level as well, an event such as the Shoah may, after all the survivors have disappeared, leave traces of deep memory beyond individual recall, which will defy any attempt to give it meaning.[4]

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[1]Lawrence L. Langer, "Remembering Survival" in *Holocaust remembrance: the shapes of memory*. edit. Geoffrey Hartman. Cambridge: Blackwell. 1994. 70-80, 74.

[2]Ibid. 79-80.

[3]Friedlander, Saul. "Trauma, Memory and Transference" in *Holocaust remembrance: the shapes of memory*. edit. Geoffrey Hartman. 252-263, 253.

[4]Ibid. 254.

Though Friedlander holds out the hope that innovative historical approaches, as well as art and literature, may help to sustain deep memory, he views the prospects at present to be bleak: "even if new forms of historical narrative were to develop, or new modes of representation, and even if literature and art were to probe the past from unexpected vantage points, the "opaqueness" of deep memory would not be entirely dispelled."[5]

Though Friedlander and Langer's work is clearly motivated by deep felt ethical concerns, much of their writing is dominated by the technical and epistemological problems of historical representation. What is often assumed in their work and in the work of historians dealing with comparable subjects, is the self-evident validity of the historical task of assimilating deep to common memory, of bringing such memory into the order of shared knowledge and understanding. This paper will attempt to foreground the ethical stakes and implications of this assumption in reference to issues central to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I will draw on the thought of theorists and theologians who share a particular attitude to the problem of "deep memory," and turn to Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* for an exemplary treatment of this problem. In doing so, my aim is not to champion literary over historical responses to the TRC, for I am not sure that literature is any more capable of dispelling the opaqueness of deep memory than are more conventional historical accounts. Rather, my intention is to highlight the costs of a particular kind of storytelling - the kind of storytelling which the TRC privileged, and which historical narrative often tends towards. Krog's book, I think, avoids this kind of storytelling. As such, though hardly useful as a model for historical writing, it stands as a testament to an important aspiration of the TRC initiative, one which, over time, is likely to suffer increasing erosion and neglect.

II

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the chairman on the Commission, reminds us, "ha[d] "a clear political focus and strong legal implications. It [was], at the same time, at its heart, a deeply theological and ethical initiative."[6] These two aspects of the TRC undertaking, its politico-legal objectives and its ethico-theological dimension, cannot simply be fused. Of course, the TRC's broader political objectives must themselves be understood as ethically informed. Reconciliation and "restorative justice" are no less ethical and theologically values than they are, in the South African context, practical political necessities. Nevertheless, I think that a distinction can be drawn between these ethico-juridico-political values and the kinds of ethical concerns raised by the TRC's aspiration to a "victim centred approach." Beyond its contribution to reconciliation, such an approach opens up ethical demands and responsibilities of a different order to the more practical political considerations which underlie an ethics of reconciliation.

Any historical account of the TRC must obviously attempt to reflect both of these dimensions of the TRC initiative, and it is probable that the former, the political and legal issues surrounding the Commission, will prove somewhat more amenable to historical reconstruction and analysis. This, I think, is owing to a certain compatibility between the narrative of reconciliation which guides the TRC, and a common, if not exhaustive, assumption regarding the ethical role of historical writing.

The TRC was, to a large extent, an attempt to tell a story about South Africa's recent past.

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[5]Ibid. 263.

[6]Tutu, Desmond Mpilo. "Foreword" in *To Remember and To Heal.* edit. H. Russel Botman and Robin M. Peterson. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau. 1996. 7-8, 7.

