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# Cracking Open Identity, Truth, and God: Reflections on South Africa's Reconciliation Commission

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here along the long white shadow  
where I thought where I thought I'd leave the litany of locust  
of locust and death I'll always hear the litany of sound

here along the long white shadow  
where I grab lustre grab honour that once was lustre and white  
the truth I've heard and how to molest it

that I travel I travel along the corn and chaff of my past  
that my past crawls forth on its deadly knees without once looking up  
that I crawl on my knees claw to that place

that light place that does not want to dim  
here along the white shadow of mortal and molested truth  
we buried many we buried without shroud or ritual

many we buried and from the graves it sprouts  
the shadow of sprouts of lustre, burdock and wheat the locusts of sound  
here along the long white shadow

and my past sits so well in its teeth all along  
its teeth sit well in the shadow of sulfur and lime its time  
the time of assassin and shame and tin

I keep slipping slipping out of truth  
while next to me along the long white shadow walks the shudder  
that I was walks the long white shudder of ash

set me I who keep slipping in the long white shadow  
out of time out of random and lies I want slipping from the shudder  
along the emptiness of litany and shadow

set me set me from the revenge and loss  
from ruins set me from the long white scar the lichen and ash set me free  
into remorse oh my hand my hand grabs the sheet like a throat

– Antjie Krog, "Litany"

This is the poem of a woman who has spent two years listening to narratives of murder, torture, betrayal, and searching. Antjie Krog, an Afrikaner poet and journalist, was asked to head a team of reporters covering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the South African Broadcasting Corporation's radio network. Her book, *Country of My Skull*, describes many of the stories and accounts she heard during that time, and recounts *her* story of trying to do a good job and stay sane under the burden of so much suffering revealed and evil exposed. Something that both sustained her, as a source of purpose and hope, and terrified her, was her feeling that this Truth Commission (TRC) was providing South Africa with a chance, perhaps its last chance, to find a better way to live—a better way to be a country with so much diversity, so much weight of history.

How did this commission provide such an opportunity? The sweep of her book and of the thousands of pages of transcripts of TRC hearings provide some clues. First of all, the TRC was about *identity*. One of the major themes of *Country of My Skull* is Antjie Krog's love-hate relationship with her own Afrikaner people, and her identity as one in the Boer lineage. Her words and memories celebrate the honour and strength of Afrikaners, but her distaste for certain aspects of the Afrikaner community and the Boer character is palpable, as is her remorse over apartheid, the Afrikaner birthchild. The Truth Commission laid bare this kind of ambivalence on a societal level. It is being experienced by Afrikaners, English, Coloureds, Indians, and Africans from all tribes. The commission gave voice to a national identity crisis. It may have begun the very long conversation that provides a horizon beyond this crisis.

Second, the commission was about *truth* (and still is—the Amnesty Committee continues to hold hearings). During the life of the commission, questions and comments such as the following were repeated endlessly: "What is truth, anyway?" "Whose truth?" "For hundreds of years the white man's truth was imposed, now the black man's truth will be imposed." But this does not change the fact that thousands of South Africans of all racial groups came to the hearings seeking to hear and to speak truth—at last! Even when we cannot explain what truth is, we still desire it—unless we feel the need to hide

from it. The TRC was also about taking away places to hide. Later in this essay we will return to the question of truth, and the liberation and suffering that comes when our hiding places are given up or taken away.

One topic that Krog's book does not devote a great deal of time to is "God" (even though the character and faith of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the chairman of the TRC, are central to her narrative). But God comes up a lot in the TRC transcripts and in the rhetoric that surrounded the establishing and functioning of the commission. In dialogues about atrocities, about forgiveness, about responsibility, many participants make reference to God. It is as if narratives that speak to both the most profane and sacred aspects of human life need God-language. Not that God always survives these narratives unscathed.

"Identity," "truth," "God": for some people in our world these words refer to solid, dependable things and provide security. For an apparently growing number of people, however, these words have become questions, aporias, entries into labyrinths. This essay will pass through these labyrinths in a search for some insight into their contours. It will seek to perceive the colours reflected within the labyrinths by the light of a century that has produced so much rending—of societies, of cultures, of faiths. A number of writers will serve as guides at different stages of this exploration, but the principal guide will be Paul Ricoeur. I will not present his work in a systematic way, but will turn to his treatment of a number of philosophical and theological concerns that relate to identity, truth, and God. Of central and persistent concern will be his treatment of narrative identity.

While there will be a general drift in this essay from the dilemma of identity to the dilemma of truth and on to the dilemma of God, these issues cannot be treated in strict sequence and each will impact on the other two throughout. A foray into one era in South Africa's history<sup>1</sup> will serve to demonstrate the interconnectedness of these issues, and to deepen our understanding of the society that will remain a contextual touch-point for our philosophical-theological reflections throughout this paper. There has been a long-standing debate within South Africa and among scholars concerning the origins

of apartheid. Irving Hexam provides a solid case for locating the birth of apartheid at the beginning of this century and for understanding this to be a birth not of a program of social control, but of a myth that responded to the psychic, cultural, and social needs of a people in crisis. To understand this development, we need to look back further into South Africa's history.

