

Captive Audience: Confession, Fiction, and the South African State

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Even during the period of detention I had been allowed to write. It was something I could not ignore. A voice said, 'Write,' and I wrote.

Breyten Breytenbach, *True Confessions* (156)

I am a captive audience, literally.

Albie Sachs, *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (132)

Confession as an imperative has a central, if not always comforting, role in modern South African culture. Apartheid laws and regulations demanded that citizens identify themselves (by race, by issued pass, by ideology, etc.) before its figures of authority, and those who did not answer the call to satisfaction—satisfaction determined, it is very important to bear in mind, not by the structure of confessional discourse but entirely by the agency of the confessor—were subjected to the more rigorous techniques of 'inquiry' practiced in the privacy of police stations and prisons. By contrast, post-apartheid South Africa has developed an entirely different mode of confession (though still imperative) in the mandate of its ambitious and controversial Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The appropriation of religious doctrinal practice and language for purposes of social justice affirms both Foucault's general observations about spiritual resuscitation through corporeal punishment in his foundational work, *Discipline and Punish*, as well as the suggestion of Michael Lapsley, a priest expelled from South Africa in 1986 and the wounded survivor of a letter bomb four years later: "part of our debate and national discourse has always been, and still is, about theology" (Boraine *et al.* 28).

Aquinas, in considering the beauty of the spiritual life, posits that the penitent is ashamed not “of the act of confessing but of the sin which confession reveals” (268). The process is itself beyond criticism. “Through the confession,” notes Foucault of legal confession, “the accused himself took part in the ritual of producing penal truth” (38).¹ Yet, at least in part because, as Dennis A. Foster puts it, “the very discourse of representation as expression is symptomatic of the desire for a language that will make the writer the master of his meanings” (2). The confessional fiction of a writer like Breyten Breytenbach operates subversively as fictional confession: the exact narrative shape which the oppressor dictates and expects to be parroted is turned inside-out. “Penal truth” is thus distinguished from “truth.” In the discussion which follows I shall examine how writers like Breytenbach and Albie Sachs subvert the process of penal confession by themselves redefining a confessional form (anti-confession?); but, further, for a decent appreciation of such subversions, the said discussion needs to be bracketed by considerations of the respective ideologies and methods which produced the apartheid-era penal confession and the present hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

I

Describe your relationships to me. Tell me about what is veiled. Admit even to that which you don't know.

Breytenbach, *True Confessions* (59)

In the fashion in which Foucault suggests that “discipline organizes an analytical space” (143), I would suggest that the penal confession, by which I mean the confession yielded by police interrogation within the apartheid penal system (as distinct from the anti- and post-apartheid confessional strategies discussed later), limits the space, confines the analysand. The system of penal confession within South Africa endows its captive audience (and captive performer) with no choice but “a certain asceticism: they must, at certain moments at least, confront tempta-

tion and perhaps the severity of God alone" (Foucault 143). God is, of course, on the side of the panoptic guardians of the prisoner.

This necessary solitude, as Foucault outlines it, is integral to such a rough practice: the penitent must be made to understand that he/she is alone against forces great in number and irrepressible in their need for the "truth" to be told to them. Any relationships outside of the confessor-penitent (interrogator-prisoner) duologue, which pretends to be a monologue, would only interfere with the process and must therefore (the good Mr Investigator may reason) be carefully prevented. In a 1976 United Nations investigation of conditions at the infamous Robben Island, torture, abuse, black slavery, malnutrition, and lack of proper medical attention were found; but, it was noted how such methods operate within an *incomunicado space*. Communication between prisoners themselves, between prisoners and legal counsel, and with the outside world is described by the U.N. report as "virtually non-existent": "the legal restrictions and their actual application created a situation wherein detailed discussion of specific violations of human rights was fruitless" (7). Within the apartheid penal method and system, confession is the dominant discourse, because it is the *only* discourse, at least officially. There are, to be sure, limited possibilities for subversion within the system. Consider, for example, the autobiographical writings of Albie Sachs. Once an outspoken dissident who endured imprisonment, exile, and an assassination attempt, Sachs now serves as a judge on the South African Constitutional Court. This reversal of fortune is entirely emblematic of the significant change in value the confession has undergone in the nation's past decade. Sachs's *Jail Diary*, far from an admission of criminal guilt or renunciation of the author's past acts, is a confession of the humanity of and within the unjust system of discipline and punishment. Sachs relates incidents of uneven relationships within prisons, like the connection with his "whistler" (20-6) and the Bible talks with the station commander: "it occurs to me that the station commander may be almost as lonely for company as I am" (134). Apartheid's specious divisions generate only an equality of lone-

liness, embodied in the polarized positions of commander and prisoner and their constrained means of interaction: the criminal confession.