Guided by a particular sense of historical and moral purpose, the Commission sought to construct a larger narrative out of the separate narratives that were presented before it at its hearings. Through comparison, analysis and investigation, the TRC hoped to assemble something like a broader truth from a body of individual truths and half-truths and, consequently, provide the basis for unity out of a past of division and conflict. In interpreting its mandate, the TRC adopted a three phase approach: first were the hearings at which victims could tell their stories; then the attempt to "understand individual and institutional motives" and "enquire into the contexts and causes of... violations"; and finally to provide recommendations regarding the prevention of future violations.[7] In situating individual memories within a framework of pre-existing historical knowledge and subjecting this memory to comparative and critical analysis, the TRC aimed at the production of a common memory in which these individual memories could find their place, and their owners, hopefully, some solace. Thus, the Truth Commission narrative, despite its pauses, retreats, occasional reversals, its footnotes and disclaimers, remains a fairly familiar one. It is, broadly speaking, the story of a movement from division to unity, from fracturedness to wholeness, from confusion to clarity, from ignorance to understanding. As such, the TRC initiative bears many of the characteristics which historians associate with the production of common memory: features such as the orientation towards common understanding, cohesiveness, closure, and what Saul Friedlander has described as a "redemptive stance".

The notion of "understanding," for example, guided much of the TRC's efforts, and the term covers a broad semantic field in TRC documentation and legislation. The Interim Constitution of 1993, the product of a negotiated settlement between South Africa's major parties and the legislative origin of the Truth Commission, stated that the question of amnesty and the investigation of gross human rights violations would "be addressed on the basis that there is a need for *understanding* but not vengeance." The 1995 Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, which finally legislated the Commission into existence, similarly assigned the TRC "the task of promoting national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of *understanding* which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past."

The emphasis on understanding exhibited in the TRC's sense of its own mission is no less central to the work of many historians, and is explicitly raised in the historiographical tradition associated with philosophers such as H.-G. Gadamer or Paul Ricoeur. Understanding - *verstehen* - is the key term in any hermeneutic project, and its connotations are as much ethical as epistemological. We seek to understand the past not merely to assuage intellectual curiosity, but because such understanding broadens and enriches our current range of beliefs and values, potentially universalising, or in less Hegelian terms - democratising - our appreciation of "the human condition" and thus also our political and cultural relations and decisions. If the methodological assumptions of a hermeneutic historiography have been challenged by social historians and by the more recent claims of discourse theorists and narrative historians, its ethical ideal, I think, still underlies much historical work.

That the narrative structure of the TRC, which aimed at such an understanding of past events, is clearly a moral endeavour is made plain in the section of the TRC Final report entitled "Concepts and Principles". Here, the narrative thrust of the TRC is explained as follows:

> By providing the environment in which victims could tell their own stories in their own

[7] *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report*. Vol.1. Cape Town: Juta & Co. 1998, 58.

> languages, the Commission not only helped to uncover existing facts about past abuses, but also assisted in the creation of a "narrative truth". In so doing, it also sought to contribute to the process of reconciliation by ensuring that the truth about the past included the validation of the individual subjective experiences of people who had previously been silenced or voiceless.[8]

Thus, the TRC procedure, at one and the same time, aims to weave disparate accounts and testimonies into a collective narrative, and in so doing, restore an authority and dignity to these separate accounts. This narrative approach brings together "reconciliation" (as the production of a broader consensus or understanding based on disparate accounts) with an obligation to victims (as the acknowledgement and recognition of their stories fostered through their inclusion in an authoritative and accredited narrative). Such a narrative, it is argued, aims to meets both the demands of "restorative justice" and to fulfil the TRC's commitment to restoring "the human and civil dignity of victims."[9]

Like the dominant motifs of reconciliation and understanding, this acknowledgement and validation of past experiences through their inclusion in an overarching narrative has its historiographical precedents. For Paul Ricoeur, the "objectivity" at which history aims is thought to be not so much a pretence to scientificity as the mark of an ethical responsibility to past generations.[10] Reconstituting events and experiences out of a mass of muddled and often overlooked data restores the link between past and present generations, inserting past lives and experiences into an order of common knowledge and understanding. "Not only does the historian's inquiry raise the trace to the dignity of an historical document," writes Ricoeur, "but it also raises the past itself to the dignity of an historical fact."[11] Much social and feminist history has been concerned precisely with such an acknowledgement of previously ignored classes and groups, an acknowledgement culminating in the restoration of these stories to the sanctioned narrative of a particular community, era or place. As the TRC Final Report makes clear, "central to the restoration of the dignity of victims" is not merely the clarification of historical facts, but their insertion in an authoritative public narrative: "What is critical is that these facts be fully and publicly acknowledged. Acknowledgement is an affirmation that a person's pain is real and worthy of attention." [12]

