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Stenographic fictions: Mary Benson’s *At the Still Point* and the South African political trial

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ABSTRACT

From the mid-1960s onward, compilations of the speeches and trial addresses of South African opponents of apartheid would help train international attention on the apartheid regime despite intensified repression in the wake of the Rivonia Trial. Mary Benson’s novel, *At the Still Point*, transposes the political trial into fiction. Its “stenographic” codes of representation open Benson’s text to what Paul Gready, following Foucault, has analyzed as the state’s “power of writing”: one that entangles the political trialist in a coercive intertextual negotiation with the legal apparatus of the apartheid regime. Through a form of metaleptic rupture, however, the novel is also opened to constructs of Holocaust memory. Drawing on Michael Rothberg’s paradigm of “multidirectional memory,” the article investigates how the novel stages other contestations over racialized suffering at the end of a decade that began with the capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann.

KEYWORDS

South African political trials; Mary Benson; the Holocaust; Eichmann trial; multidirectional memory

From the mid-1960s onward, compilations of the political speeches and trial addresses of South African opponents of apartheid would help train international attention on the apartheid regime despite intensified repression in the wake of the Rivonia Trial. A clandestine pamphlet, issued following the so-called Incitement Trial of 1962 that led to Nelson Mandela’s first incarceration on Robben Island,¹ is illuminating with respect to the unfolding of an emergent topos of the political trial in South Africa that would, over time, find cumulative expression elsewhere – in depositions, court records, journalism, broadsheets, memoirs, autobiography, literary texts, and auditory culture. The pamphlet, compiled in all likelihood by Ahmed Kathrada under the title “I Accuse! Speeches to Court by Nelson Mandela,” draws on Émile Zola’s defense of Alfred Dreyfus in an effort to juxtapose the anti-apartheid struggle with a notable instance of public intellectual political engagement in France following the Dreyfus Trial (1898).² If the invocation of Zola is unsurprising, the pamphlet is perhaps more remarkable as evidence of the networks of circulation that sustained it and which, in turn, it helped sustain. “WHEN YOU HAVE FINISHED PLEASE PASS IT ON” exhorts the banner on its front cover, underneath a 1961 photograph of Mandela taken by Wolfie Kodesh during

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¹Catherine Cole uses the term “Incitement trial” to differentiate it from the Treason and Rivonia trials with which it is sometimes confused. Cole, “Justice in Transition,” 82.

²“I Accuse,” n.d., American Committee on Africa (ACOA) Collection. My thanks to Rotem Giladi for this source. For Ahmed Kathrada’s role regarding the pamphlet, see Martha Evans “Nelson Mandela’s ‘Show Trials,’” cited with permission of the author.

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Mandela’s period underground. The injunction concretizes what David Featherstone has called the “labor of connection” required to forge “cultural solidarity” in the language of this special issue. The pamphlet conjures up an imagined addressee whom it positions a mere arm’s length away from further prospective addressees in a horizontal lattice of solidarity – an imagined community of resistance, so to speak, that is also distinctly embodied.

These imagined personal networks mirror the actual relations that often obtained between the activists who compiled similar interventions and the political prisoners on whose behalf they acted. Figures including Hilda Bernstein, Ruth First, Oliver Tambo, Anthony Sampson, and Kathrada, drew on richly textured personal connections with South African political prisoners as the source of their cultural and political authority. Although the writer, campaigner, and journalist Mary Benson no longer claims the recognition afforded to Bernstein, First, Kathrada, Tambo, or Sampson in whose circles she moved, she must rank among one of the most prolific of the various activists who sought to mobilize public opinion with specific reference to the South African political trial. Various an expatriate political campaigner; a dissident subject to banning orders and house arrest; and eventually, a political exile, Benson’s political involvement subsumed deeply personal dimensions. Her repeated engagements with the political trial, spanning many decades and multiple courtrooms, would prove pivotal for her oeuvre across a large variety of textual forms.