In his editorial guise, offering “A Note on the Relationship between Detainee and Interrogator,” Breytenbach criticizes both the “preordained roles” of prisoner and interrogator—“this macabre dance, this fatal game”—and the horrible “normality” of the person who can assume the latter role (*True Confessions* 341–42). This is part of a terrific broadside to the notion of modern enlightenment. Where the confessor may assume airs of tolerance and even piety (“they will at most consider theirs to be ‘a necessary if dirty job’”) in an abusive system in which “more advanced technologies have merely brought a greater sophistication to the methods employed” (*True Confessions* 342). Such observations frequently resound in Foucault:

In a disciplinary régime [...] individualization is “descending”: as power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized; it is exercised by surveillance rather than ceremonies, by observation rather than commemorative accounts, by comparative measures that have the “norm” as reference rather than genealogies giving ancestors as points of reference; by “gaps” rather than deeds. (193)

The obvious “gap” for the apartheid regime is its centralized racism, but this is a wider gap than a study of European prison formations might anticipate. Differentiations from this model will be noted shortly. The “gap” becomes internalized, so that the uncriminal “norm” of apartheid signifies accuracy—true, redemptive confession—and anything else is just an absence. Michael K, the outsider protagonist of Coetzee’s novel, *Life & Times of Michael K*, is haunted by this gap in his self-understanding:

Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understand-

ing balked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (110)²

The investigator's persona, or the confessor's presence, is itself internalized. The penitent prisoner is trapped in a cyclical confessional mode, with nothing to do but,

Listen how being locked up grinds.

Talk to self.

(Breytenbach, *Judas Eye* 20)

Foucault continues, in even more turgid language, to speculate on the optimum scheme for punitive panopticism:

The ideal point of penalty today would be an indefinite discipline: an interrogation without end, an investigation that would be extended without limit to a meticulous and ever more analytical observation, a judgement that would at the same time be the constitution of a file that was never closed, the calculated leniency of a penalty that would be interlaced with the ruthless curiosity of an examination, a procedure that would be at the same time the permanent measure of a gap in relation to an inaccessible norm and the asymptotic movement that strives to meet in infinity. (227)

The “analytical space” of apartheid offers such an ideal—selective totalitarianism—in which its discontents are scrutinized not only as if under a microscope but even more intimately: Breytenbach never fails

to characterize the “meticulous and ever more analytical observation” as coprophagic. “I am your control. I am your handler. I squint up your arse,” he writes, as he assumes the voice of the Investigator, “I am your proctoscope” (*True Confessions* 57–9). Breytenbach’s interrogation is also purported to be, as Foucault proposes, “without end”: “I am your present time, forty-two hours per day, from now on until all eternity” (*True Confessions* 57).

As for the matter of a “calculated leniency” within the system, one need look no further than Section 22 of the Prisons Act, which generously gave the Commissioner of Prisons the power to discriminate arbitrarily among individual prisoners;³ or, one may compare the racialized demographics of state executions (see, for example, Welsh 411): games of “South African roulette!” as Breytenbach refers to them (*Mouiroir* 113).

It is worth noting, however, that Foucault’s thesis on the historical transference from punishment of the body to rehabilitation of the soul only applies to states in which there is at least a theoretical *pretense* of the equality of souls (not equality of persons, or classes of persons, for which general and systematic discriminations Foucault allows [276]). Breytenbach echoes Orwell’s Newspeak when he writes of the “Unwhites” (*Mouiroir* 52), who are legally and morally “unpersons,” by either nature (the political misfortune of not being born white) or act (the mistake of dissent). These are not to be redeemed: “at the heart of the South African prison system is the denial of the humanity of the ‘other,’ and in that it is only a reflection of the larger South African cosmos” (*True Confessions* 273).

