The Seduction of Narration in Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples*

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ABSTRACT

The problem of who speaks on behalf of the traumatized other is sometimes too easily glossed in postcolonial literature by a specious claim to insiderness, which consistently mediates the kind of story we receive as readers. This gloss represents itself as imagination at its most expansive and inclusive, even as it conceals areas where neither text nor author want to go, based on very particular subject positions informed by race, class, ethnic affiliation, and language. By contrast, Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* sets the fantasy of harmonious white South African family life during apartheid against the text's silences, omissions, contradictions, and falsifications. I suggest that the transparency of the subject looking back at apartheid constitutes a seduction of the reader, a liminal seduction that situates voyeurism and empathy on the same axis. My analysis engages with tracing the structural, modal, and schematic contours of this novel: how it discloses trauma and distributes references to traumatic events. I also examine the novel's use of the child narrator Marnus, who dramatizes the text's preoccupation with bodies of all types escaping narrative, physical, and ethical containment. Though we are always at risk of succumbing to the seduction of the text as fantasy enclosure, that risk is counterbalanced by Behr's persistence in demonstrating how innocuous, everyday language can generate a passivity that eclipses and denies the trauma of the other.

Toward the end of Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples*, the adult version of Marnus, the white South African child narrator, perishes while fighting in the Angolan War. The violence of apartheid returns to the adult white soldier in a future anterior to the temporality of the child narrative, which ends the novel with the child Marnus repeating a white Afrikaner homily of peace and security in the face of the daily trauma of apartheid. Behr does not permit the

child to offer a direct account of trauma; only in Marnus's adult future is the body explicitly acknowledged as a site of traumatic inscription. This future, though, can never arrive within the conventional first-person narrative. The child Marnus's internalization of apartheid rhetoric allows the novel to position the discourse of apartheid violence as a narrative caress, which threatens to seduce the reader into treating the focalization of the white child narrator as a transparent mode of representing trauma. However, by projecting Marnus's awareness of the brutality of apartheid into a deferred future, Behr's novel presents a dominant colonial voice only to undermine it, suspending the traumatized body of Little-Neville, the black victim of white Afrikaner assault, in silence between temporally disparate narrative surfaces.

This article is primarily concerned with the representation of the trauma of Little-Neville, the black South African body, as compared to the trauma of rape that Frikkie, Marnus's close friend, experiences at the hands of Marnus's own father, Johan. My focus is not meant to suggest that one instance or form of trauma is somehow more authentic and worthy of representation than another. Indeed, the circumstances of Frikkie's rape demonstrate the profound interrelationship between forms of apartheid hierarchy: Johan's double role as military general and family patriarch is precisely what gives him the social authority to make Frikkie's body vulnerable to abuse. Michiel Heyns has poignantly interrogated the novel's complex representation of sexuality, framing the relationship between Marnus and Johan as a "male bond established by Marnus's complicity . . . in the rape of his best friend [Frikkie]" (85). For Heyns, the novel ultimately suggests that "paternal tenderness is yet another form of coercion" within the framework of apartheid (93–94). Cheryl Stobie uses the concept of the interstitial taboo to track the novel's representation of "the contradictions, rationalizations, slippages, and inconsistencies in constructing myths and ideologies about race, nation, religion, masculinity, gender, and sexuality" (76). My analysis, while indebted to the work of these and other critics, focuses instead on linguistic repetition (specifically, the rhetorical devices of aphorism and antithesis), using phenomenology and the reading practice of Roland Barthes to frame the novel as a "body" with its own ethical mass.

Behr's rocky relationship with the question of ethics and truth in fiction is well-documented. A white South African who worked as an informer for the apartheid regime from 1986 to 1991, Behr formally confessed to his role at a literary conference in 1996, reading the text of a lengthy speech in which he apologized for his activities and wondered whether he was now doomed to be known only as "the voice of betrayal: a voice that cannot be trusted, that is incapable of truth" ("South Africa" 119).¹ Critical response to Behr's confession has been severe. Nic Borain has castigated him for being more concerned with how his words are judged than with legitimately attempting to answer for his crimes; for Borain, Behr's confession was merely a facile "shutout" that forced everyone to either support him or align themselves with "those who deny perpetrators the right to change heart . . . to seek a language to express their grief and regret" (27). Less polemically, Sarah Nuttall has chastised Behr for eliding "the possibility of truth where 'truth' matters . . . in the sense of which story you tell, or who you make your apologies to" (87). In light of Behr's confession, one could plausibly argue that Marnus's narrative is overburdened with Behr's own yearning for political forgiveness; Behr's problematic

relation to narrative truth finds ambivalent and at times manipulative expression in Marnus's desire for parental love and approval. As a result, both Marnus and Behr are implicated in the violence inflicted on black South African bodies; both are potentially also secondary victims of trauma, in terms of their proximity to scenes of violence.

However, if we view *The Smell of Apples* only as a thinly veiled confession of authorial guilt, we are left with little to say. We either brand Behr as a disingenuous self-promoter, and condemn his opportunism, following Borain and Nuttall to some extent, or treat the novel as a child's tale in which an "inclination to trust in itself becomes the first step towards complicity" (Medalie 513). My argument rejects this binary. There is, I would suggest, a great deal of complexity in Behr's novel, a complexity of representation that extends beyond the deceptive candor of a child's story. The novel is always in the process of presenting two forms of narrative to the reader.² One is explicit and apparently unselfconscious, the shell narrative of the child Marnus guilelessly telling the story of his life in South Africa as the son of a military general, unable to challenge apartheid doctrine. However, this shell narrative contains another form of representation, which emerges in a variety of narrative silences: the Erasmus family's reflexive use of aphorism, inductive logic, and stereotype promote and embody a kind of white self-surveillance and hyper-secretive memory, which gradually overwhelm the apparent innocence of the child Marnus's account. At this level, any break in the self-defeating and doomed logic of apartheid comes in the form of white characters who are themselves defeated. Marnus's sister, Ilse, struggles against the family's apartheid ideology, while the adult Marnus's morbid reflections, as a soldier fighting and eventually dying in a colonial dirty war in Angola, puncture the main body of the text, evidence of the hopelessness of his position.