While Benson’s autobiography has drawn some critical commentary, the sheer extent of her writing on political trials in South Africa has not been noted. Similarly, very little attention been directed toward the significance of the political trial for Benson’s single novel, At the Still Point – the work that stands at the center of the discussion below. Benson’s At the Still Point was based on the author’s own experiences as a journalist for David Astor’s liberal British newspaper, the Observer, when she was appointed to cover the post-Rivonia trials of black South Africans in the Eastern Cape. Such coverage, Benson points out, was the exception rather than the rule:

\[\text{footnote 3}
\text{footnote 4}
\text{footnote 5}
\text{footnote 6}
\text{footnote 7}
\text{footnote 8}
\text{footnote 9}\]
Virtually all the trials have been held in camera, in villages remote from Port Elizabeth, on the grounds that state witnesses fear intimidation or reprisals, with resulting difficulty in finding defense counsel and in the Press being able to cover them, so that a dreadful pall of anonymity settles on the Trials.\textsuperscript{10}

The novel aspires to document social history at a time when South Africa was undergoing the transition from an authoritarian into a police state: a process marked among other things by a massive co-optation of the judicial system whose consequences for grassroots black South African activists the text helps to expose.\textsuperscript{11} Benson’s work restores to view the extended continuum of political trials in South Africa of the mid-1960s which has been somewhat obscured by the sheer synecdochical force of the Rivonia Trial. Its fidelity to the political history of the Eastern Cape notwithstanding, \textit{At the Still Point} is not an acclaimed novel.\textsuperscript{12} This does not mean that it is devoid of interest. The documentary aspirations of the text, arising directly from Benson’s positioning as a middle-class white activist who witnessed at first hand the apartheid state’s juridical assault on its black non-citizens, are typical of what I have elsewhere termed the “stenographic” orientation of apartheid-era literary culture – or its tendency to valorize the truth-telling function of committed literature in apartheid South Africa in accordance with explicitly realist semiotic codes.\textsuperscript{13} But this is the place to observe that the novel is stenographic in a second sense also, since it traverses that which properly unfolds between the courthouse walls. As my reading of the text progresses, I will take up the unusually proximate relation between Mary Benson’s activism and her fiction together with the courtroom setting of the latter under the double sign of the stenographic.

My argument will proceed through three stages, and two “scenes of writing,” so to speak.\textsuperscript{14} In the first stage, I will examine the consequences of the text’s documentary aspirations as it tracks the political prisoner in camera. The semiotic contract that sustains the “trope-of-truth” is never simple, my earlier work suggests, not least because of its disavowal of the kinds of mediations performed by the realist signifier.\textsuperscript{15} In the present instance, my argument will proceed slightly differently. Against the backdrop of the apartheid regime’s “power of writing” whose web of inscriptions thoroughly ensnared the South African political prisoner as Paul Gready has incisively argued, I will explore how a crucial segment of the novel is traversed by an agency belonging neither to Benson, nor to her surrogate Anne Dawson, as the state reads into evidence certain fictions that it

\textsuperscript{10}Benson, \textit{Struggle for a Birthright}, 276.

\textsuperscript{11}Concerning this transformation, see Swart, “Road to Freedom,” 164. Albertyn observes that: “The years 1963 and 1964 were decisive in crushing resistance, beginning with mass trials of POQO [sic] and the PAC [Pan-Africanist Congress], then trials of MK \textit{[uMkhonto we Sizwe]} and ANC leadership and, from 1964, trials of the ARM [African Resistance Movement] and white members and office-bearers of the SACP [South African Communist Party]. At least 4,505 arrests took place under various laws, of these 2,438 people were tried, 1,604 convicted and 1,167 released without trial.” Albertyn, \textit{Rivonia Trial}, 139.

\textsuperscript{12}In a not un-ambivalent appraisal, Paton would call the novel “good and sincere and compassionate, and most certainly true.” Alan Paton to Mary Benson, 1 July 1968, Alan Paton Center and Struggle Archives, PC56_1_1_34. My thanks to archivists Nazim Gani and Sherian Latif for their assistance.