In 1652 the Dutch East India Company established a permanent station on the Cape of Good Hope. The first settlers at this station were mostly Dutch Calvinists. Over the ensuing decades, as the quantity of settlers grew, the majority of the population continued to be of Dutch origin, but significant numbers of Huguenots and northern Europeans also arrived. Despite this diversity, almost all inhabitants came to speak Dutch and became members of the Dutch Reformed Church, which played a central role in the education of children and the provision of a system of values for the new society. When the Cape was occupied by the British in 1806, the Dutch Reformed Church worked to protect the language and culture of the populace from "anglicization." In the decades that followed the occupation, the Dutch settlers became increasingly displeased with the British frontier policy. In the mid-1830s hundreds of settlers packed their wagons and headed north into terrain free from British rule. This was the beginning of the Great Trek. In the ensuing years thousands more Dutch settlers followed and spread themselves over much of what is today called South Africa. It is not exactly accurate to call these trekkers "Dutch." Their language was evolving into a unique tongue and their culture was going through a parallel process. They were becoming "Afrikaners," also known as "Boers."

The trekkers took their Dutch Reformed religion with them but, like Calvinism in Europe, it was prone to schism. Eventually, the Dutch Reformed Church was divided into three major Kerk. The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK), to which the majority of white South Africans still belong, was established by the Dutch East India Company in 1652 and, as mentioned, formed the centre of the settler community. When, in 1836, the first wave of trekkers left the Cape, they were not granted the blessing of the NGK. In the new Boer Republic that was formed in the Transvaal, the Nederduitsch

Hervormde Kerk was formed. Several years later, a group of the faithful who felt that the church was moving too far from its Calvinist roots split away and called itself the Gereformeerde Kerk, and eventually its members came to be known as “Doppers.”

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Afrikaner settlers spread throughout the territory of South Africa and fought with various African nations for control of the land. At the same time, the British pursuit of colonial interests and their attempts to moderate the conflicts between Boers and Africans expanded their presence into areas such as Natal. During this time of expansion and the establishment of new Afrikaner republics in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, the Dutch Reformed Churches seemed to be shaped largely by the societies of which they were a part. They were divided to the extent that Afrikaners were divided, but showed a common concern to support the Afrikaner cause—even if they were reluctant to endorse the most militant Boers (Villa-Vicencio 1988, 22–23).

In 1899 decades-old tensions between the Boer republics and the British colonial authorities broke out into armed conflict and the Second Boer War began. Over the course of the previous seventy years the Boers had spread into new lands, fought “epic” battles against such peoples as the Zulu and the Ndebele, and survived many hardships in a land new and strange to them. During these decades, they had developed a sense of destiny and had come to understand themselves not only as a distinct people, but one chosen by God to fulfill a mission as the “white tribe of Africa.” The Second Boer War and the period immediately afterward were times of great crisis of identity for the Afrikaners for a number of reasons. First, they lost the war—a fate many of them had not considered possible in light of their “divinely ordained destiny.” Second, during the second phase of the war, when the British had captured the towns and cities and the Boers had turned to guerrilla tactics, the British army implemented a scorched earth policy and herded many thousands of Afrikaners into concentration camps. As many as 18,000 perished. Third, the British were following a post-war policy of “anglicization.” This involved the establishment of English-language schools for Boer children, the takeover of pre-existing schools, and attempts to bring the Dutch Re-

formed Churches under the influence of the state. Fourth, the economy of the former Boer republics was in disarray after the war. Fifth, in the wake of the defeat, many Afrikaners seemed to lose faith in their Reformed Christianity. Their loyalty to their churches and their obedience to the strict moral code advocated by their religion were weakening (Hexam 1981, 18–23).

Louis Rousseau points out that a society in the grasp of such a crisis has two possibilities: sociocultural disintegration or the actualization of a process of revitalization (1998, 4). Within Afrikaner society the second possibility became a reality, and involved the formulation of a symbol system that was perceived by its agents as a return to the values and culture of their forbears. Over the coming decades a renewed Afrikaner myth would be articulated and embodied in a theological system, an educational network, and a political program. This myth would spread from a sub-culture within Afrikaner society to be embraced by that society at large (with significant islands of resistance); would inform Afrikaner politicians as they came to control the new Republic of South Africa; and would become encoded in the infamous policy called “apartheid.” Displaying a tragic pattern that has been repeated many, many times in human history, a newly articulated collective identity was formed in a crucible of suffering and oppression. At the heart of the new identity was the distinction between those who shared this identity (sameness) and those who did not (otherness). Afrikaners had learned that this was a violent distinction, and that extreme measures would be necessary if they were to be protected from the other.