I argue that Behr offers his strongest commentary on the trauma of colonial apartheid precisely in the disjuncture between these two levels of representation. To the extent that Marnus is able to look back, what he beholds is not vitality or the "ultimate vigor of presence in representation" (Levinas 67), but rather a compulsion to cover over and obturate, as if his memory is tethered to the past, acting out his attempts to avoid bearing witness to the trauma of the other. At every step, the narrative traces the possibility, in literary terms, of direct access to trauma, only to redouble that trace with a pathological erasure. On the one hand, the erasure codes an expression of specific racial and cultural memory: the Erasmus family's insistent connection to the land, the revisionist chronicling of Afrikaner history. On the other, through irony, the erasure negates its own coding, generating an exhaustive and exhausting silence around the act of bearing down, of exerting pressure: everything that finds no home in Marnus's narrative is also what subverts his story as an attempt to bear witness to trauma. But *The Smell of Apples* is not merely the sum of Marnus's thoughts. I contend that Behr has purposely designed the novel to contain both the narrative (its historical futility) and the ethical futility of oppression as narrative pressure. In this contention, I locate a negation in Behr's writing: the way that the force and trajectory of the novel constitute its most profound ethical statement as a result of how little it actually says or directly represents.

Rita Barnard has characterized *The Smell of Apples* as "a veritable compendium of the sayings, stereotypes, and justifications that made up the everyday

banality of apartheid" (207). She identifies the claustrophobia of the text as a closed circle that evokes what she calls the "moral airlessness" of a narrative suffocated by the patriarchal law of apartheid (208). Indeed, the child Marnus casually and frequently oscillates between explicit aphorism and unmarked vocal interpolation. At times, Behr uses the rhetorical device of anaphora as hypnosis, repeatedly beginning Marnus's sentences with the phrase, "Dad says." Elsewhere, Johan's voice lurks without attribution in Marnus's apparently unmediated speech. As these interpolations increase in frequency, they cluster around politically significant events, undermining Marnus's ability to challenge his father. Johan's silent presence is, on an apparently formal level, merely evidence of realist technique: young Marnus imitates the adult language he hears his parents speaking. But this presence also stands as an ethical critique: the increases in interpolative frequency and intensity dramatize the gap between what Marnus initially wants to say and what his father cajoles and eventually coerces him into saying. *The Smell of Apples* transforms reading into coercive surveillance, in secret, a pressure through containment that only intensifies as we move between temporalities. Spying is what binds us to the text—the unease of transgression in watching, of seeing what the text's participants do not know we see. Collusion is the result of awareness of one's readerly position as an operative—a sense of implication in a larger system of political and narrative signs.

PARENTAL VOICE, VOCAL OVERLAY

The purview of Marnus's narrative is never consonant with the limits set on his language by the implied narrator. Marnus's voice is indistinguishable from the vocal overlay of his parents (primarily Johan but also Leonore at times); the cadences of parental authority double his voice like a unison line lagging slightly behind the original vocal "melody." Aphorism infiltrates point of fact, presaturating physical space with ethical tautology. In other words, no space in the novel is free of the parental vocal overlay, which emerges in the novel's opening lines: by invoking Marnus's nicknames, "son," "little bull," and "piccanin" (1), the narrative foreshadows the inescapable grip of parental authority and thus of apartheid hegemony. These nicknames have already presaturated Marnus's sense of himself and, by extension, the narrative space of the story about to be told. Though they indicate heteronormative masculinity (little bull), filial obedience (son), and the ugly history of colonialism and segregation (piccanin), their off-hand, seemingly harmless appearance at the start of the novel is contiguous with the narrative's obsession with chronicling South African history as a series of self-evident and inevitable events. The Afrikaner connection to (read, right to possess) the physical space of South Africa cannot remain ethically intelligible without this presaturation:

Dad says Nixon will be out of the White House before Christmas and it looks like the Americans are going to lose the war against the communists in Vietnam. Dad says it's typical of the Americans to try and prescribe to the Republic how we should run our country while their own president is such a rubbish. Dad says you don't tell someone else how to make his bed when your own house looks like a pigsty. (12–13)

Marnus parrots Johan's belief that President Nixon will be forced to resign (due to the Watergate scandal) and that the U.S. will eventually lose in Vietnam. Behr tethers irony to the reader's sense of historical inevitability, since Nixon's resignation and the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam have long since come to pass at the time of the novel's publication (1995).³ Immediately, though, Marnus attaches aphorism to political facticity in the explicit voice of his father. Here, as elsewhere in the text, factual description bordering on a sub rosa realist technique appears on the heels of a declared aphorism, stifling Marnus's ability to offer any honest critique of his father's views: Johan's strictures on American hypocrisy disqualify the country from judging apartheid without actually addressing it as a system of racialized oppression and discrimination. Through Marnus, Johan shifts the terrain of the discussion from politics to political relativism, with the child Marnus complicit both in the shift and in the subsequent erasure of the traces of it; each sentence uses structural similarity (the anaphoric style of "Dad says") to elide ethical difference. After all, apartheid as a political system is not any less oppressive because the American president is mired in a political scandal and his country is losing the war in Vietnam.