\textsuperscript{13}See Bethlehem, \textit{Skin Tight}, 1.

\textsuperscript{14}See Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing.” I have also been influenced, more indirectly perhaps, by Phillip Lejeune’s “Autobiography in the Third Person” in his well-known work, \textit{On Autobiography}.

\textsuperscript{15}Bethlehem, \textit{Skin Tight}, 1–20.
has caused to accumulate around the figure of the prisoner and the political trialist. This section of my argument points to the manner in which the novel is imbricated in the state’s entextualization of aspects of the political prisoner’s biography, where entextualization denotes the process of producing “circulable texts” by “extracting discourse from its original context and reifying it as a bounded object.” This imbrication unsettles the boundaries between the codes of fictional representation and the lived contexts within which the state and its adversaries did battle over the construction of the biographies of political dissidents, Benson included. In the second stage of my argument, I will fold At the Still Point back onto the personal context that generated it, to entertain the wager that the novel comprises a type of “autobiography” in J. M. Coetzee’s well-known sense: that it crosses the lived experience of the author in dense, if defamiliarizing, conflation. Mindful of Coetzee’s assertion that “All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography,” I will risk the proposition that Benson’s own experiences of the state’s persecution of its opponents find displaced expression in this work through Benson’s revisiting of an act of annotation or transcription.

Early on in the novel, Benson briefly abandons first-person focalization, introducing into her text the substance of a “notebook” penned by a minor character, the Jewish political prisoner Paula Waszynski, who transcribes and reflects on writing by authors drawn from the extra-diegetic world beyond the pages of the novel. Entextualization of a different kind thus informs this second “scene of writing.” Moving beyond its speculative link to Benson’s own experiences, I will then proceed to question how Paula Waszynski’s notebook further complicates our appraisal of the figure of the political prisoner and the topos of the trial addressed in the novel. This turn in my argument, constituting its third stage, draws on Michael Rothberg’s paradigm of “multidirectional memory” to ask what else is read into Mary Benson’s novel, taking up the question of how the memory of political violence in South Africa was constructed for global audiences, particularly with respect to the staging of other contestations over race and racialized suffering. I will conclude my discussion of the multidirectional dimensions of the novel with a brief reflection on the transnational entanglements that result from Benson’s afterword to the Virago re-edition of her novel.

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16 Gready, Writing as Resistance, 28. Gready takes the phrase “power of writing” from Michel Foucault’s well-known study, Discipline and Punish. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this text for the variations on the phrase “reading into evidence” that this paragraph adopts and adapts.

17 See Joseph Sung-Yul Park and Mary Bucholtz, “Introduction Public Transcripts,” 486. Although the term predates Park and Bucholtz’s work, I found their linking of entextualization to forms of institutional power and authority particularly suggestive in relation to the topos of the trial in apartheid-era South African writing.

18 Coetzee, “Interview” 394. In a related manner, Stewart points to Benson’s construction of self across genres. “Despite her use of the traditional generic classifications autobiography, biography, history and novel,” Stewart claims, “it is soon apparent that we are in the company of a large autobiographical enterprise, as Benson shapes her own life while focusing on other lives that are important to her sense of what it means to be a South African.” Instead of offering us autobiography as introspection, Stewart claims, Mary Benson “develops an identity through her interaction with other people and through her attachment to public actions.” Mary Benson, 2. Benson’s biography of Mandela and her novel are thus seen as adjuncts to her autobiography.


20 At the Still Point, 42–6, and see discussion below.

21 Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory.
Stenography and selfhood I

At the Still Point makes no secret of constituting a roman à clef. Two of its central black protagonists were modeled on Govan Mbeki, fictionalized as Daniel Makhana, and James Calata, fictionalized as Samuel Qaba, as Benson records. The novel is also shot through with references to Benson’s close friend, Bram Fischer. The author’s disclaimer immediately preceding the novel alludes directly to Fischer (who is named Jakob Versfeld in the text) in a manner that bolsters its verisimilitude:

South Africa’s sabotage trials of 1963–1964 were over but from 1965 onward hundreds of Africans were brought to trial in remote villages. And early in 1965, a distinguished white lawyer, on trial as a Communist, disappeared and went underground. These facts of South African history provide the framework for this novel with its wholly fictional characters.