The birthplace of the Afrikaner revitalization and religious awakening was the Afrikaner subculture of the Doppers. In 1857 a politician in the Free State had written to the Separate Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands, a church that had split off from the state church over the issues of liberal theology and loyalty to the teachings of the Synod of Dort (1616–18), complaining about liberal influences in South Africa and the movement of the Afrikaner Churches away from their Calvinist roots to a more evangelical form of Christianity. The Separate Christian Reformed Church sent Dirk Postma to South Africa to investigate. He traveled in the Cape and Natal before set-

ting in the Transvaal to be the minister of a church that had split from its mother denomination. The membership of this new church was made up of "Doppers," a distinct group within Boer society known for their Calvinist piety, their moral conservatism, and their distinct dress (Hexam 1981, 60–61).

As shown by their split from the larger Dutch Reform Church, Doppers were particularly sensitive to the encroachment of liberal and enlightenment values and attitudes into Afrikaner society. Thus, the perceived moral and religious deterioration of the post-war period, the somewhat successful British policy of anglicization, and the dissonance of the British victory were felt even more intensely in the Dopper community than in Afrikaner society at large. The response of the religious and intellectual leaders of the community was to weave a new myth of the Afrikaner people. It was through participation in this myth that the Dopper community had its awakening. The formative elements of the myth were the great suffering of the people at the hands of the British, the continued validity of a belief in a divinely ordained mission for the Afrikaners despite their humiliation, a return to Calvinism as articulated by the Synod of Dort, the ever-present threat of chaos for a people wedged between the "disorderly" Black Africans and the British Empire, and the necessity for Afrikaners to be a separate people, as the Doppers had been separate for decades. The man most responsible for this myth was Totius—a theologian, minister, linguist, but above all a poet. His long narrative poems mourned and memorialized the Boers, especially the women, who suffered and died during the war, and they described the building of a new life out of the ashes of grief. Like an Old Testament prophet, he interpreted the trials of his people in terms of God's providence and the need for the Boers to be refined in the fire of suffering. In the same poems, he crafted a national identity and a political intent. Remembrance extended back beyond the war to the Great Trek and the battles against the Africans. Hope reached to a future era when the elect of God would guide their own destiny, free of the British and separated from the Africans. His poems spoke to a fractured Afrikaner people, but projected into the past a vision of a unified Afrikaner na-

tion. Of course, his readers were called to “rebuild” this nation (Hexam 1981, 31–35).

Other writers such as Totius’s brother-in-law, Willem Postma, participated in the myth-making, as did preachers and educators. The new and powerful myth was given a fertile and protected environment in which to incubate because of the segregated nature and Calvinist piety of Dopper community. The myth must have eased their psychic dissonance and spoken to their spiritual needs. We find evidence for this in the fact that the writings of Totius and company became very popular and their themes were given manifestation in sermons, teachings, and physical monuments (Hexam 1981, 45–54, 60–61). Irving Hexam’s description of the post-war Dopper community in *The Irony of Apartheid* reveals a powerfully religious people motivated to preserve their heritage and to convince all Afrikaners of the truth of their vision. This motivation was actualized in the reconstruction of their churches and communities against a backdrop of great destruction, in the establishment of a new educational system, and in an impressive production of propaganda. The Doppers overcame the temptation to despair and used the great tragedy of the Second Boer War as an opportunity to draw their countrymen and women back to God (Hexam 1981, 69–72)

This accounting for the birth of apartheid challenges some longer-standing readings of South African history. While Hexam’s documentation and argumentation are impressive, I am not expert enough in historiography or South African studies to fully evaluate the strengths and weakness of his interpretation. Beyond these concerns, however, Hexam’s work holds unquestionable value as a text (an extended parable in a certain sense<sup>2</sup>) that speaks to the many contexts in our world where a people constructs a narrative identity in “us versus them” terms. This kind of identity construction plays a central role in violent conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Palestine, on Canadian Native Reserves, and in a seeming infinity of other contexts. Hexam shows that apartheid was not a simple case of an evil people lording it over its victims, or of a people falling into the grasp of evil, but that apartheid grew first as a symbol system formulated by historical actors who were responding to the challenges and needs of



their society. Afrikaners *needed a new narrative* that not only accounted for the experiences they had been through, and had yet to go through, but also told them *who they were* when their self-understanding as a people of divinely-ordained destiny was disintegrating. They also needed the narrative to speak to God and “His” reasons for abandoning them to destruction at the hands of the British. In a sense, they needed a narrative that would tell them who God was, and how they could live in relationship with “Him.” In volume three of *Time and Narrative* and in *Oneself as Another*, Paul Ricoeur examines the relationship between narrative and identity. A little further along in this essay I make a modest excursion into his work in these volumes, looking for resources to help us understand how we construct our identities to the exclusion and inclusion of others. First, however, I will flush out the problematique of identity construction and the relation to the other by taking a detour through the work of Miroslav Volf in *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. This problematique is the central concern of *Exclusion and Embrace*, and, since Volf is a systematic theologian, the relationship between identity construction and faith in God is given extensive treatment.