The novel is always in the process of overtaking Marnus's ethical position, jamming a list of facts, anticipated events, and relational dates through the aperture of Marnus as focalizer. Ilse is older than Marnus and she will soon be "on her way to Standard Ten at Jan Van Riebeeck High." She finds out whether she is head girl in December, before the holidays, Jan Van Riebeeck High is the "oldest Afrikaans school in the country" and Marnus's father was once a head boy there. For the latter two reasons, this "head girl business is a big thing" (13). The elements in this list are not random, nor do they proceed out of an ingenuous and childlike desire to evoke comfort by clustering familiar things and places together. On the contrary, each element carefully prepares the way for the next by sedimenting materiality into the reader's mind, overwhelming any potential response to apartheid as a repressive system. Though the text has hinted at the larger context in the previous paragraph, it quickly retreats into the enumerative style of a list, reducing each element to the status of its neighboring ones by virtue of their mutual inclusion in Marnus's supposedly child narrative. For example, Ilse's chances of becoming head girl do not contain the same depth as the history of Jan Van Riebeeck as an Afrikaans school, a history that touches on the policy of racial exclusion and segregation of apartheid. However, because both appear on the same list, the Erasmus family's connection to and implication in the apartheid system flattens out and eventually disappears below the surface of visibility in Marnus's shell narrative. This flattening constitutes one of Behr's subtlest uses of irony, as we discover that certain elements in these types of lists are not the same as others, have a deeper ethical resonance that the child's list resolutely strives to eliminate. In sum, the matrix of the (child's) list obliterates ethics. Only by accessing the second level of representation can we perceive how the narrative (but not Behr) resolutely retreats from any acknowledgment of white culpability in the experience of black South Africans during apartheid.

Retreat is not merely the text imposing its will on the reader; retreat is the historical and cultural context of the narrative escaping the narrator's control. Speaking of classical texts, Roland Barthes observes that "[t]o read, to understand, to thematize (at least a classic text), is therefore to retreat from name to name" (93).

At stake, for Barthes, is the unspoken trajectory that defines the so-called classical text, whose teleology must always subordinate to the apparent exigencies of a plot in which the brazen absence of departures and returns would constitute a "scandal" (105). Codifying, in the Barthian sense, is thus a retreat; naming, the specific act of codification, is, correspondingly, a reduction. In the formulation "to retreat from name to name," unity is not cognate with understanding. Rather, textual unity gives way to what Jean-Luc Nancy would call ex-scription, writing conceived as an infinite line of tangents, touches, intersections, and dislocations (14). In *The Smell of Apples*, retreat encompasses the term's military usage—the army's retreat and the failure of the covert war in Angola—only to expose other withdrawals: in politics, as the apartheid system fails, and in ethics, as the child Marnus ends the novel by repeating his mother's earlier declaration that "the Lord's hand is resting over False Bay" (Behr, *Apples* 90). The text is always already in self-conscious retreat, coming to rest in the presence of names whose evanescence signals the permanent dislocation of meaning in the apartheid context. Thus *The Smell of Apples* seems to invite closure only because these lexical clusters of meaning (names) are innocuous, gleaming, seeming either to be depthless or to contain easily navigable depths. These clusters take figurative shape in the child narrator, acquire semantic fixity in and against the child narrator's body, which, in its fragility and eventual subordination to apartheid logic, performs "the truth of intersection and co-penetration of all monads in their totality" (Nancy 27).

The voice of adult apartheid authority overlays the voice of the child Marnus, creating a narrative gap or silence, which is any engagement with the black experience of trauma during apartheid. The deferral of this engagement to a phantasmatic future evokes Barnard's "moral airlessness," to which I alluded earlier. For example, in the initial dinner for the visiting Chilean general, Johan's revisionist account of the history of Tanzania after the departure of the white colonial regime transitions seamlessly into Marnus's internal stereotypes of non-whites. Beginning with the pseudo-scientific claim that "those with black skins across their butts also have the smallest brains," Marnus then ties blackness to a lack of civilization, noting that "[e]ven if you can get a black out of the bush, you can't ever get the bush out of the black" (Behr, *Apples* 39). Any sense of Marnus's voice as being uncontaminated by the discourse of apartheid is almost impossible to discern, except for his brief acknowledgment that Doreen "might go to heaven," but even her ascent is provisional and segregated; she will only live "with other Christian Coloureds in small houses," provided she is not "boozing it up like the rest." Marnus ends by characterizing Gloria, "the real floozy with the purple lips who fancies herself to be a real madam" (39), as the archetype of black dereliction and sexual promiscuity.

The vocal overlay of Johan and Leonore suffuses the discursive space Marnus has at his disposal to tell his story. Behind Marnus, the implied narrator falls silent on the topic of black trauma by stitching together the pure interiority of the child with the hegemonic voice of apartheid authority. Nothing can be said in this space, nothing of ethical consequence; no statement can turn its face toward black experience, as it were, in order to examine white culpability, to approach the trauma of apartheid's deadly logic visited on actual black bodies. There is no space to offer counter-narratives, or even counter-logics. Marnus's feeble defense of Doreen illustrates the extent to which he is already in the process of acquiescing

to his father's view of South Africa: he cannot formulate an adequate rebuttal to apartheid logic even in his own thoughts.

NARRATIVE CATACHRESIS

The intrusion of the father into the very thoughts of the child narrator signals the double function of the text. It demonstrates the relays between overt and covert forms of power by filling the text with the anxious, compulsive, and pathological need to have one touch and subtend the other. However, it also punctures the authenticity of the child narrator Marnus by casting doubt on the whole realist enterprise of narrative plausibility. Ethically, Behr's novel is engaged in a kind of narrative catachresis, constantly touching on improper connections generated by the double schism of displaced chronology (two narrative times) and disjointed narrators (two versions of Marnus overlaying the same ethical critique in different places and times). If the child Marnus is the primary focalizer for whom the narrative fragments of his older, adult self are interventions from an as-yet unrealized future, the novel loses realist plausibility: the child is being visited by his future self prior to death. Conversely, if the soon-to-die adult Marnus is the focalizer revisiting the memories of his childhood, marginalizing the adult narrative mocks the transparency and temporal primacy of the self looking back. Both possibilities give a pro-forma nod to plausibility without engaging mimetic realism on its own ground.