The shadow of the paratext falls upon the novel whose lost object, Fischer, himself imprisoned by the time of the publication of At the Still Point, is retrieved at the price of a melancholic splitting between the character of Versfeld and his friend and associate, Matthew Marais, the second Afrikaner lawyer portrayed in the novel. Marais is engaged in defending Beatrice Qaba, a woman charged with membership in the African National Congress, while journalist Anne Dawson, the first-person focalizer of the novel, is Marais’s lover. Dawson’s political awakening unfolds alongside her romance, allowing the novel to proceed in the recognizable grooves of what Benita Parry once termed the South African “liberal novel of stricken conscience.” A conventional liberal humanism frames the erotic bildung of the character whose “making” – to use a term drawn from the subtitle of Benson’s autobiography – proceeds via rather self-absorbed forms of interior monologue focused on Dawson’s subjective experience. Yet the same character’s political bildung, in thrall to an apparently to-taken-for-granted verisimilitude, deserves closer scrutiny.

Narratologically speaking, the novel’s mimetic aspirations vis-à-vis the South African political trial are naturalized through Anne Dawson’s role as a journalist, enabling her to reduplicate courtroom proceedings in a capacity that borders on amanuensis. Time and again, Benson rivets her narrator to the progress of a procedural drama whose outcome is predetermined by the apartheid state’s willful use of the courtroom to elaborate its own incriminatory fictions. Under apartheid, Paul Gready has argued,

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22See A Far Cry, 200; At the Still Point, 246–7. Makhana’s name alludes of course, to Robben Island, the carceral site par excellence that also featured in Benson’s journalism and radio dramas. Benson, “The Men on Robben Island” The Guardian 10 August 1964; “The Price of Freedom.” British Broadcasting Corporation Written Archives’ Center, Reading. My thanks go to Trish Hayes for her assistance with this archive. For a discussion of Makhana’s 1819 resistance to the British, his attempted escape from Robben Island and drowning, see Benson, Nelson Mandela, 154.

23At the Still Point, n.p. Emphasis mine.

24My allusions to Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” are fully intended. In a tribute to Bram Fischer entitled “A True Afrikaner” published in Granta magazine in 1986, Benson refers to their discussion of the Afrikaans terms “motrën” (soft rain) and “douvoordag” (dew before daybreak). “A True Afrikaner,” 12, repeated in A Far Cry, 170. The novel transposes this discussion into an exchange between Marais and Dawson. At the Still Point, 119. Benson’s homage to Fischer significantly predates its more famous counterpart, Nadine Gordimer’s Burger’s Daughter. Gordimer endorses the novel on the jacket of the Virago Modern Classics edition as a ‘live nerve of a novel.’

25The character was modelled on a nursing-sister, Zebia Mpendu, from the New Brighton township of Port Elizabeth whose trial Benson attended. Benson, A Far Cry, 199.

26Parry, “Speech and Silence,” 149.

life stories were most revealingly constructed at the interface between the state and its subjects/opponents during moments and encounters when both were seeking to inscribe and were contesting lives. In contexts such as the torture chamber, the courtroom, the prison cell, and exile, life-story texts became a paradoxical chorus of state and subject, neither straightforwardly autobiography nor biography but auto/biography. Identity construction, narration, and interpretation became violently collaborative.28

Seen through this lens, the novel affords an early and unusually sustained representation of the courtroom in anti-apartheid fiction as a pivotal arena for the “auto/biographical” capture of the South African political trialist. In one of its most rhetorically charged scenes, Anne Dawson records a long cross-examination between the state prosecutor and a young black prisoner, Jerry Mondlu that culminates in the following exchange:

“You Bantu have an inferior education?”
“Yes.”
“What’s that? Speak up!”
“Yes, Your Worship.”
“En jy is dood tevrede?” The Prosecutor must have been carried away; quickly he corrected himself. “I mean, you are dead happy with your lot, Jerry?”
“Dead happy, Your Worship.” The voice was small.
“Dead happy in your job?”
“Dead happy. I get my pay.”
Jerry’s round boyish face was quite blank, but his knuckles gleamed white in his tense hands. All of a sudden his hands went limp. I realized the Magistrate had spoken. Adjournment.29

The descriptive detail that concludes this segment drives a wedge between the prisoner’s verbal performance and its somatic archive since what the state produces as truthfulness is contradicted by the evidence of the detainee’s body.30 Our awareness of the prisoner’s coerced acquiescence in his own degradation is hereby heightened through the framing narration. The overlay of descriptive detail, deriving from Dawson’s focalization of the scene, underscores the point that Jerry’s speech-act is precisely not testimony. The “echolalia” that marks the speech of the accused betrays the violently collaborative intertextual relay between the prisoner and the state that forms a cornerstone of Gready’s analysis.31 The prosecution is seen to speak through the prisoner as it entextualizes anterior inscriptions of its own power derived from contexts of interrogation and torture. An “alien power of writing” in Gready’s phrase – alien to the prisoner, but alien also to the focalizer – takes up residence in the exchange, in accordance with consummately mimetic codes of representation.

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28 Gready, Writing as Resistance, 10.
29 At the Still Point, 144, italics mine, LB. In the interests of space, I have only replicated a short segment of the cross-examination, see ibid., 141–4.
31 I take the term echolalia from Gready’s discussion of the torture in police custody of Steve Biko See Gready, Writing as Resistance, 26. During torture, he observes, “The regime doubles its voice by making the detainee’s voice its own; the detainee echoes the brutalized and brutalizing voice of the interrogator,” ibid.
At the same time, I think it is useful to point out that the scene of cross-examination might equally be claimed to contravene the assumption that the liberal realist author maintains full mastery over the constitution of her fictional world in all of its dimensions. The alien power of writing that we have seen to inhabit this exchange is not so much evidence of Benson’s mastery of verisimilitude, I want to suggest, as it is alien to the fictional representation itself – arising instead from forms of discursive circulation that Benson does not herself author. If the boy-prisoner no longer coincides with himself, neither does the novel that contains him. I mean this very literally. In her autobiography, Benson reveals that this particular sequence was lifted verbatim from a courtroom in Cradock in the Eastern Cape during one of the court proceedings that she attended. “So extraordinary and disturbing was the cross-examination,” she records, “that I later used it verbatim in a novel and in a radio play.” This being the case, the novel does not offer a fictional representation of the state’s interrogatory practices vis-à-vis its opponents so much as provide a supplementary site for their reproduction. But there is more that can be said here. Realist mimesis, already estranged from itself through the device of stenography, will come to generate a secondary trail of defamiliarization when the scene is repeated across the novel, the radio adaptation and the autobiography. Now auto/biographical unsettlement gives way to its autrebiographical counterpart. Benson’s literal transcription of the original courtroom exchange across its iterations so thins the boundary between its fictional deployments and its entextualized reappearance and reattribution in the autobiography that the author and her focalizer are, for long paragraphs, indistinguishable.