The attempt to restore to the historical narrative the memories of previously neglected groups or individuals, in other words to construct a genuinely "common" memory, is largely what constitutes history's "redemptive stance". For the theological idea of redemption points precisely to the expectation that those who are most lost, most abject, most without hope, will come to resume their place in a common humanity, free of division and suffering. Redemption is not for one, but for all, for the redemption of the forgotten means simultaneously, the redemption of those who forget - the closing of the hermeneutic circle, the restoration of humanity, or at least, a community, in its unity. The promise of redemption is thus the promise of closure, as the words of Archbishop Tutu in the Chairman's Report suggest:

> we are sisters and brothers in one family - God's family, the human family. Having

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[8] Ibid. 112.
[9] Ibid. 57.
[10] Ricoeur, Paul. *History and Truth*. trans. Charles A. Kelbley. Evanston: North Western University Press, 1965, 31.
[11] Ibid. 23.
[12] *Final Report*. Vol.1. 114.

> looked the beast of the past in the eye, having asked and received forgiveness and having made amends, let us shut the door on the past - not in order to forget it but in order not to allow it to imprison us, Let us move into the glorious future of a new kind of society where people count...because they are persons of infinite worth created in the image of God.[13]

Though, as the above suggests, Archbishop Tutu and others have consistently expressed the view that the objective of the TRC is not to encourage a forgetting of the past, it has nevertheless also insisted that both individuals and the country as whole need to move on. In *Country of My Skull*, Antjie Krog quotes Tutu's words at the conclusion of a harrowing day of victim testimony: "We should all be humbled by what we've heard, but we've got to finish quickly and really turn our backs on this aweful past and say: Life is for the living"[14]. The TRC's Interim Report report placed a similar emphasis on the cathartic or restorative role of witness testimony and on the closure which must follow it.

> We hope that the Commission will contribute to the process of healing a traumatised and wounded people. We open wounds only in order to cleanse them, to deal with the past effectively and so to close the door on that dark and horrendous past forever. Together we can then turn to the present and the future.[15]

So, if a redeemed nation or humanity continues to remember its past, it does so from a place where which the past no longer haunts it, no longer exerts its destructive force, or even makes claims, upon it.

Historians have long ago given up on the pursuit of a universal history, and yet it can be argued that the ethical horizon of historical research and writing retains a similar orientation towards the idea of a common humanity. What distinguishes history from the natural sciences is that it concerns people and communities, and as such, cannot be separated from our own desire, as people, to make sense of our humanity. As Ricoeur writes in this regard, "History is therefore one of the ways in which men "repeat" their belonging to the same humanity."[16] History is thought to be endowed with a redemptive function, insofar as the conversation it opens between past and present generations promises a greater understanding of humanity in its entirety.

What Holocaust historians have designated as collective memory's orientation towards "coherence, closure and possibly a redemptive stance" is therefore clearly evidenced in the TRC initiative. The final report of the TRC makes it clear that it cannot alone achieve this goal. The TRC's final report, in Archbishop Tutu's words, "is not and cannot be the whole story." Yet the "whole story" remains the TRC's regulative ideal and the ideal with which it charges future historians. The contribution of the largest number of people to this process increases the odds of approaching a consensus on the truth, and thus, a settlement in national and public life. "We hope that many South Africans and friends of South Africa will become engaged in the process of helping our nation to come to terms with its past." To come to terms with: to be reconciled to, to reach an understanding. Yet the continued historical pursuit of this broader political and

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[13]Ibid. 22.
[14]Krog, Antjie. *Country of My Skull*. Johannesburg: Random House. 1998, 29-30.
[15]*Interim Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, sec.1.
[16]Ricoeur, 29.

social ideal may overlook another aspect of the TRC initiative – one less accessible to historical treatment but nonetheless a key aspect of the "deeply ethical and theological" dimension which was at the TRC's heart.