Suspended between childhood and adulthood, within two overlapping vectors of narrative time, Marnus is the subject of a formal and ethical rupture. If the child consumes the apartheid ideology of his parents, erasing any encounter with black trauma in the process, the adult performs and enacts the destructive effects of that consumption: he enlists in the South African Defense Force, attains rank, and eventually perishes in Angola. The future offers an ethical critique through oversaturation of meaning: at every step, Marnus's perception bears the weight of recollection, carries the threat of regression into the affective backflow of the past. If his fellow soldiers are apathetic, Marnus is embittered; if they are resentful, he is nostalgically melancholic. Both temporally and ethically, he is out of step with the soldiers around him, only at home within his childhood memories, and unable to speak in any meaningful sense. Each narrative thrust that might reveal the presence of an explicit critique is turned aside and countervailed by the text until the only intelligible foil to the adult Marnus is the child Marnus whose formation drenches the adult's memories, feelings, and perceptions. The text comments on the problematics of representing trauma precisely in the tension between these two figures, neither of whom can ever really speak.

The two versions of Marnus are the representatives of mutually incompatible systems of ethics. Barthes describes the foil as an implacable opposition in the text, not merely a convenient arrangement of antagonists or even opposites within a delimited system, but symptomatic of "the battle between two plenitudes set ritualistically face to face like two armed warriors" (27). In Behr's text, the narrators, child and adult, interlock in representation, but come face to face within the narrative only by way of the ethical paradox, or what bridges these two figures, namely the fact that they are temporally distinct versions of the same person. Paradox, then, arises from Marnus's inhabitation of *both* positions: he corresponds

to both terms within the antithesis, a deeply ethical transgression that touches on the rhetorical transgression of the antithetical figure. Whenever the reader might acquiesce to apartheid's "closed circle" (Barnard 207), of which the child Marnus's narrative is a typical example, Behr interposes the body of the narrator (in two distinct temporalities) to disrupt the "harmoniously closed loop" of the whole (Barthes 27). As focalizer, the body of the narrator is a supplement whose narrative presence is epidermal, exemplary of colonial penetration; Marnus is the figure of antithesis mobilized from strictly rhetorical terrain to both rhetorical and ethical terrain. Something has entered the text, punctured the skin, and deposited a residue of unease that becomes coextensive with the reader's unease with the "moral airlessness" that Barnard describes. Comfort and truth, like oxygen, do not escape the collapsing trajectory of Marnus as the perishing future narrator, alerting the reader to the vicious circular logic of apartheid, which is a diminished and rapidly diminishing circle made evanescent by our awareness of its lack of historical future: its future is the past, dried up and reduced to memory. The puncturing of the shell narrative touches on the futility of history by way of the persistent and ironic use of aphorism.

THE TRANSGRESSION OF APHORISM

In *The Smell of Apples*, aphorism baffles the reader by resisting penetration. Meaning is only revealed in the slide across a surface, irony heightened by the contemporary reader's awareness of the eventual end of apartheid as a political system. Aphorism is narratively transgressive in its simplicity, particularly when a child repeats the maxims of his parents, as Marnus does throughout the novel. Aphorism doesn't just give rise to silence (on the scope and facticity of Chrisjan's trauma, for example); aphorism is itself a silence, allowing parental and authorial voices to compartmentalize lived experience in order to corrode or trivialize its ethical meaning. Consonant with the apartheid image of South Africa as a family ("Uncle John" Verwoerd), aphorism consumes Frikkie, Doreen, Little-Neville, and Chrisjan at an experiential level, folding racial difference back into silence.⁵ The anaphoric present tense ("Dad says") elevates each aphorism to the status of meaning, only to reduce it to non-meaning, because "Dad says" is merely a syntactical shortcut to asserting anything as truth, without the burden of having to prove it. Discursively, such a shortcut does the opposite of what the child Marnus (but not the novel) wants: instead of reifying the rightness of apartheid, it only reconfirms apartheid's weakness as a legitimate social model. Through Marnus's repetition, the axiom acquires metric force at the cost of semantic meaning until it becomes one and the same as Johan's voice. Out of Johan's discourse in proverbs comes the interpellation of Total Strategy, years before it comes to pass in historical time.⁶ In this sense, trauma is visible in the text as a dappled shape beneath the epidermis of the text: a cognitive silence or aporia.

In the Erasmus family's use of aphorism, generalized abstraction masquerades as lived experience, suturing unverifiable metonymies together until the narrative body is riven by wounds whose source is always missing. The trauma of apartheid violence that Little-Neville suffers never finds expression in the ethics of the Erasmus family narrative. Leonore ridicules the suggestion that something terrible has happened to Little-Neville, first saying that "worrying only makes one

age before one's time" (Behr, *Apples* 62) and later assuring Doreen that "no news is good news" (124). Leonore's worn commonplaces attempt to efface the real danger and trauma that the black South African body can experience in everyday life. That this attempted effacement is ironic to the reader, given the consistent and recursive brutality of the apartheid system, infuses the aphorism with a shadow depth, a doubling below the surface of what is spoken and even implied. Beneath that surface lies both the facticity of what the future will bring for Little-Neville (assault, injury, trauma) and Leonore's non-recognition: a white Afrikaner, she occupies the only subject position from which the proverb "no news is good news" can, and indeed must, legitimately evoke comfort and safety. The apartheid government's very propensity for making world-headline news is part of what its proponents would rather avoid. We can readily modulate "no news" into "nothing new" as the archetypal Erasmus family position: stasis, arrested temporality contiguous with diminished or impoverished ethical reserve, and hermeneutic shielding from traumatized bodies, traumatized characters, the trauma of narrative.