Stenography and selfhood II

Mary Benson was herself no stranger to contestations between the South African state and its opponents over the auto/autrebiographical. On 15 February 1966, Benson was served with notices of banning and house arrest in terms of Section 10 of the Suppression of Communism Act. In a letter 8 days later to the Chief Magistrate of Johannesburg, she attempted to negotiate their terms. Benson requested permission to visit her aged father in Pretoria one day a week, then added: “My only other relatives (I being a spinster living in board and lodgings) are my sister, brother-in-law, and niece. I should be grateful for permission to have a meal with them from time to time.” The notion of spinsterhood, arguably anachronistic in the mid-1960s, traduces the singleness of a woman who lived passionately outside the boundaries of monogamy. Is this

32 See Michael Vaughan for one formulation of the homology between the liberal subject and narrative technique in South African writing: “If individuals hold potential mastery over the real world, it follows that a fiction which is concerned to promote this mastery must set an example in its own domain. Reality must be mastered, rendered amenable in every face. This implies an ideal of transparency – of absolute clarity. Liberal fiction aims at clarity, ease and concreteness of exposition,” “Literature and Politics,” 120.
33 Benson, A Far Cry, 201.
34 Compare the cross-examination scene in At the Still Point, 141–4 with its reiteration in A Far Cry, 201–2. We have already encountered evidence of Benson’s tendency to thin the boundary between fiction and autobiography in connection with Bram Fischer. See note 24 above.
35 B. J. Vorster to Dorothy Mary Benson. Institute for Commonwealth Studies, Mary Benson Papers, ICS 6/1/2, University of London, London.
37 See Benson, A Far Cry, 26–36, 148–9, Peter F. Alexander, Alan Paton, 244–8.
self-description a matter of the formalism that attaches to the use of “spinster” as an official legal status? Perhaps, although its recurrence in Benson’s address to a US Congressional committee suggests a certain amount of internalization.38 Either way, through identifying herself as a “spinster” Mary Benson touches upon the state’s capacity to perpetuate her aloneness and to ensure that the loss of social personhood will be the predominant feature of this stage of her life-course. Benson is punished precisely through being made to endure a continuum of isolation – not in a cell but in the newly carceral space of her home.

No charge to answer. No trial. No effective appeal. No means of protest, because thenceforth I could not be quoted in a newspaper without the editor committing a serious offence. In one way it is an honor to be house-arrested and banned: it means the South African Government dare not charge one with any offence even under the fantastic network of laws at its disposal; yet it so fears one, or one’s power as a writer, that it arbitrarily imprisons one’s talents and stunts one’s life.39

The reference here to “one’s power as a writer” is particularly telling. Benson’s house arrest was exacerbated by banning orders that prevented her from “‘preparing, compiling, printing, publishing, disseminating or transmitting in any manner whatsoever’ any book, newspaper, magazine, pamphlet, hand-bill or poster.”40 These wide-ranging prohibitions, we learn, were amplified by a further nine clauses. “In short,” she observed in her 1966 appearance before the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid after leaving South Africa for exile in London, “not only could I not transmit anyone else’s writings such as press cuttings or articles but private writing, a diary or letters, would be safe only if confined to the most innocuous of topics.”41 Not unexpectedly, the provisions of Benson’s banning orders created an entirely unwelcome interface between the (writing) subject and the state: “The psychological effects were immediate and shocking: a distinct drop in self-respect at obeying any of Vorster’s dictates, and a persecution complex [. . ..]”42 Yet Benson continued to attempt to write in defiance of the restrictions imposed upon her. “At times literally looking over my shoulder,” she confessed, “I made feeble attempts to go on with the novel I had been working on for some months, under the pretense I was making notes on other novelists.”43

An author annotates – or pretends that she does so. A novel in the making masquerades as something else – as a book of notes, a notebook. Thus, Benson momentarily, provisionally, feebly by her own admission, counters the near paralysis that the state’s stultifying power of writing has inflicted upon her own writerly capacity. But what are we to make of the fact that this novel, once realized, fictionalizes an act of annotation by introducing into its own pages the substance of a “notebook”? What consequences arise from this displacement of an anterior scene of writing – arguably imbued with traumatic affect deriving from Benson’s house arrest – in excess of this affect? How, in short, does the displacement work, and what work of memory does it perform?