III

Beyond its contribution to truth and reconciliation, the Commission's aspiration to place the suffering and loss of individual victims at the forefront of its proceedings is also a part of the legacy which the Commission has bequeathed to those that come after it. In its Final Report, the TRC defines its mission by quoting the words of Antjie Krog:

> The Commission chose, in the words of Antjie Krog, a South African writer and poet, "the road of ...restoring memory and humanity."[17]

But if the TRC saw as its task the construction of a "common memory" as a basis for the restoration of a common humanity, its own insistence, in Krog's words, that "victims... should be the beginning, the focus and the central point of the [Truth and Reconciliation] legislation"[18] opens up the problem of deep memory in ways which are incompatible with the TRC's broader narrative strategy.

The question raised by the incommensurability of deep to common memory is whether a sense of historical responsibility can be thought to exist between present generations and dimensions of past lives and experiences which are inaccessible to historical reconstruction. Does our obligation to victims extend to the dead as well as well as to the living, to the memories of the inarticulate as well as the eloquent? Or is our responsibility as writers and scholars limited to those stories which, accessible to narrative reconstruction or scholarly analysis, are therefore of use in the construction of a reconciliatory or redemptive common memory? Some of the testimony presented at the TRC was fragmented and disjointed, and at moments of particular distress or trauma, bordered on the incoherent. Behind these shattered sentences lay depths of personal suffering which were glimpsed but would never fully find their way to language. In other cases, the factual recounting of events gave way to lamentation and prayer, a flood of metaphorical and lyrical language. So is our felt sense of obligation to individual victims consistent with an historical jettisoning of fragments of memories which by virtue of their obstinacy, obscurity or sheer irrecoverability do not contribute to understanding? The literary critic Geoffrey Hartman, whose work has increasingly been concerned with ethical questions raised by Holocaust history and literature, points to the "injustice" perpetrated against the individual victim when our sense of obligation to the victim is mediated by such a desire for hermeutic or ideological closure:

> Even the strongest of interpretative attempts [to integrate the Holocaust into cultural knowledge] have relied on ideological closure, on a totalizing method familiar from metaphysical speculation. They promise the affirmative aspect of knowledge - of getting to know and dominate something - over the quintessentially moral moment of

[17] *Final Report*, 112-113.
[18] Krog, 5.

being called into question, accused by the place and face of the other.[19]

Yet what would it mean to stand accused by the place and face of the other? And what kind of narrative strategy could meet the excessive and infinite demand which such a relation would place upon us?

Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, I suggest, if unable to solve this dilemma, is nevertheless willing to take the challenge which it poses seriously. The book, quite clearly, is not an historical narrative. In fact, it is not a narrative at all. Rather, its structure conforms to what has come to be characterised in literary scholarship as fragmentary writing. The book consists of 200 or more "pieces" (and there are also fragments within these fragments) which juxtapose an array of literary genres and are sharply delineated from one another by the use of an asterisk. For example, an imagined conversation may be followed by five lines of witness testimony which is then followed by lines of verse. The relation between these fragments is not made immediately apparent and they obey no obvious sequential or logical order. Neither argument nor narrative binds these them into a cohesive whole.

Whereas historical writing begins with fragments (of data, evidence, or testimony) and then attempts to knit these fragments together into a unity, exponents of fragmentary writing have in general been motivated by a concern to resist the subordination of the fragment to such an ordered system or whole. Maurice Blanchot, the contemporary literary figure perhaps most identified with fragmentary writing, suggests in *The Writing of the Disaster* that:

> Fragmentary writing is... risk itself. Interrupted, it goes on. Interrogating itself, it does not co-opt the question but suspends its (without maintaining it) as nonresponse. Thus, if it claims its time comes only when the whole - at least ideally - is realised, this is because that time is never sure.[20]

While pointing to an originary and promised unity, fragmentary writing nevertheless suspends the imposition of any such unity by deeming it premature. "That time," it seems to suggest, has not yet come. This double gesture of fragmentary writing, its seeming invitation to, and suspension of, closure, takes on an ethical dimension when the fragment marks the place of a lost or inaccessible life or memory which seems at one and the same time to demand acknowledgement but would hold any appropriation of its singularity and uniqueness to a common order of understanding to constitute a betrayal.