This microcosm can be entirely literal, as Breytenbach’s experience in solitary confinement in Pretoria’s maximum-security prison (1975–77) taught him. In his prison writings Breytenbach often chooses to dramatize the strictly regulated form of penal confessional discourse with a game of chess, a system of spatial control, the competitive goal of which is to immobilize, or trap, the opposing king. This might not seem a fair challenge, given the stakes and the awful moment when the prisoner recognizes and must accept the assigned role of pawn

("You are the pawn" [*True Confessions* 56]), but the game is a gambit for mental survival. It is "I facing I, me against Mr Investigator" (154), played as much against the physical presence of the authoritarian as alone: "I moved the pieces, move and counter-move, but without an opponent it was a sterile and schizophrenic game which I was fated to lose and to win" (*Mouvoir* 19). In chess, as in the act of reading, the participant encounters interpretive strategies in variation rather than in stability and certitude, always asking oneself what effects each word/move has upon every other word/move and upon the narrative whole. Yet, this analogy has as many limits as does chess. Losing and winning are the only outcomes available—stalemate is, of course, possible, but improbable—and if the Investigator should lose (not have his questions answered), the pieces may be immediately afterwards reset for a new plan of attack. Sachs writes in his *Jail Diary* of his fearful gambit with a wishbone, in which the outcome is not only more crudely binary in its possibilities than in chess, but a more physically involved schizophrenic exercise: "with each hand I grasp the wishbone, and pull. My left hand wins: it does not matter if my right hand knows" (194).

The game must be played, and the voice tells Breytenbach, "Write" (*True Confessions* 156). This schema of mandatory confession may well represent Foucault's "ideal point of penalty," but it is important to note that even in so exact a process as chess it is not altogether impossible to cheat on occasion. It is, after all, the inmate who swallows his guardian's pieces who leads the "hard struggle to survive" (*True Confessions* 154ff). Herein lies the margin for resistance.

II

If it is true that confession is "an attempt to objectify the self" (Foster 10), one needs to question whose objectivity is to be the measure for success (atonement). The prisoner, who in the penal confession is coerced into accepting the attempt as his or her own even though it is not, needs to resist objectification in order to retain self-integrity and to prevent his or her will and conscience from being altogether assim-

lated by the apartheid state ego. “They threw the book at me,” jokes the narrator of Breytenbach’s *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (242). I would argue that the author is throwing the book back at them, that Breytenbach’s “true confession” is “a complex and vital act of self-defence” (Jolly 99). The fictionalized confession is a subversion of the standardized usage of confession by the police state interrogators, and, as such, it represents a special form of what Edward Said (among others) calls a literature of resistance (see Said 30, 209–20). Breytenbach frequently expresses worry about the possibilities of complicity: “writing becomes for me a means, a way of survival [...] But at the same time I soon realize that it becomes the exteriorization of my imprisonment” (*True Confessions* 155).

While it is a truism, it probably bears repeating that the narrator of *True Confessions* is *not* Breyten Breytenbach, but at best “the mask known as Breyten Breytenbach,” as the writer himself elsewhere puts it (*Deathwatch* 123): “That is as close as I come to the truth. Here I am. Here the truth is also” (*True Confessions* 13). The need for this repetition here is three fold: there are several critics who ignore it (e.g., Roberts, Doherty; though David Schalkwyk is a good exception); the name “Breytenbach” suggests a general narrative voice more often than an author, depending on specific context; and finally, the disingenuous name-frame to the self-portrait is a central part of the ironic reversal of the confessional form.

In English (I do not know Afrikaans), “confess,” “fable,” and even “fib” have the same etymological roots (*fat r*, “admit,” in *confit r*, “acknowledge,” is a relative of *fbula*). The ‘fictionalization’ (to use a clumsy word) of the confession suggests not that the opposite of truth is being offered, a possibility which would only serve to confirm the objective nature of the confessor’s reifying ‘truth’; instead, it offers alternative truths. Perhaps the most radical example of this struggle for alterity in meaning in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* occurs in a distinctly metafictional moment. Breytenbach’s narrator submits a madcap confession in written “draft,” ostensibly limited to 500 words, found “tucked away among the drafts of monthly grocery

orders" (306): it turns out to be a pun-ridden fable about a bandit who has to write a 500-word draft ("*wrub it up in no smore than 500 whatta-chatta*" [308]). The metafictional investigator is not amused at his own incomprehension:

'What matter of nonsense is this?' (snarled Snovel). 'Knose alone knows I expiacted all kinds of batty scense but not those! Your wordshaveworms, my friend! You want to go to anozzle world?['] (307)

The nose and smell jokes suggest a foul smell, something rotten in the state of South Africa, maybe as well as the ever-extending nose of Pinocchio. (I suspect Breytenbach is playing with proverbs: "A wicked doer giveth heed to false lips; and a liar giveth ear to a naughty tongue" [Prov. 17:4].) In any case, Breytenbach is throwing up a very Joycean resistance to the regulated practices of interpretation. He kicks away the analyst *à la Finnegans Wake*: "I can psoakoonaloose myself any time I want (the fog follow you all!) without your interferences" (Joyce 522).