Aphorism touches on without touching. It is contiguous and associative, rather than metaphoric, as its object is never available for metaphoric comparison. In the text, aphorisms appear as much to displace meaning as to cement it; the child Marnus bridges them to the non-aphoristic language of his parents via association, so that both will eventually come to look like nothing in particular both to Marnus and the reader. Indeed, part of the difficulty in isolating the instances of aphoristic speech in *The Smell of Apples* lies in how so much of the text tacitly functions as a closed set of signs in which the declarative and the object occupy fixed, visible, ordained positions in a predetermined linguistic hierarchy. Whereas other white writers, such as J. M. Coetzee, employ the middle voice to gesture to the impossibility of the white South African position with respect to apartheid, Behr, by contrast, adheres to strict, childlike, almost martial speech rhythms: the subject performs an action on the object with a minimum of subordinate clauses and feelings are self-consciously synonymous with their immediate expression. Internal contradictions quietly keep their silence, such as the obvious discrepancy between Marnus's assertion that "[o]pen eyes are the gateway to an open mind" (160) and Johan's belief that "a quick mind requires only half an explanation" (162). The evidence of writing as craft vanishes in the framework of an apparently seamless and artless narrative structure; Behr grafts aphorisms to commonplace speech and naively pastoral descriptions of the South African landscape, until the specific racial and historical singularities that give rise to the aphorisms disappear within what is now natural, naturalized, made every day by routine and repetition.

Contiguity comes to rest in the gathered folds of the family aphorisms, within which other axiomatic meanings can take root and grow, eventually effacing their origins. Marnus's child narrative is never entirely free from the overdetermination of his parents' views, though he's not dominated overtly so much as made to internalize their willingness to subordinate the specificity of lived experience to apartheid stricture (Tannie Karla's conflict with Leonore over Chrisjan's alleged thefts is a fairly clear example). More than just a case of generalizations and apartheid rhetoric superseding the black South African experience of apartheid, this internalization actually announces the morphological rigidity of the shell narrative. Within the formal framework of proverb and aphorism, half-truths and fabrications mediate the history available for the shell narrative

to tell, sharpening the edge of readerly unease by stripping ironic awareness from the child Marnus. The morphology of the child Marnus's story parallels Ilse's up tempo rendition of the anthem, in which melody and word evoke the growing consternation of the audience members: they want to stop singing, find they cannot within the bounds of decorum, and instead misremember and sing the third and fourth verses, which are rarely heard. The novel disdains overt textual critique of the closed system of apartheid. Ilse's resistance to Johan and Leonore, like her remonstrations with Marnus, finds both expression and limit in adolescence; her opinion that Little-Neville, after his trauma, would be better off dead, arises from her assumption that he will "hate white people" once he becomes aware of what his assailants have done to him (191). Even to the most progressive member of the Erasmus family, Little-Neville's racialized experience of trauma is less disturbing than the thought that the survivor of a violent assault might come to feel animosity toward white Afrikaners. Ilse's subject position both circumscribes and performs the range of empathic responses available to white South Africans, with respect to black trauma.

CONTIGUOUS BODIES

By reducing Little-Neville's trauma to the white Erasmus family's experience of its implications for *their* position in South Africa, the text joins the body of the narrator Marnus, the supplementary body of the implied narrator (Behr), and the corpus of the Total Strategy era of apartheid. Their touch is an ethical silence, revealing the gap between what Marnus is willing to avow as a narrator and what Behr discloses through irony and implication. In other words, Behr's treatment of the representation of trauma is far more nuanced than the shell narrative we obtain from Marnus. In literary terms, Behr presents the antithesis of Total Strategy, the text wearing the mask of continuous surveillance but quietly exposing every discontinuity in overt apartheid strategy. The reduction of Little-Neville's trauma foreshadows Marnus's later difficulty in accepting that it is his father, not the visiting Chilean general, who he sees raping Frikkie; the discourse of Total Strategy brings a similarly totalizing blindness to the trauma of vulnerable bodies. The text's ostensibly childish account of the lives of the Erasmus family has no apparent object except a stasis in which emotional well-being and a racial hierarchy maintained by violence are no longer distinguishable from each other. Everything of ethical consequence happens when these bodies touch each other in spite of limits: forbidden and improper touches between entities that are not supposed to be in dialogue with each other, at least not according to the driving logic of apartheid.

The novel's manipulation of narrative, lexical choice, and aphorism constitutes a trenchant indictment of white privilege in the act of representing trauma. In essence, the novel is not afraid to draw attention to the precariousness of its own position as both a work of literature and a piece of historical testimony. The text speaks through Marnus but also speaks with and against him. The very presence of the traumatized nonwhite victim's body is a sign that there is no proper place, within the text, to store the trauma of that body. Every setting and location is stage-like and unreal. The nonwhite body is always in the middle of displacement, taking up residence in a margin not even visible as such. Frikkie's rape is thus not only an explicit illustration of the coercive violence of the apartheid

hierarchy, but also symptomatic of other types of violence (towards Little-Neville and Chrisjan) that the discourse of apartheid cannot even register as trauma. The parables, proverbs, aphorisms, and declarations of the Erasmus family coalesce into an ethical contagion, suffusing the narrative until there is no intelligible way to discuss or represent black trauma, or to examine apartheid as a set of historically contingent omissions, assumptions, and tautologies. This suffusion is what allows the text to speak, bringing us to the limits of representation, only to throw us back into a narrative that has no way of crossing that limit. With this technique, Behr gestures to the achievement of *Total Strategy* as a response to the Soweto riots, to growing black unrest in South Africa: oversaturation of every discursive space, each signifier touching each other in a pathological vice-grip, which precludes even the naming of the violated darker-skinned body.