One of history’s great and tragic ironies is that modernity, with its ideal of inclusion, was born in Europe during the era of colonization. The story we tell ourselves in the modern, democratic West is one of progressive inclusion. That is why we are shocked when we see ethnic cleansing in Europe. We seek to define the cleansers as non-European and savage. Volf challenges this smug attitude and argues that there has always been “a momentous inner tension in the typically modern narrative of inclusion.” Following critics like Dussel, Nietzsche, and Foucault, he describes the birth of modernity as entailing exclusion of colossal proportions. Indeed, this is Europe’s history of interaction with non-Europe; whether non-Europe be that which existed on other continents and was labeled barbarity, or that which existed in Europe but was rejected by Europe’s formulation of its own identity and was also labeled barbarity. The modern self is constructed through the exclusion of the other. Volf does not agree with the prescriptive assertions of the postmoderns, however. He rejects what he sees as their

push for inclusion to the point that all boundaries are suspect. His quarrel with modernity is informed by Christian faith and theology. God created and creates the world through work that includes differentiation and judgement, each of which can be contrasted with exclusion. Creation involves binding *and* separation. Exclusion is the sin of reconfiguring creation, separating what God has bound, and binding what God has separated. At the level of the self, where identity is constructed in a cultural matrix, Volf understands the exclusion inherent in modernity to begin with exclusion from a situated self. He contrasts this with a self capable of making non-exclusionary judgements (1996, 57–68).

In a penetrating section of his book, Volf outlines a theology that names exclusion as sin. Here the pursuit of false purity has a central place. Fixation upon a false purity is the result of turning the will to purity away from the spiritual life of the self to the cultural world of the other. There emerges a politics of purity, and various kinds of exclusion to exercise against its targets. Exclusion by *assimilation* says “you can survive, even flourish, in this society if you abandon your identity and become like us.” Exclusion by *domination* subjugates the other to a lesser place, and makes the other the victim of exploitation. Common today in the stance of wealthy classes toward the poor, and the developed world toward the developing world, is exclusion by *abandonment*. They are left to their fate. These types of exclusion are supported by exclusionary language and cognition, which, Volf argues, are not usually the result of simple ignorance, but of willful misconstruction. This all involves an array of emotional responses ranging from hatred to indifference. Evil is at work here, creating an “ideational environment” in which it can go unrecognized. Sin is often passed as virtue, especially in religious circles. That which is not sin is labeled as sin, causing innocents to be outcast. At the level of the self, what is at the bottom of this? Why do we exclude? Because we project hatred of ourselves; because we resist that which disturbs our identities, boundaries, and cultural maps by mirroring something we do not want to see in ourselves or by challenging our assumptions; because we want what others have; because we want to be at the centre and there alone (Volf 1996, 72–78).

At the beginning of his book, Volf asks what is the best way to approach the question of identity and otherness. He differentiates between approaches that focus upon *social arrangements* and those that focus upon *social agents*. Saying that the latter is more properly the concern of theologians, he forgoes an extended discussion of how society ought to be arranged to accommodate diversity, and chooses to concentrate on social agents. He asks what kind of selves we need to be to live in harmony with others who are not like us. His assumption is that selves are situated. Their identity relates to characteristics such as gender, race, and class. Selves often have hybrid identities and often migrate from one identity to another. If the primary concern is social agents, then a key question is “what should shape social agents so that they can fashion healthy social arrangements?” To answer, he offers a theology of the cross. He holds up the example of “divine self-donation” for enemies in the passion of Christ, and the reception of enemies into the eternal communion of God. This is the model of how we should behave toward the other, even the enemy.

Drawing on the resource found in Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of God, in his death on the cross, and in the character of the triune God, I will advocate here the struggle for *a nonfinal reconciliation based on a vision of reconciliation that cannot be undone*. I will argue that reconciliation with the other will succeed only if the self, guided by the narrative of the triune God, is ready to receive the other into itself and undertake a re-adjustment of its identity in light of the other’s alterity (Volf 1996, 20–23).

For Volf the essential “moments” in the movement from exclusion to embrace are repentance, forgiveness, making space in oneself for the other, and the healing of memory. By passing through these, humans live out the self-donation modeled by God. Predictably, Volf calls for aggressors and agents of oppression to repent by taking themselves out of the mesh of large and small evil deeds that characterize so much of social intercourse, by refusing to explain their behaviour or accuse others, and by taking their wrongdoing upon themselves. What is surprising is that he calls for victims to do the same. He claims that victims are rarely blameless themselves. Though some sins will have been imputed to them, they will have been guilty of

others. Conflict and oppression produce enmity, which in turn makes victims want to take the place of the oppressors. Repentance for victims means resisting the seduction of the values and practices of the dominant order, and letting the “new order of God’s reign” be established in their hearts. He claims that the revolutionary character of Jesus’ message lies in the connection between the hope he offered to victims and the change he required of them. To the extent that oppression has put hatred in their hearts they need to repent of what the perpetrators have done to their souls. This is necessary for them to become the kind of social agents who can resist the dominant order of oppression, who are shaped by the values of God’s kingdom and are therefore capable of participating in genuine social transformation (Volf 1996, 113–10).