Inversion—the effect of Breytenbach's beloved mirrors on an object's representation—is everywhere in his *True Confessions*. He offers a parenthetical (capitalized) RECAPITULATION instead of a capitulation (56), wherein he assumes, or co-opts, the voice of his would-be confessor; but, I think that the revised expression, "it's the early worm that catches the bird" (*True Confessions* 329), is a most exact example of the process at its most linguistic level. Although Sheila Roberts grimaces at the use of birds and bird symbols in discourses of freedom—indeed, she wonders whether "prison literature might be more vulnerable to cliché than other kinds [of writing]" (65)—here Breytenbach writes *against* the cliché (as does Albie Sachs when he scratches into his cell's wall "JAIL IS FOR THE BIRDS" [*Jail Diary* 184]). Here the bird, because it is free, ironically represents not the prisoner, but the jailer. Sachs writes a doggerel verse with an explicitly moral reversal as a form of protest, in which it is the righteous ("*The Christians*") who lock the

cell door: “*Ding dong dell, ding dong dell, / All bad people go to church, all good people stay in hell*” (*Jail Diary* 243).

J. M. Coetzee, it seems to me, mistakes the nature of *True Confessions* when he writes:

Because it is an interim report, a partial biography of a phase of Breytenbach’s life, *True Confessions* does not have to solve the problem that troubles the novelist: how to justify a concern with morally dubious people involved in a contemptible activity; how to find an appropriately minor place for the petty secrets of the security system; how to treat something that, in truth, because it is offered like the Gorgon’s head to terrorize the populace and paralyze resistance, ought to be ignored. (“Into the Dark Chamber” 366)

The (mis-)assumption here involves the nature of “confession” (but I will return to the matter of “the Gorgon’s head” shortly). Although Coetzee does not make the mistake, as a startling number of critics do, of altogether missing the ironies of Breytenbach’s title, he considers the confession a “biography,” and thus a self-contained activity, presumably performed at some leisure. (Elsewhere Coetzee claims “we can demarcate a mode of autobiographical writing that we can call the *confession*, as distinct from the *memoir* and the *apology*, on the basis of an underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self” [“Confession and Double Thoughts” 252]. He is perhaps too haunted by the word’s ecclesiastical connotations to see either its grave usage by social institutions or even Breytenbach’s habitual, playful distortions of genre.) I would agree instead with the understatement to the contrary, that *True Confessions* “is, ultimately, not a conventional biography; if anything, it is a parody of that convention” (Jolly 92). Breytenbach thus refers to the form of his writing as much as to subject when he claims that he “subvert[s] the orthodoxies, the going conventions, the accepted norms, as they exist here at the moment” (Dimitru 93). The “albino terrorist” does not accept the need to categorize himself or his confessions: “don’t expect me to

know what you are to do with this information, or with these writings” (*Deathwatch* 130). Like Albie Sachs, Breytenbach merely whistles in the dark: “I have covered many pages with reflections and speculations pertaining to freedom, as if covering my tracks” (*Deathwatch* 130).

Coetzee even more strangely neglects to consider the full dynamic of confession by focussing on “the” problem of the writer: to whom does he/she confess? The theological paradigm, of course, posits an auditor who is not only omnipresent (can be confessed to anywhere), but omniscient and, best of all, all-forgiving. Within the punitive configuration, the prison interrogator, the “Mr Investigator” (165) of *True Confessions*, seeks to adopt the deific position. Breytenbach narratologically confounds such an attempt in his textualized fiction/confession by a variety of methods. The distinction between penitent and confessor is continually blurred, as Breytenbach is “the scribe not only for [his] fellow inmates but also for the *boere*” (168). The “I” of the narrator is inextricably linked with his opposite, “Mister I” (87). Furthermore, Breytenbach associates, by repeated use of the second person address, “you,” the implied reader, with the Investigator (Jolly 94–98). Sheila Roberts terms this address “Baudelarian” (71)—presumably invoking the sneering final lines of “Au Leteur”⁴—but goes on to say that we as readers “understand and forgive even while some times we smile sardonically and shake our heads: we want to know more. We love him” (72). Such a response to Breytenbach’s positional game is rather jejune. Roberts embraces the Investigator’s role *and* “his” ideological direction, directly and affirmatively answering the call for complicity:

Why are you so withdrawn, so crumpled? *Talk* to me. But don’t leave me! I am the controller. Don’t you know me? Help me! Don’t slide away like that from under my fingers. Resist! Be rich! Be! Don’t leave me alone! I am the Afrikaner. Why dost thou not love me? (*True Confessions* 59)

It seems to me that the reader who so readily answers this call not only misses the irony but effectively becomes merely another selfless member

of the confessor “Eyego” (*Mouvoir* 39), the state ego of apartheid South Africa (“the Afrikaner”). I find it difficult to agree, however, with readings of the Investigator as specifically and exclusively a racial other, or as collective “black forces” as one critic unfortunately phrases it (Doherty 236). Within this system of ironically unrequited love, “the controller” is, as Sachs muses of the prison commander, as lonely and isolated as the controlled, whose resistance is at least an articulation of feeling. “Black” and “white” become untenable distinctions in Breytenbach’s scheme of inversions because they are co-dependent for their meanings.

Whereas the confession required of the penitent prisoner operates, as noted in Foucault, within a principle of “descending” individualization (the singled-out individual confesses to a “crime” against the state to the state, the “crime” having been predetermined by the state), the “confessions” produced by writers like Breyten Breytenbach, Herman Charles Bonson, Caesarina Kona Makhoere, and others are addressed to a public readership. Publishing a confession within the punitive context is like a Promethean act of stealing fire for others, for the narrative of crimes is not only to be structured by the state institutions, but interpreted exclusively by them (the police badge as a seal of confessional). The breach of the seal by these writers—producing confession as accessible literature—is itself a radical gesture, as it closes the isolating “gaps” necessary to keep the prisoner(s) subservient, ready to confess, and accepting of punishment. The individualism of the works, against the current of discipline, is “ascending.” In his sensitive, determined, and often harrowing *Jail Diary*, Albie Sachs imagines a kind of chorus of defiance sung from within confinement:

This is my voice; I am singing. It’s true that things are harder than I thought they would be. I didn’t imagine that isolation could be so complete and so punishing. Yet if there is anyone out there also a prisoner, listen this is me singing, I’ve come to join you, and I’m going to be here a long, long time, because I’m not going to break down, whatever happens. (17)

There is a hope for fraternity here; a collectivism of prisoners confessing the wrongs of the state rather than the wrongs which the state ascribes to each of them.

Coetzee's notion of turning from the "Gorgon's head" is a telling case of mythology decontextualized. (He has better footing on classical ground when he compares Breytenbach to the Cretan liar [*Giving Offense* 222].) The structure of the disciplinary system of apartheid was, like it or not, a human organization, whose participants have, in most cases, only forfeited their individual selves as much as the prisoners themselves have been forced to. Medusa herself, according to Ovid, is a victim made monstrous for the crime against her (Ovid 106). Raped by one god and blamed for the act by another, Medusa's own body (in particular her helpless eyes) is turned against her. Theseus overcomes the deadly gaze of this Gorgon in the same way in which Breytenbach overcomes that of the interrogator—by confronting the reflected, re-framed visage. "A Russian proverb apparently states—remarking upon injustice is like having an eye gouged out, looking away is losing both eyes" (Breytenbach, "Appendix" 165): denial, for Breytenbach, Sachs, and any other prisoners who would sing, is not an option.

III

From a moral point of view, it seems most dubious to refrain from dealing with an actual and manifest evil because of anxiety that its elimination might lead to the appearance of another evil. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof—the best time for fighting for freedom is always now, and the best starting point is always here.

Sachs, *Protecting* (186)

Breytenbach exactly phrases the anxiety of the penitent before any form of confession: "will the proximity of the One (the original Other) be measured exactly by the quality of the supplicant voice calling forth?" ("Appendix" 163). The context for his question is of present affairs in

South Africa: is there a confessor great enough to hear its sum confession? Can South Africa hear and forgive its own?