To metaphorize black trauma is to operate in the realm of extension, as Johan and Leonore so frequently do when discussing any black subject. In this context, I characterize extension as the physical act of extending transposed into literature by way of phenomenology. As Derrida notes in his critique of Husserl, the concept of extension depends on a phenomenological distinction: on the one hand, extension as the pure contact with things (physical qualities, such as the roughness of a hand or its color) and, on the other hand, the twin sensations of touching and feeling oneself touched, which form what Husserl refers to as double apprehension. For Husserl, this distinction makes auto-affection (self-touching) an originary experience preceding all others. However, Derrida argues that such a distinction is inevitably undone by its disavowed other, leading to the possibility that the experience of extension is “constitutively haunted, by some hetero-affection related to spacing and then to visible spatiality” (179).

In Behr’s novel, I submit that auto-affection is white South African narcissistic introjection in its last state of self-deception, representing apartheid logic as the originary experience from which all material things can only exist as pure extension. The Erasmus family’s tendency (indeed, compulsion) is to induce black degeneracy and culpability from the slightest anecdotal evidence. Thus the disappearance of both Chrisjan and the fishing equipment must mean that Chrisjan is a thief, while Little-Neville must have brought his assault on himself in some way. I am less interested in the obvious discontinuity between what Leonore assumes and what actually transpires than on the pathological insistence on inductive logic, on the facticity of the body in front of Leonore as the body from which she can extend, chain-like, to imagined acts of black crime, historical revisionism, and the ceaseless justification of apartheid as an ethical system. The body must always speak the justice of apartheid, with Little-Neville’s body the limit case for the Erasmus family’s amplification of this message. However, the precondition of that speech is secrecy, an unspoken agreement in apartheid logic that contact between discrete, segregated bodies of all kinds is invalid, mistaken, forbidden.

SECRECY, PASSIVITY, AND THE CARESS

Expression of the secrecy of the white subject position never occurs throughout the novel, as apartheid rhetoric suffocates any direct acknowledgment of black trauma. Hence the fascination of secrets for Marnus and Frikkie, for Marnus vis-à-vis his family (and the General), and for the novel as a partially biographic

expression of Behr's past. Secrecy leads the reader to a vicarious delight in the keeping of a secret, as the deferral of acknowledgment produces the dramatic irony that allows the reader to suspend its betrayal until the "proper" time. Characteristically, though, *The Smell of Apples* defers that time past the point of its own existence; exposure of the secret never arrives and with that realization comes the voluptuousness (to mobilize a Levinasian term) of a delay without resolution. Secreted in this delay is the thrill of caress, of contact with the epidermis of trauma's representation but without the expected encounter with the other.⁷ The reader, who presumes to receive, in passivity, the pearl of an ethical secret whose contours can be known in advance, instead colludes in keeping the secret from the child's active perception. This collusion is a touch that does not puncture but in fact diverges into a caress, running limit across limit, creating the expectation that perception, experience, and knowledge will converge. However, this convergence only happens partially, in a future of which the novel's main narrative cannot be aware: ethical plenitude is both dystopic and utopic to *The Smell of Apples*. It would be facile to say that the text is the "skin" at whose touch or even rupture we accede to the body of trauma because the text is skin only insofar as we demand the epidermis as both barrier and mediator. The body beneath is at once too much and not enough for the reader of literary trauma. What the shell narrative must disregard is the connection between *forms* of tactility: traumatized bodies, victims of trauma; bodies of text, masses that resist or invite readerly puncture; our own passive bodies as we read.

Behr's text exposes the problematic passivity of the Erasmus household, forcing the reader to inhabit that passivity through Marnus's pathological refusal to puncture the apartheid narrative and access the trauma of the other. Leonore's homilies and calls for quiet acceptance of suffering frame passivity as a certain attitude to deferring engagement that signals the white guilt of apartheid. As the text turns its face to and from the trauma of black South Africa, complicity, for the white South African, becomes choice, the only model in which passivity is cognate with an ethical principle. The hermetic enclosure of the child's story connotes a kind of textual and ethical stasis. The reader, as the implied recipient of Marnus's ethical framework, is seduced into inertia, unable to operate within the enclosure as an ethical agent. Passivity therefore becomes not only the absence of motion in the immediate present, but the expectation of stasis in any foreseeable future. Hence the lacerating interjections of the adult Marnus, whose future death in Angola deprives the total narrative of any possibility of movement: the future is as barren as the ethical awareness of the child Marnus's story. The British soldier who complains about conscription prompts Marnus to retort that both of them had a choice, but that the soldier chose "the easier one" (Behr, *Apples* 83). The British soldier has no answer for Marnus, who himself has no answer for the impossibility of the white position that the soldier represents, in spite of his status as an outsider (and representative of an earlier colonial regime in South Africa). As the soldiers huddle around the radio to hear Marnus's father publicly denying the presence of South African soldiers in Angola, we witness a belated recognition of systemic and hierarchical oppression now that it has finally, at the bitter end, brought its pressure to bear on the colonizers themselves. The roar of the tanks and the obscene energy of the mechanical and the military touch on the fatality of passivity as a principle. But even here, the representation of black trauma is absent, rendering

the terrain on which the soldier and Marnus voice their positions a staged drama, as figuratively artificial as it is ethically unreal.