I would suggest that it precisely Krog's sense of the author as "accused by the place and the face of the other" that accounts for the fragmentary structure of the book. The dedication at the start of the book makes it clear where the author's primary sense of obligation would seem to lie. The dedication reads: "*For every victim who had an Afrikaner surname on her lips.*" The dedication is ambivalent, and opens all kinds of questions regarding what historical responsibility to the victims might consist in. The dedication suggests both Krog's intimate sense of relation to the victim on the basis of gender, while simultaneously pointing to her sense of responsibility as an Afrikaner. But besides raising issues of gender and linguistic or cultural background, the dedication also complicates the question of the range of victims to whom we are responsible. Who, precisely, are these victims with an Afrikaner surname on their lips?

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[19]Hartman, Geoffrey. *The Fateful Question of Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 119.

[20]Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster*. trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press. 1995, 59-60.

Those who named Afrikaners as their assailants in testimony, or, perhaps, those whose last word was an entreaty to their killer, their speech cut short by death? Is our obligation only to the survivors, or also the dead?

In interviews about the writing of the book Krog has commented that after a year of listening to witness after witness tell their stories of unspeakable cruelty and irreparable loss, she "became hyper conscious of the price people paid for a single sentence."[21] For Krog, this sense of obligation to the victim puts into question the right of the writer to write at all. "One has no right to appropriate a story paid for with a lifetime of pain and destruction," Krog argues at one point in the book, "Words come more easily for writers, perhaps. So let the domain belong to those who literally paid blood for every faltering word they utter..."[22] The ethical dilemma that the writer thus faces is the seeming requirement to tell these stories on the one hand, and on the other, the desire not to allow the fluency and mastery of an authorial voice to impose apparent closure on what yet remains to be said, or on what is simply unspeakable. Thus, there is an obligation to precisely what is most intimate and opaque in the victim's experience on the one hand, and the duty to bring order to what is most disorderly, to express the inexpressible, on the other. This dilemma is summed up by Krog when she writes:

> No poetry should come forth from this. May my hand fall off if I write this.
> So I sit around. Naturally and unnaturally without words. Stunned by the knowledge of the price people have paid for their words. If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don't, I die.[23]

Krog's chosen response to this dilemma is to indicate by both the use of the fragment and by the fragmentary structure of the book as a whole, the degree to which the impetus to understanding (in all its senses) and to the construction of common memory risks the betrayal of what is most intimate and inexpressible in the lives and experiences of victims. A sense of this is given on the very first page of the book, in which Krog dramatically highlights the necessity and impossibility of meeting, through legislative and political discourse, our obligation to the victim. As this first chapter records, the process of Truth and Reconciliation begins with the Justice Portfolio Committee of the New Parliament, assigned the task of drafting the legislation which will establish and govern the Commission. As the chapter opens, the committee is hearing public submissions on what this legislation should include:

> The faces are grim in the hall with its dark panelling, old fashioned microphone hanging from the ceiling, hard wooden gallery and green-leather seats...'Bellington Mampe... Looksmart Ngudle...Suliman Salojee...Solomon Modipane...James Lenkoe...'A slow litany of names, read out into the quiet hall. The names of one hundred and twenty people who died in police custody...'Iman Abdullah Haroon...Alpheus Maliba...Ahmed Timol...Steve Bantu Biko...Neil Aggett...Nicodemus Kgoathe...' The chairperson of the Black Sash, Mary Burton, concludes her submission in the same way the Sash's meetings have been concluded for years: name upon name upon name. They fall like chimes into the silence. Journalists stop taking notes, committee members put down their pens - stunned by the magnitude of death that is but a bare beginning.[24]

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[21]In Jaggi, Maya. "Lest We Forget" in *The Guardian.* January 28, 1999.
[22]Krog, 237-238.
[23]Ibid. 49.
[24]Ibid.1.