In a “drama of embrace,” Volf offers the four structural elements of a process that can reconcile alienated parties: opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms, and opening them again. All four must be there in an unbroken time-line. Opening the arms is a sign of discontent with one’s own self-enclosed identity, and of desire for the other. It is also a sign that one has made space in oneself for the other to come in and has initiated a movement out of oneself so as to enter the space created in the other. It also suggests a fissure in oneself through which the other may enter. Finally, it serves as an invitation and a soft knock on the other’s door. After opening the arms, the self rests at the boundary of the other, waiting for desire to arise in the other, and for the other’s arms to open. The other cannot be coerced or manipulated into embrace. Closing the arms is the goal of the embrace. It must be reciprocal, each party being active and passive. It must be a soft touch, and boundaries must remain in place. Neither oneself nor the other is denied. The identity of both is preserved and transformed. Preservation of the alterity of the other requires the skill of not understanding the other, which opens the possibility of new and better understanding. Finally the other must be let go of so that the “‘negotiation of difference’, which can ‘never produce a final settlement’,” can continue (Volf 1996, 140–44).

Volf’s work, especially his analysis of the problems inherent in the way moderns construct identity, is a strong resource for those who

would interpret a context of ethnic conflict and social rending such as South Africa. His highlighting of the pathological pursuit of purity, and his insight into how self and community are defined over against the other relate directly to the myth of apartheid as formulated by Totius and the Doppers. The Doppers had separated themselves from larger society because of a heightened concern for theological purity. They believed that the suffering and defeat of the Afrikaners during the Boer War resulted from the encroachment of unacceptable values and practices into Boer society. The war was a crucible in which God purified the divinely chosen people. To the extent that they were able to transmit an identity-constructing symbol system to Afrikaner society, they spread the pathos of their own method of building and maintaining identity. Not to say that this kind of exclusion of the other was restricted to Afrikaners. It is clear from the testimonies during TRC hearings and other sources that South Africans of all racial groups produced narratives denying the humanity of those whose skin colour, language, class, or ancestry were different from their own.

Another strength of Volf's analysis is his identification of the *politics* of purity, lived out by exclusions of assimilation, domination, and abandonment. As apartheid progressed from being a myth to a legislative program, all of these kinds of exclusion were practiced and embedded in legislation, proving Volf's point that this is not a question of ignorance but willful misconstruction. Still another strength of his analysis is his identification of the first and parental exclusion as alienation from oneself (the parallel being a community being excluded or alienated from itself). Obsession with purity comes from a neurotic rejection of something that lives within us, both as individuals and communities.

When Volf moves from description of the problem to prescription of the solution, however, his work is less helpful. His drama of embrace follows from his belief that the way to reconciliation is emulation of Jesus Christ, and his understanding of Christ's mission and passion is rooted in a very orthodox Protestant theology. The problem is that most human beings, not to mention communities, are simply incapable of moving in one leap from clinging to an identity built upon exclusion to emulation of the "divine self-donation." He

calls for a “nonfinal reconciliation based on a vision of reconciliation that cannot be undone,” but how can we expect the embittered and traumatized participants in the TRC, for example, to lift their eyes all the way to the horizon of such a vision? It is too far. It asks too much. As a result, Volf’s prescription becomes another version of Christian “pie in the sky” utopianism. People in difficult lived realities will fall short and be left with the guilt of having done so. Ricoeur’s work on narrative can help us understand, and perhaps move beyond, Volf’s limitations. His point of entry relates to Volf’s passage from description to prescription. Ricoeur’s sequence in *Oneself as Another* includes an intermediate stage.

*Oneself as Another* contains ten “studies.” While the entire work is concerned with the question of identity construction, the studies pass through several stages. Chapters one and two are concerned with a philosophy of language. They constitute an analytical tour through the language in which we talk about the self. Chapters three and four turn to a philosophy of action. There is a focus upon language about action, and upon speech acts. This stage of the work can be said to be about description—of actions that use language in such a way that questions regarding identity could be answered (“who is speaking,” “who is acting,” “who is designating herself as the one who acts”). Chapters five and six are centred upon the question of personal identity. Ricoeur links narrative identity with the philosophy of action because narrative is the imitation of action (*mimesis*). It is at this stage that Ricoeur builds upon and pushes further his examination of narrative identity in *Time and Narrative*. He does this by establishing a dialectic of identity through the juxtaposing of identity-sameness (*idem*) and identity-selfhood (*ipse*). We will delve deeper into this discussion below. The important point here is that before moving on to chapters seven through nine, which are concerned with ethics and morality (prescription), Ricoeur inserts an intermediary phase of philosophical labour between description and prescription. This labour has its home in the poetics of narrative, and deepens the probing of identity before asserting how identity should be lived out in relationships, communities, and institutions. The final study in *Oneself as Another*, chapter ten, explores the ontological consequences of

the hermeneutics of the self (Ricoeur 1992, 20, 114–15; cf. Reagan 1996, 75–76).