Behr's text is always in the process of sedimenting one form of passivity within another. The passivity of the narrator concedes to the passivity of Little-Neville, burned almost to the point of death by white assailants, lying motionless in a hospital ward, an object of pity to ostensibly concerned white citizens for whom the passivity of prayer is actually a retreat from engagement. The rape of Frikkie, the burning of Little-Neville, Marnus's own beating at the hands of his father, at each event, Marnus degenerates into spectator, offering belated, ineffectual, and incomplete reportage after the fact, at times taking refuge in outright denial (putting his fingers in his ears while his father rapes Frikkie in the room below). Likewise, the text's preoccupation with saturating the child Marnus's narrative with the thoughts of others demonstrates its formal passivity: waiting, with patience beyond awareness of its own death, for the barren logic of apartheid to fill out, eclipse, and retrace Marnus's story.

THE WEIGHT OF THOUGHT

As the narrative arc of the story layers forms of passivity into the space of reading, their congealment into the interstices of textual reading practice signals a transformation: thinking, or thought, acquires weight and, by weight, the force of ethics in motion. If the text dramatizes the tension between Marnus's relentless parroting of apartheid rhetoric and the trauma on the ground, such a dramatization also confronts the reader with a horrible intimacy, a performance of the pressure and trajectory of narrative as seduction. In other words, seduction becomes the *weight* of a narrative thought detached from the specifics of the thought itself, modulating the novel's indirect encounter with the representation of trauma. There is, I would suggest, no way to figure the claustrophobia of Behr's narrative except as a convulsive expression of white Afrikaner discourse of which Marnus, in both child and adult form, is at once vessel and proponent. We never lose sight of the awkwardly visible frame of the novel. Even the child Marnus's essay, an unwitting parody of the form of political-platform rhetoric, stands in for *The Smell of Apples*: a child playing at writing a story. The formal limits of the novel displace a certain mimetic realist imperative to let the contours or structures of the novel, as writing, disappear into a steady accretion of details, which would then quietly efface all traces of a state anterior to their self-evident presence:

I learned from Dad to first dry myself almost completely while I'm still in the shower cubicle. Otherwise it gets the tiles on the bathroom floor wet, and that makes unnecessary work for Mum and Doreen. When we've finished drying ourselves off, we tie the towels around our waists and I comb my hair in a side parting just like Dad's. (63)

The cited passage embeds perceptual detail in the account of Marnus learning how to be more like his father. Showering, drying in the cubicle, towel around the waist, side-part in the hair—Johan suffuses Marnus at both a factual and a meta-narrative level. Marnus tries to emulate his father's actions and appearance; the reader, within the larger context of the story, absorbs the irony of this emulation.

Reposing in bland domesticity, the passage saturates the reader's space with blankness of being, offering itself innocuously, to no one in particular, as if the reader has accidentally stumbled onto a scene whose only purpose is unselfconscious transcription. In exemplary fashion, the passage's steady refusal to judge encages the pressure of response: the irony of a child lovingly and artlessly learning, in all possible and problematic ways, from a father implicated in the perpetuation of the apparatus of apartheid.

The context of this passage anticipates a similar moment in Marnus's future. The child Marnus is checking for the arrival of pubic hair; the adult Marnus, having just finished urinating against a tree in the middle of Angola, takes several moments to fondle and appraise his penis. The novel sutures temporalities through contiguous association; the penis appears in two different times and in both, the focalizer scrutinizes his own body, seemingly without judgment or context. The body's vulnerability, in both time periods, becomes a compulsive absence in the focalizer's consciousness. The textual obsession with Barnard's "moral airlessness" produces a kind of narrative anti-oxygen: pressurization, compression at every turn, until escaping containment becomes the encounter to which the text responds in prolepsis, over and over again: the devastating evidence of Total Strategy as ethical and political pathology.

If collusion is the corollary of readerly intervention in Behr's text, it also indicates the reader's complicity in Marnus's own elevation of the act of looking back. Marnus stages both his adult and child narratives as acts of nostalgia—the letters from his mother he receives while in Angola evoke his sense of longing to recapture an apparently formative childhood moment whose full ethical weight he never discovers, even in the moment before his own death: "I feel Dad's face against my chest and my arms around his head, and I feel safe. But now it is a different safety. Death brings its own freedom, and it is for the living that the dead should mourn, for in life there is no escape from history" (198). The resonance, in the above passage, is the unconditional love Marnus has sought but never received from his father and not the self-deceiving rhetoric of apartheid that has led to Marnus fighting and dying in a meaningless war in Angola. In the past, Johan's embrace meant safety, while in the present, individual death is the metonym for apartheid: the safety of stasis, of bodies absent or about to be absent of life, the airlessness of a political and narrative space in which explicit challenge is never permissible or even intelligible. Marnus's invocation of history in this last moment is thus all the more startling when set against the text's near-total refusal to acknowledge the history of colonialism, which is also the history of sustained, collective trauma. Tellingly, Marnus recalls his father's embrace at the moment when the black sergeant beside him is offering a hollow assurance that Marnus will recover; the staging inverts the traditional logic of apartheid, returning us to the scene of Little-Neville in the hospital, where Leonore mouths platitudes about patience in the face of suffering.