The post-apartheid advent of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (hereafter referred to as simply the TRC)⁵ signifies an extraordinary paradigm shift for the confession, as both its methods and goals have always alternative and sometimes exactly opposite directions to the apartheid process of confession outlined above. In the new mode of individualism "ascending," the confessions have proved very different: they are of crimes to humanity, to the citizenry of the country (without exception), rather than to the state; they are made in public and available for public reference via global media, including the Internet; and, at least in principle, they are to encourage tolerance and forgiveness within South Africa as a whole. They can be as excruciating to hear as to make. Most notably distinct from the apartheid penal system, in terms of confessional structure, is the purpose of amnesty. Unlike the detained penitent whose confession serves to justify the system of punishment, those who confess crimes to the TRC do so to escape prosecution, and only those who have performed an "act with or associated with a political objective," as the TRC may discern it, are eligible. Subcommittees on amnesty, reparation and rehabilitation, and human rights violations have extensive legal powers within South Africa (i.e., to subpoena; search and seizure); yet a great deal of their effect is to be "symbolic" (i.e., "reparation" does not signify "compensation"). To this end, the TRC expends considerable energy in its attention to press releases and media coverage, exemplified by the publication of a coffee-table book of photographs, Julian Edelstein's *Truth & Lies*, and the commission's regular maintenance of an official website (www.doj.gov.za/trc/).

This paradigm shift does not, as it may perhaps first appear to, represent just another turn in the perpetual Hegelian dialectic machine. (One likewise hopes it will not turn out to be a turn in a Viconian cycle, either.) All too familiar positions of master and slave by any other names are required, and in considering the work the TRC has cut out for itself, Sachs recognizes the care required to avoid mere resummptions

and/or reversals thereof: “there is a vast amount of human reconstruction and reconciliation to be done that goes well beyond the old ‘us and them’, the freedom fighters and the *boere*” (Boraine *et al.* 129). Sachs has in various writings challenged such separations, such as when he denies in “Preparing ourselves for freedom” that he has not lost his senses⁶ in stating that “white is beautiful” (26); or more pointedly, when he posits freedom as an unknown: “we give the last word to freedom, yet we do not know what it is [...] We know what oppression is” (*Protecting* 184). In *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Breytenbach puts the challenge this way: “freedom is accepting unfreedom, denying that there are opposites, reading one in the other, and going beyond” (87). Both writers are calling for a new narrative form, to break the cycle of penal confession and of individual crime and guilt.

John de Gruchy notes the theological basis of the (then proposed) TRC’s terminology (Boraine *et al.* 142), lending credibility to Lapsley’s notion of a theological national discourse. To just what extent the TRC initiative is a theocratic exercise remains to be seen in its result(s), though debate surrounding it has been just as theologically charged and confuted as it is politically (see Mkhathshwa 57–69; Storey 70–8; and Breytenbach, “Reconciliation” 1–25). Disapproval of the TRC’s agenda within South Africa is, even this far into its proceedings and decisions, not at all uncommon, extending from the former president P. W. Botha’s out-of-hand rejection of the Commission as “a circus” to public protest by angry citizens calling for “No amnesty for liars” (Ignatieff 91–3). A probably unsurprising critical reaction centres on problems of responsibility and accountability:

The two of you, violator and victim (collaborator! violin!), are linked forever perhaps, by the obscenity of what has been revealed to you, by the sad knowledge of what people are capable of. We are all guilty. (Breytenbach, *True Confessions* 343)

The problem of so-called “collective guilt” has been, and somewhat surprisingly still is, contended with extensively in the past few decades, par-

ticularly by Holocaust historians and scholars. In an admirable effort to escape the violator-victim binary stasis, the TRC has strived to avoid the methods and subsequent errors of the Nuremberg trials. Alex Boraine, vice-chair of the TRC, stresses how “in many instances [at Nuremberg] due process was ignored and the human rights of the violators were in turn violated” (Boraine xiv). Faced with “a situation wherein detailed discussion of specific violations of human rights was fruitless,” which the U.N. report on prison conditions diagnosed, it is afterwards problematic, to say the least, to chart gradations of atrocity or blame. The approach of the moral bean-counter, tallying scars and weighing corpses, is not even close to adequate.