To be fair to Volf, his study in *Exclusion and Embrace* is of a very different sort than Ricoeur's study in *Oneself as Another*. Also, Ricoeur himself states that it is not essential that the activities of description, narration, and prescription always follow that sequence. Despite these qualifications, *Oneself as Another* exposes the lacuna in *Exclusion and Embrace*. Volf's description of flawed action constructive of identity is strong, but he misses (or does not stay long with) the action that is central to the formation of identity (personal or collective): narration. He does not deepen his analysis with an examination of how narrative identity is formed. As a result, he underestimates the extent to which narrative identity is central to one's perception of reality (temporality—more below). His prescription for more beneficial action toward the other is the incorporation of a reified narrative concerning the Christ (divine self-donation as depicted in an orthodox Protestant reading of Christ's passion) into the self, and an imitation of that narrative in communicative and social action. Such an incorporation would be very difficult if not false for most people engaged in an initiative such as reconciliation in South Africa. Most are not orthodox Protestants, and many have been led by their witnessing of atrocities and of very questionable actions by the churches to question Christian narratives and the nature of God. Volf calls for victims to repent of their desire for vengeance, and to let the "new order of God's reign" be established in their hearts. This call shows a troublesome underestimation of the deconstruction of narrative identity that would be required, and ignores the fact that the embracing of the "new order of God's reign" would require immersion in a complex and extended narrative in which God is the central character. The problem is that many victims find themselves doubting the existence of a loving God, or are angry with God. To borrow a phrase from Robert Jacques, they feel that "God is unforgivable."

The incorporation of reified narratives is not what is needed for any of the parties in such a context, but rather the opening of identity-constructing narratives to intersection with narratives created by individuals and groups who are different from oneself (or one's

group), even though this kind of opening requires an acceptance of vulnerability and suffering. Once (I use “once” here in an existential rather than sequential sense) there has been encounter with the other, and a passage through anger, mourning and other kinds of suffering, the question of God will raise itself up for incorporation in the newly emerging narratives. This question cannot be dealt with in a satisfactory manner if either the identity of God or the symbol system in which God is to be encountered is reified.

We turn now to a closer, but still very brief, examination of Ricoeur’s notion of narrative identity. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur develops the concept of narrative identity as an essential component of his poetics of narrative. These poetics are employed to respond to what he calls the “first aporia of temporality”: the mutual occultation of phenomenological time and chronological time.<sup>3</sup> His poetics of narrative respond to this aporia through a union of history and fiction—history being linked with cosmological time, and fiction with phenomenological time. Narrative identity is the “fragile offshoot” of the union of history and fiction (Ricoeur 1988, 244–46). It is also the locus of this union, because the construction of a narrative identity requires a kind of “emplotment” that fictionalizes history and historicizes fiction. Human experience of “the opaque background of life” is mediated by narrative. This narration provides human time and personal (as well as communal) identity.

Once we move into discussion of identity, another question arises. That is the question of the continuity, or as Ricoeur puts it, “permanence” of identity. Narrative identity is Ricoeur’s response to one aporia, and his entry into another.

This fragile offshoot from the union of history and fiction is the assignment to an individual or a community of a specific identity that we can call their narrative identity. Her “identity” is taken in the sense of a practical category. To state the identity of an individual or community is to answer the question, Who did this? Who is the agent, the author? We first answer this question by naming someone, that is, by designating them with a proper name. But what is the basis for the permanence of this proper name? What justifies our taking the subject of an action, so designated by his, her, or its proper name,



as the same throughout a life that stretches from birth to death? The answer has to be narrative. To answer the question, Who? as Hannah Arendt has so forcefully put it, is to tell the story of a life. The story told tells about the action of the “who.” And therefore the identity of this “who” itself must be a narrative identity. Without the recourse to narration, the problem of personal identity would in fact be condemned to an antinomy with no solution. Either we must posit a subject identical with itself through the diversity of its different states, or, following Hume and Nietzsche, we must hold that this identical subject is nothing more than a substantialist illusion, whose elimination merely brings to light a pure manifold of cognitions, emotions, and volitions. This dilemma disappears if we substitute for identity understood in the sense of being the same (*idem*), identity understood in the sense of oneself as self-same (*ipse*). The difference between *idem* and *ipse* is nothing more than the difference between a substantial or formal identity and a narrative identity (Ricoeur 1988, 246).