38“I found painful the restrictions on having any visitors. And, of course, even partial house arrest at nights, weekends and holidays destroys one’s social life. For the first time in my life, I really felt [my] spinsterhood!” Benson, “Congressional Record,” 10868.
40Ibid., 12.
41Ibid.
42Ibid., 11.
43Ibid., 12, emphasis mine.
The *mis-en-scène* of annotation occurs in the first section of the novel in the context of a sub-plot involving a Jewish activist jailed for sabotage. Anne Dawson visits Paula Waszynski in jail at the request of Paula’s mother, a refugee and Anne’s former neighbor in London. The notebook irrupts into the novel at the conclusion of Anne’s prison visit to Paula. It constitutes an autonomous textual segment given over to Paula’s personal reflections (on her singleness, on a thwarted attack on her person, on marriage); commentary on recent South African history (Sharpeville, the sentencing of a white farmer who beat a black child laborer to death); musings concerning individual conduct and moral agency, as well as citations from Bruno Bettelheim, Albert Camus, and Miklós Nyiszli, as well as Boris Pasternak and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The notebook intrudes upon the unfolding narrative focalized by Anne Dawson through the device of a clumsy typographical caesura: “NOTEBOOK – PROPERTY OF P. WASZYNSKI.” The heading, with its underlining and its capital letters introduces an extended textual segment set in a smaller font: proper to/the property of P. Waszynski. The disruption of focalization that occurs here is compounded by further diegetic rupture since the notebook brings into play forms of writing whose materiality and facticity belong in the world outside the diegetic frame of the novel. This transcription precipitates a kind of metaleptic disturbance since the intertextual relay connects the fictional world in an illicit conjunction with “the ontological level occupied by the author as maker of the fictional world,” as Brian McHale has observed of metalepsis in a different context. At this point, the novel does not merely represent the extra-textual world through the codes of realist verisimilitude but incorporates within itself textual artifacts existing in that world; entextualizes them in evidence of certain moral claims; and puts them on display in what has effectively become a kind of daybook, collage, or album. By virtue of the content it introduces, this act of metaleptic rupture opens the novel to a set of questions that intersect the outward ripples of a different political trial that will, for the moment, wait in the wings of my argument.

**Metalepsis, memory, and complicity**

Paula Waszynski’s notebook begins with a citation from *Auschwitz: A Doctor’s Eye-Witness Account* by the Hungarian Jewish physician and concentration-camp inmate, Miklós Nyiszli. Nyiszli’s role as a forensic pathologist in Auschwitz and his part in Josef Mengele’s notorious medical experiments are not referenced. Rather we are offered commentary on the 7 October 1944 revolt of Sonderkommando No. 12 in the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex. “By fighting...”

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44 Benson, *At the Still Point*, 25.
45 Ibid., 42–6. In the discussion that follows, I will restrict myself to Benson’s use of non-fictional sources.
46 Ibid., 42.
47 McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 213, and see also his discussion of metalepsis as the violation of ontological hierarchy, ibid., 119–130.
48 I want to thank Cynthia Gabbay for drawing my attention to her use of the terms “album” and “collage” to describe similar instances of intertextual incursion in the work of Julio Cortázar. See Gabbay, “El álbum cortazariano,” forthcoming.
49 Small groups of Jewish prisoners were assigned to the Sonderkommandos (special units) and forced to work in the killing installations in the Nazi extermination camps. In October 1944, Jewish Sonderkommando prisoners who had learned of their...
own impending liquidation staged a revolt independently of the non-Jewish resistance movement in Auschwitz with whom they had been in contact. Some turned on and killed their guards using improvised weapons while others blew up one of the crematoria using explosives smuggled into their possession by women inmates working in the munitions factory. See Gidon Graif, We Wept Without Tears, 40–50.

56 Benson, At the Still Point, 42, emphasis in original.

57 Nyiszli, Auschwitz. See Benson, At the Still Point, 42.

58 "If today Negroes in Africa march against the guns of a police that defends apartheid – even if hundreds of them will be shot down and tens of thousands rounded up in concentration camps – their march, their fight will sooner or later assure them a chance of liberty and equality." Ibid., 45–6, italics in original.