Commentators on fragmentary writing have remarked how isolated names may often function as minimal markers of absence, as fragments or traces of entire lives. Blanchot writes that,

> names, in a devastated field, ravaged by the absence which has preceded them...seem remainders, each one, of another language, both disappeared and never yet pronounced, a language we cannot even attempt to restore without reintroducing these names back into the world, or exalting them to some higher world of which, in their external, clandestine solitude, they could only be the irregular interruption, the invisible retreat.[25]

"Falling like chimes into the silence," each of these name read out at the Justice Portfolio hearing is at once separated, isolated and also rich in resonance. Surely incomplete, detached from even the minimal grammatical elements necessary for the production of meaning, they nevertheless refer in their simplicity to an entire world of significance and experience. This "litany of names," each the mark of a singular individual, of a unique and irreplaceable life, conveys the dimensions of the task which these legislators must meet. The TRC begins, justice begins, to recall Hartman, with an accusation before the face of the Other. If committee members put down their pens, it is because the obligation imposed by this personalisation and individualisation of their task is inimical to any shorthand, to any legal summation or paraphrase. Yet our obligation to the victim demands that comparisons be made, priorities determined, that legislation be finalised, drafted and passed.[26]

Committee members put down their pens, and "journalists stop taking notes." What holds for the law, holds no less, it seems, for writing. For what form of written response could do justice to this immediate experience of an irretrievable history and of histories cut short, of these minimal verbal remainders and reminders of lives lost but still crying out for justice? If the intent to do justice to this litany of names is what originally motivates the legislators of the TRC, it motivates, no less, the fragmentary writing of *Country of my Skull*. If Krog's use of "the name" points to such a relation between the fragment and the dilemma posed by an obligation to the victims, this relation is manifested most clearly in those chapters of the book that deal most extensively with the victim hearings. Whereas the first two chapters of *Country of My Skull*

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[25]Blanchot, 58.

[26]A statement by Kader Asmal indicates how the TRC legislation and process is thought to "do justice" to the dead, but, I think, rather exposes the inevitable inadequacy of such a response:

> Facing the past will also ensure that we achieve justice for those who did not live to see the new country. It will lay bare, in unambiguous terms, the illegitimacy of apartheid and its legacy... It will help create a political culture in which genuine equality and apartheid's lawless process of private and public looting gives wayto durable and legitimate institutions of property. (Asmal et al, *Reconciliation Through Truth*. Cape Town: David Philip. 1996, 214)

Whether the production of legal clarity, government by the law and the restoration of property can, in any sense, be thought to truly "achieve justice" for Apartheid's victims is surely open to doubt. The theologian Johann Baptist Metz, who draws on the work of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno writes that:

> The dead, after all, also belong equally to the universal community of all men in solidarity with each other,... The happiness of the descendents cannot compensate for the sufferings of the ancestors and social progress cannot make up for the injustice done to the dead. (*Faith in History and Society*. New York: Seabury Press.1980, 75)

deal largely with the history and logistics of the Commission's establishment, it is in the third chapter that we first encounter the victims, and it is here that narrative and argument give way to testimony, poetry and, above all, the fragment. In the first five pages of the chapter, Krog provides transcriptions of seventeen excerpts of witness testimony. These fragments of testimony, some amounting to no more than two or three lines, are presented with no indication of context or authorship, and are neither commented on nor imbedded in an encompassing narrative. Each stands alone, complete in and of itself. The first of these fragments, indistinguishable from those that follow it except by the absence of quotation marks, is not the voice of a witness, but of Krog:

> Beloved do not die. Do not dare die! I, the survivor, I wrap you in words so that the future inherits you. I snatch you from the death of forgetfulness. I tell your story, complete your ending - you who once whispered beside me in the dark.[27]

Ten fragments later, we hear the voice of an unnamed witness:

> The sun was bright...but it went dark when I saw him lying there. It's an everlasting pain. It will stop never in my heart. It always comes back. It eats me apart. Sonnyboy, rest well, my child. I've translated you from the dead.[28]

The poet, with the duty to reanimate the dead - cloaks herself in the suffering of the victim. The victim, whose suffering and singular experience is inalienable, to give voice to such experiences, takes upon herself the mantle of the poet. Foremost in both of the fragments is the need, the obligation to speak, and not merely for one's own benefit, but for the sake of another. The memory of the dead, the vindication of the dead, require this. Yet if Krog assumes this responsibility, as her occupying of the place of the victim in the first of these fragments suggests, the fragmentary form militates against this very possibility. For in taking on this role, Krog renounces her position of authority as author or narrator, as the voice in which all the other voices are taken up and woven into an integrated whole. Her identification with the victim entails a fragmentation of her unity as speaking subject, and of the authority which such unity implies. Her choice is a stark one: either speak as a victim, and hence stand as only one fragment among all the others, with no more claim to final authority than any other; or speak for the victim, and hence renounce any claim to speak that victim's most intimate life and truth. If such a dilemma would seem to indicate that the victim's right to speak for herself takes precedence, this is on the presumption that such speech is possible. This however, is not always the case:

> This inside me... fights my tongue. It is... unshareable. It destroys... words.[29]

The victim cannot always speak her most intimate life and truth. And yet this does not undo the obligation that this life and truth be told. Later in the book Krog quotes one of the translators of the victim testimony:

> you know, you are just looking at the victim as he is speaking and unconsciously you

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[27]Krog, 27.
[28]Ibid.
[29]Witness testimony in Krog, 27. Ellipsis in original.

> end up throwing up your hands as he throws his, you end up nodding your head when he nods...But it becomes very difficult to interpret when they are crying, then they speak in instalments. He says something, then he keeps quiet and he starts again... you have to bring the pieces together."[30]

The attempt to "bring the pieces together" is demanded by the very structure of fragmentary writing. The fragment's splintering of discourse into isolated parts is never total, never entirely closed to the system. In fact, Blanchot suggests, this threat to the fragment's unity and irreducibility is what accounts for its force and its endurance: "Fragments persist on account of their incompletion."[31] We find ourselves no less obligated to fulfil their demand for completion, than we are paralysed by the depths of irrecoverable meaning to which, in their absolute individuality and heterogeneity, they point:

> And he said to me, "I will tell you tomorrow." He said, "I will tell you when I arrive in the hospital." I said to him," Please, tell me, you said to me you know the perpetrators." He only opened his mouth *like a bird* and closed his mouth again..."[32](emphasis mine)

This particular fragment of testimony captures the essence of what is at stake in fragmentary writing. On the one hand, the fragment's opening to a future, to a time in which "the whole will be realised," lingering questions resolved. On the other hand, the tendency to individuation, the attempt to ensure, if only by the insertion of a single metaphoric phrase - which like all metaphor eludes paraphrase - into this factual recollection of past events, the unique character of this tragic event, its difference and distinctness from other similar events, the untranslatibility, unparaphrasability of this moment, this life, this experience into a universal discourse. The fragment following the series of fragments in Chapter 3 is once again in the author's words:

> In the beginning it was seeing. Seeing for ages, filling the head with ash. No air. No tendril. Now to seeing, speaking is added and the eye plunges into the mouth. Present at the birth of this country's language itself.
>
> And it wipes us out. Like a fire. Or a flood. Tears are not what we call it. Water covers our cheeks and we cannot type. Or think. [33]