This is a remarkable passage, not only because it concentrates an extended and sometimes diffuse discussion, but also because it brings substantialist and narrative understandings of identity into such clear confrontation. In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur moderates this confrontation by depicting identity in terms of a dialectic between *idem* and *ipse*, but the opposition between the two and the centrality of narrative remain. The centrality of narrative “cracks open” identity, and speaks to an illusion that most of us live by most of the time. Even though we are continually reconstructing our selves through narration, we think of our identities as substantial, unchanging givens. When people or experiences threaten our identity by challenging the stories we are consciously *and unconsciously* telling ourselves, we experience this as threat. Volf does a good job of describing how we respond to this threat through exclusion.

The centrality of narrative cracks open another construction that we mistakenly assume to be reified: the past. This has implications for our understanding of identity and for our understanding of *truth*. One of the great obstacles to a reconciliation initiative like the TRC is the abiding sense that the past is a given that cannot be changed. Hannah Arendt speaks to this in terms of the irreversibility of action: “being

unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing" (1958, 237). We remain the victims of the consequences of action forever, even if those consequences could not have been foreseen. Totius's action of writing poems is a good example of this. He certainly could not have foreseen the consequences of the myth he did so much to formulate, but his descendants and all other South Africans live under the weight of those consequences. But Arendt asserts that humans have the capacity to break out of the consequences of action—a capacity that lies within the field of action itself. This is the faculty of forgiveness (236–44). It is interesting that Arendt describes forgiveness as the exact opposite of vengeance. This speaks to rending and reconciliation in South Africa. Totius's symbol system moved white South Africans to acts of exclusion (of all the kinds described by Volf). In response to these acts of exclusion, non-white South Africans confronted whites in a variety of ways. This led to further and more precisely formulated acts of exclusion, which led to more conflict, and on went the process until the country was pulled into a cycle of violence and revenge. The architects of the TRC understood that forgiveness was necessary to break this cycle:

We are privileged to be on this Commission to assist our land, our people to come to terms with our dark past once and for all. They say that those who suffer from amnesia, those who forget the past, are doomed to repeat it. It is not dealing with the past to say facilely, let bygones be bygones, for then they won't be bygones. Our country, our society would be doomed to the instability of uncertainty—the uncertainty engendered by not knowing when yet another scandal of the past would hit the headlines, when another skeleton would be dragged out of the cupboard.

We will be engaging in what should be a corporate nationwide process of healing through contrition, confession and forgiveness. To be able to forgive one needs to know whom one is forgiving and why. That is why the truth is so central to this whole exercise (Tutu 1996).

We seem to have wandered from our discussion of narrative, but this quote is a good return to the examination of narrative and the "cracking open" of the past. The architects of the TRC understood

that “skeletons in the closet” are alive—that the past is not reified and closed off, and attempts to make it so are dangerous. Ricoeur also understood this, and spoke of the past as within the space of experience that is open to rereading and reinterpretation. In his book, *Dieu livre au pardon des humains*, Robert Jacques takes an extended look at the way Ricoeur’s work opens the past and frees unactualized potentialities for re-entry into the play of human experience (1995, chaps. 4 and 5). As in the quote from Desmond Tutu, the themes of narrative, truth, and forgiveness converge in Jacques’s work. He asserts that the past is not “un *meme* que le savoir pretendrait dominer,” and the future is not an *other* that is never attainable. The past uncovers possibilities that abide. Action can accomplish or reverse these possibilities in the future (depending on the circumstances, either of these could amount to forgiveness). Narrative successfully articulated in the present is a repetition of “the possible” that turns to the past as a space of experience and to the future as a horizon of waiting. It is an approximation of the truth in which the elements of truth configure themselves historically. This requires a communication process in which reciprocity and reconnaissance of intention are achieved. The truth is achieved not through a conformity of perception or speech to “the way things really are,” but through the generation of a solidarity—“une responsabilite partagee qu’indique ici l’idee de *reciprocite*.” In Jacques’s worldview (which takes its cue from Ricoeur), truth (or at least one form of truth that is particularly relevant to hermeneutics) is an anticipation of humanity reconciled (1995, 110–13).

Again, this speaks directly to the TRC. The truth of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission must do justice to historical facts that relate to thousands of episodes of murder, torture, resistance, and courage. Those whose lives and futures were stolen must be given voice. Consider the following assertions by the Chilean philosopher and activist, Jose Zalaquett: “It will sometimes be necessary to choose between truth and justice, we should choose truth.... Truth does not bring back the dead, but releases them from silence.... Identity is memory.... Identities forged out of half-remembered things or false memories easily commit transgressions” (cited in Krog 1998, 32). But

freeing the dead from silence, releasing their voices to participate in the narratives that construe our reality and construct our identities is not enough. This must be done in a discourse that is committed not only to veracity in the sense of being true to “what happened,” but is also committed to truth in the sense of the anticipation of humanity reconciled. At this point, the pursuits of truth and forgiveness converge and become one. It is also at this point, having made our foray into the poetics of narrative, that Volf’s drama of embrace can re-emerge and be seen as a drama of hope.