CLAIM TO THE LAND

The trauma of Little-Neville shadows the act of looking back, as the child Marnus substitutes pastoral and family origin for any encounter with the face of the trauma victim and the black trauma victim in particular. During Frikkie's

rape, Behr allows Marnus to record the event in cognitive detail: the position of the two on the bed, the childlike persistence in euphemizing the penis as “John Thomas,” the birds outside the window. However, the frame is already saturated with meaning. Images appear not only to divert attention away from the trauma that vulnerable bodies experience, but to instantiate a white South African claim to the land that eclipses and transcends the historical specificity of apartheid, the casual brutality and frequency of black trauma. The mountains are pink, the clouds blue over False Bay; these stylized images embed the colonial claim in the tropes of the pastoral. Marnus’s psychic flight to the pastoral is not the prelude to spiritual resurgence, but symptomatic of cultural and historical introjection: a retreat into the white fantasy of naturalizing the colonial claim to the land. The fact that Johan, not the Chilean general, is raping Frikkie only surfaces obliquely in Marnus’s observation that “the scar is gone from the General’s back” (177). By hyperfocusing on the destruction of Marnus’s innocence, the text dramatizes the insularity and introjection of an apartheid narrative that suffocates direct expression of “unacceptable” forms of trauma: the rape of Marnus’s best friend, the assault on Doreen’s son. Marnus can only act out against his father, but eventually capitulates and allows Johan to sow on the military epaulettes, thereby completing the erasure of trauma from the shell narrative.

Behr’s text satirizes the tyranny of presence, using the child narrator Marnus to demonstrate how memory finds plenitude in its ability to be aware of itself caught in the act of looking back. This arrested act of memory gestures to the noetic structure of Western philosophical inquiry: the intuition of thinking, without which a metaphysics of presence is not possible. Derrida writes, “It is when—and insofar as—thinking is thought as a means that intuitionism is dominant” (202). Here Derrida is concerned with isolating a tendency in philosophy to use self-conscious experience as the basis for knowledge: thought, in this model, is never itself, never available as the subject *modifying* experience by looking back.⁷ By effacing the workings of Marnus’s consciousness, Behr seduces the reader, offering the apparent transparency of intuitionism as thinking in order to perform the limits of such, with respect to postcolonial trauma.

Marnus’s body lies between reader and text, pressuring both at each end, enjoining a kind of ethico-tactility. The body of the narrator, being supplementary, is prosthetic: an extension without visible extremities, a prosthesis that simply does its work quietly, as if its entrance were not the product of a prior agreement, an understanding between author and audience that its weight should encode but never comment on its own authority, its own inalienable right to govern bodies of all kinds. But the body of the narrator is also transgressive, exceeding the prosthetic as an operational category; the text always leaves a remainder, beyond what the literary convention of the narrator-figure has tabulated. The body of the narrator is never contained except by our collusion. Moreover, the body itself is not *the* body, but a cluster of bodily metonymies, as the figurative body of Marnus, the ostensible narrator, shadows, touches, and caresses Behr, the implied narrator. For *The Smell of Apples*, commentary on trauma thus emerges in the improper contact between images and bodies, between proverbs and characters, between systems and ideologies and daily realities, each of them resting on the catachresis of narrative, as if the text’s very basis for existence were itself fallacious, a mistake that calls into question the novel’s legitimacy but paradoxically also constitutes its strongest reason for being.

NOTES

1. Behr's plea for forgiveness evokes the uncertainty of the meetings between Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, psychologist for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the notorious Eugene de Kock, the imprisoned former head of the apartheid death squads. In Gobodo-Madikizela's account, de Kock oscillates between wanting to undermine "the boundary between interviewer and subject" (40) and reaching out, both figuratively and literally, the actions of a "desperate soul seeking to affirm to himself that he was still part of the human universe" (47). De Kock's reference to one of his hands as the "trigger hand" (Gobodo-Madikizela 39) was his way of disavowing the killing that he had either done or organized; it was also a powerful metonym for the willingness of white South Africans to disavow the violence of apartheid following the end of the regime. To this extent, Behr's appeal resonates as a plea to avoid localizing guilt and blame entirely in the figures of informers and covert operatives.

2. The word "reader" is, of course, a broad term. South African readers, particularly those living in South Africa, have a more direct relationship to the political and historical backdrop of the novel, as well as the material conditions of the post-apartheid era in which Behr chose both to write the novel and stage his confession. Though the novel, in its use of aphorism and shell narrative, is undoubtedly and uncomfortably familiar to South African readers, its persistent reluctance to break the frame of the Erasmus family's ideological insularity also resonates in the post-apartheid era with readers outside the country; in this latter era, it constitutes a literary archive of the doomed and self-defeating apartheid regime that was eventually overthrown. Without wishing to conflate the two readerly positions, I am nonetheless more interested, with respect to the scope of this article, in the historical specificity of the post-apartheid reader as the presumed audience for Behr's novel.

3. This sense is true, I'd suggest, of both South African and non-South African readers, insofar as knowledge of the referenced political events is what allows one to approach the irony of the passage, not one's readerly status as such.

4. While "Uncle John" is a general expression of respect in Afrikaans, the expression invites that respect by way of a family relation (one's relationship to an uncle) to Hendrik Verwoerd, the prime minister whose regime implemented formal apartheid in South Africa.

5. Faced with growing labor unrest and the collapse of its colonies in Mozambique and Angola, the South African government "refined its elaborate and already totalitarian security apparatus. The central emphases of policy at this time were therefore managerial, technocratic, anticommunist, and military. The umbrella concept linking all of these policies—defined as a response to what was called the 'total onslaught'—was 'total strategy'" (Attwell 73–74).

6. The delay forms an interesting contrast with the idea of post-apartheid literature as the vicarious expression of trauma accompanied by a "catharsis of suppressed emotions" (N van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 60). Instead of healing and a corresponding "increase in insight," the text proffers deferral, turning away from any notion of the writer's task as merely one of "revealing what is good, but also what is lacking" (61).

7. Correspondingly, Levinas notes that according to a certain Western philosophical tradition, we live by existing reflexively on the noetic plane, by forgetting consciousness as the lens through which we glorify all sense in recollection (160–62).

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