These fragments speak of the impossibility and inadequacy of language. Of the language of the witness and the writer alike. So how to reconcile these two experiences - the obligation to do justice to what is most individual and singular in the experiences and ordeals of the victim, and language and thought's inadequacy to precisely these most intimate and individual dimensions? For it this most intimate dimension of the victim's experience which is at stake: "One hotel drifts into another," Krog writes, after weeks of listening to testimony. "One breakfast buffet provides the same sad fruit as another. One sorrow filled room flows into another. One rental car smells like another... but the language, the detail, the individual tone...it stays."[34]

So what is history to do with the "bits" that do not contribute to a common memory - the opaque

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[30]Krog, 220.
[31]Blanchot, 58.
[32]Testimony of Anna Silinda on the death of her son, in Krog, 139.

[33]Korg, 29.
[34]Ibid, 37. Ellipsis in original.

memories, the fragments of detail whose utility is not clear? What is history to make of the cries, the outbursts, and the unparaphraseable poetic detours of witnesses, as well as our sense of past lives and experiences, which are lost to historical knowledge? Walter Benjamin, in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" writes that,

> a chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past - which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has the past become citable in all its moments.[35]

Benjamin, too, takes a "redemptive stance," but his idea of redemption, informed by a radical messianism, is beyond the capabilities of any historical reconstruction. The most obscure and inaccessible fragments of experience deserve their place in a redeemed humanity but this demand, rather than vindicating history's drive to unity, highlights its inadequacy to a vision of redemption which includes the most impenetrable of life's experiences. Deep memory, rather than representing a mere technical obstacle to historical reconstruction, marks the ethical measure and limit of any historical claim to reconciliation, unity or justice. For Benjamin, it is these most hidden of memories, memories not even remembered, which are the true objects of a messianic redemption:

> One could speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten them. If the nature of such a life or moment required that it not be forgotten, that predicate would not contain a falsehood but merely a claim that is not being fulfilled by men, and perhaps also a reference to a realm in which it is fulfilled: God's remembrance.[36]

In one of the last fragments of *Country of My Skull,* in which Krog recalls a trip with the Truth Commissioners to Robben Island, she reminds us for a final time of what is a stake in the Truth Commission and in any writing of it.

> In a wild arch of air I rock with the Commissioners in a boat back to the mainland. I am filled with an indescribable tenderness towards this commission. With all its mistakes... it has been so brave, so naively brave in the winds of deceit, rancour and hate. Against a flood crashing with the weight of a brutalizing past on to a new usurping politics, the Commission has kept alive the idea of a common humanity.[37]

If the Commission has kept alive the idea of a common humanity, it has done so no less at the cost, than in the interests, of any assumed unity, understanding or reconciliation. For in the light of the excessive and interruptive demand contained in the idea of a victim-centred approach, and in terms of the undecidability inherent to the structure of the fragment - we risk a betrayal, an injustice, if we read in Krog's words a conclusion or a closure. For if the utilisation of fragmentary writing amounts to a similar refusal to disavow this idea of a time of common humanity, it also opens the possibility that without an ever renewed commitment to see justice done to the least individual, and to the fragments of their lost and forgotten experience, this time

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[35]Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations*. ed.Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books. 1968, 254.
[36]Ibid. 48.
[37]Krog, 278

may never come.

"The fragment," write the philosophers Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, "conjoins the functions of the monument and evocation."[38] In the fragmentary writing of *Country of My Skull*, Krog reminds us of our obligation to remember, and at the same time reminds us that what is remembered may be no more than an evocation, of lives and experiences beyond recall, but not beyond concern. The book stands as a testament, a memorial to that dimension of the TRC initiative which may forever elude the efforts of historians but which should not, therefore, be sacrificed in the interests of a cohesive or unitary account of the past . For to bear witness to deep memory is to bear witness to a cry for justice that exceeds what may be delivered by any legal judgement or political settlement. It is to remember a cry for redemption that goes beyond the unity of either narrative or historical analysis. It requires, in the words of Blanchot, that "we keep watch over absent meaning."[39]

[38] Lacoue-Labarthe, Phillipe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*. New York: SUNY Press, 1988, 43.