The mention of Volf reminds us of the dilemma that needs to be further addressed by this essay—that of God. Standing at the end of the twentieth century, looking back over such events as the two World Wars, the Holocaust, Stalin’s purges, and the genocide in Rwanda, how do we talk about God? Orthodox and traditional theologies have been turned on their head. Belief in a God who is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving withers in the face of human suffering and ecological destruction. All three characteristics cannot hold at the same time. For many, the Holocaust was the final blow to any theodicy that could prop this God back up. For some South Africans, the revelations of the TRC were the final blow. But the question of God endures, and, for those who cannot settle with atheism, there is a need to restart the dialogue that addresses itself to this question. For those people, Robert Jacques’s book *Dieu livre au pardon des humains* is a wonderful resource. God has long been seen as central to discourse about forgiveness. Jacques turns this dialogue on its head, however, by placing God in the position of the one that stands in need of forgiveness.

L’affirmation d’un Dieu beneficiaire du pardon des etres historique apparait dans le contexte tant d’experiences individuelles de la souffrance que d’experiences collectives... cette parole appartient tout autant qu’au langage des petites gens qu’au langage des poetes et des penseurs. Egalement et surtout, cette parole conteste les idees traditionnelles sur Dieu, sur le sens de l’experience de la souffrance, sur les notions de peche, de culpabilite, de pardon, de salut. Elle est en quelque sorte l’expression exacerbee du renversement de ces idees dans l’experience religieuse contemporaine de plusieurs (Jacques 1995, 8).

Jacques discusses at length the validity of naming God as one who needs forgiveness, the human experiences that lead to such an utterance, and the legitimacy of granting or withholding that forgiveness. This essay will not follow him through those discussions. In the end he does not offer conclusive answers, but asserts that “la pensee ricoeurienne enseigne le renoncement a la parole definitive, au sens ultime” (1995, 153).

Our inquiry does not need conclusive answers to the question of God. In fact they would be counter to our purpose. This essay seeks to stay true to people, like the many participants in the TRC and those involved in the rebuilding of South Africa, who have been through powerfully deconstructing and disorienting experiences. Perhaps all people who live with eyes wide open at the beginning of the twenty-first century qualify. For these people an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving God with a reified identity is a temptation that offers certainty, sureness of footing. But this is a God who will return us to clashes of identity and exclusion of the other.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout his works on identity, Ricoeur rejects the *cogito*, the unmediated, idealized self that can be directly apprehended. He argues that we come to know ourselves by taking detours through symbols and symbol systems. His work points out the danger of ignoring the mediated nature of self-understanding and self-construction. The danger lies in desires for reified identities that are self-deceptive and destructive. In many ways the desire for a reified, idealized identity for God parallels this danger. It is time to challenge orthodoxies that list the things that cannot be said about God (God’s needing our forgiveness being a good example). A search for God in this time will require detours through a wide range of narratives and other symbol systems.

This essay has been about “cracking open”: cracking open identity, cracking open truth, cracking open God. As such it has paralleled the TRC hearings, which have cracked open all those things. When identity, truth, and God lay open, we are vulnerable. When they are closed off, we are dangerous. Paul Ricoeur, and his interpreters such as Robert Jacques, do us service. Their work opens a window to a new way of dealing with dilemmas such as identity, truth, and

God. It provides insight into the ways we construct our reality (emplotment), and, in doing so, confronts us with a responsibility we have always had but have often ignored at our peril. Their explorations of narrative seem to be opening more questions than they are closing, but they are also providing resources for living with these questions, not only on the level of theory, but also in contexts such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The historical interpretation delineated in this foray follows the work of Irving Hexam in *The Irony of Apartheid: The Struggle for National Independence of Afrikaner Calvinism Against British Imperialism* (1981). Hexam's work is revisionist and provides an interesting tableau for reflection upon the connections Ricoeur makes between history and fiction. This section of my essay builds upon and borrows from Daye 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Again, this relates to Ricoeur's description of the poetic nature of historiography, and his weakening of the barrier between history and fiction. See Ricoeur 1988, esp. section 2, "Poetics of Narrative: History, Fiction, Time."

<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur comes to this aporia through a very extended discussion that crosses the volumes of *Time and Narrative* and examines temporality in the thinking of philosophers from Aristotle to Heidegger.

<sup>4</sup> It is true that many people in crisis, including many who participated in the TRC, fervently cling to a traditional understanding of God. This can hardly be begrudged, and may actually enable a level of psychological integration that would otherwise be impossible. It is also true that many people with a traditional understanding of God are exceptionally inclusive and empathetic in their treatment of people very different from themselves.

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