There is ground for criticism, too, I think, in the inherent (and not simply, abstractly ideological) dangers of a state project that determines “truth.” Sachs admits that he is discomfited by “echoes [of] the ‘Ministry of Truth’” (Boraine *et al.* 129):

Although I strongly support a commission of truth, for all the reasons I have given, the danger is that there should never be a substitute for truth in people’s lives, for real dignity and the real overcoming of apartheid (Boraine *et al.* 24)

Even now, seven years into its mandate, the TRC needs to recognize its limits as an institution. In South Africa the writer has new freedoms and responsibilities with which to form new narratives and perhaps contribute to “the real overcoming of apartheid.” Both writers discussed in this essay have contributed to the public debate about the shape of these freedoms and responsibilities. In his famous polemical essay “Preparing ourselves for freedom,” Albie Sachs proposes an end (or at least a temporary discontinuance) to the propagation of culture as “a weapon of struggle” (19):

Culture is not something separate from the general struggle, an artifact that is brought in from time to time to mobilise the people or else to prove to the world that after all we are ci-

vilised. Culture is us, it is who we are, how we see ourselves and the vision we have of the world. (22)

Breytenbach, meanwhile, has claimed that his position in the post-apartheid South Africa is one of “loyalty,” but in the form of “a vigilant opposition” (“Dear Mr President” 20). He has furthermore entered international controversies, extending his purview as writer to the Israel-Palestinian conflict by condemning Ariel Sharon’s initiatives in a widely published open letter of 15 April 2002. The South African writer, it seems, now feels compelled to profess values rather than confess crimes.

It may be that the time for confession’s imperative in South Africa is nearly over, but the political relocation of fiction within efforts of autobiography is sure to become a more and more complex affair, as the TRC has been compelled to reject a number of amnesty appeals by applicants who have been found to be “not telling the truth.”⁷ Whether the self-serving opportunism or desperation displayed in a false testimony to the TRC and new dispensers of justice in South Africa can be argued to constitute either a “culture” or even a form of “vigilant opposition” emerges as an irrepressible and unsettling question. What Foster calls “the desire for a language that will make the writer the master of his meanings” is more and more a collective desire, and the maker and audience of this new confession of desire is merged, at least legislatively. Prefacing his *Protecting human rights in a new South Africa*, Sachs makes a remarkable comparison between a national constitution and an autobiography, hoping that it is his “privileged generation that will do the writing” (vii). The readers await.

Notes

- 1 The gender bias within the language of Foucault, Foster, and some other writers cited here when describing the prisoner, the penitent at confession, and the writer is too consistent to alter or comment upon in each instance; but I feel I must draw attention to it from the outset, if only in a short note.

- 2 The “hole” or “gap” within the apartheid system of justice is also represented in Coetzee’s novel by the medical officer’s assessment of the ironically named Felicity: she “has never conceived of history as anything but a childhood catechism. (‘When was South Africa discovered?’ ‘1652.’ ‘Where is the biggest man-made hole in the world?’ ‘Kimberley.’)” (*Life & Times* 158). Note both that “history” is as religious a routine as orthodox confession and the juxtaposition of the colonial (necessarily selective) historical time-line with the “biggest man-made hole.”
- 3 From Section 22 of the (apartheid era) Prisons Act:
[The Commissioner] may in his discretion:
 - (a) grant such privileges and indulgences as he may think fit to any prisoner;
 - (b) notwithstanding anything to the contrary contained in any law, withdraw any privilege or indulgence granted in terms of paragraph (a) to any prisoner without furnishing any reasons and without hearing such prisoner or any other person.
- 4 Roberts, I think, misses the great chance to contrast the boredom Baudelaire discerns in his reader (“l’Ennui!—l’œil chargé d’un pleur involontaire” [line 37]; “boredom—the eye laden with an unwanted tear” [my translation]) with the boredom Breitenbach discerns in the imprisoned writer (“The Writer Destroys Time” [*True Confessions* 154]).
- 5 I am grateful to Thoko Ushe-Robb of the High Commission for South Africa for some of the general information (in instances where no other source is directly cited) on TRC administration and policy which follows.
- 6 Sachs’s good humour—itself a phrase which seems so inadequate—is astounding: he is in fact joking in this instance about severe bodily damage he suffered in a car bombing in 1988.
- 7 In one recent example of such a decision, in January 2001, the amnesty application of one Bongane Shadrack Khumalo was refused in no uncertain terms by the TRC: “we do not think it is necessary to detail all the applicant’s contradictions and lies as the record very loudly speaks for itself. During the rendering of his testimony it became clear that he was quite prepared to give the members of the panel no credit at all for intelligence” (the full text of this decision, file AC/2001/009, may be found online at <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/decisions/2001/ac21009.htm>).

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