59 Ibid., 43.

60 Anti-racist activists inside South Africa had drawn on the Nazi analogy since the early 1940s to clarify the nature of the system they were opposing, and [...] in exile, their diplomatic strategy relied in part on branding their struggle as "the most important moral battle in the world since the defeat of Nazism." Gilbert, "Jews and Racial State," 34, citing Mark Gevisser, Thabo Mbeki, 397. x.

61 The exiled communist Brian Bunting, for instance, frames his account of the apartheid regime through analogy to the Third Reich, detailing anti-Semitism in South Africa in a work references the concentration camps only in passing. The Rise of the South African Reich, 60–8; and 212. Roni Mikel Arieli has charted exceptions to this tendency in an innovative reading of Ahmed Kathrada’s position on the Holocaust that considers his 1951 visit to the Warsaw Ghetto and Auschwitz, "Kathrada in Post-War Europe." For the Soviet position see Thomas C. Fox “The Holocaust under Communism.”

62 For the evolution of this campaign, see Genevieve Klein, “The British Anti-Apartheid Movement,” 459–60.
and Bertrand Russell were among its signatories.\textsuperscript{57} The organizers simultaneously attempted to secure the signatures of formerly imprisoned Danish, Polish, and French members of the resistance against the Nazis in Occupied Europe – but unsuccessfully so.\textsuperscript{58} In contrast with Benson’s novel, the invocation of Nazi Germany on the part of anti-apartheid constituencies in Britain proceeds independently of any mention of the internment or extermination of Jews, or of their resistance. What might account for Benson’s alternative perception of the Nazi genocide in her novel published at the end of the decade?

The novel offers evidence, I believe, of a broader shift within the construction of collective memory regarding the Nazi genocide in the global public sphere over the mid-1950s and 1960s – one whose articulation has itself become possible given recent developments in Holocaust historiography. Just as dissident Holocaust scholars working outside of received Israeli nationalist and Jewish diasporic accounts of the genocide of European Jewry have increasingly linked the Nazi genocide to forms of necropolitics heavily dependent on race, imperialism, the dissolution of continental European empires and the long aftermath of colonization rather than resorting to explanatory models that perpetuate transhistorical understandings of “antisemitism,” so too has Holocaust memory been reevaluated.\textsuperscript{59} Over the last decade, Michael Rothberg’s influential paradigm of “multidirectional memory” has catalyzed non-identitarian understandings of the evolution of Holocaust memory that challenge what he calls the “ugly contest of comparative victimization” that informs the cultural politics of our times.\textsuperscript{60} Multidirectional memory foregrounds “the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance” on the part of varied, even agonistic constituencies.\textsuperscript{61} For Rothberg:

the emergence of the collective memory of the Nazi genocide in the 1950s and 1960s takes place in a punctual dialogue with ongoing processes of decolonization and civil rights struggle and their modes of coming to terms with colonialism, slavery, and racism.\textsuperscript{62}

He sees the period of the French war against Algerian independence (1954–1962) as crucial for understanding synergies between narratives of collective memory generated in response to historical circumstances often considered incommensurate with one another. Rothberg focuses predominantly on Francophone corpora, with some consideration of African American and Caribbean contexts. Although his volume does not include a direct reckoning with South Africa, the anti-apartheid struggle richly deserves to be addressed within this framework.\textsuperscript{63} Benson’s entextualization, through Waszynski, of specific works by Albert Camus in juxtaposition with the

\textsuperscript{57} Bodleian Library, Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1956–1998, MSS AAM 1781 Former Prisoners’ Letters, Oxford University, Oxford. I would like to thank Lucy McCann for her generous assistance with this archive.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. Comparisons between Mandela and leaders of the French resistance were not unknown. In her 1964 appearance before the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid, Benson cites the Observer’s comparison of Mandela to “a true leader of the Resistance (to the Nazis) in Occupied France;” in other words, a hero” “Statement, 11 March 1964,” 3.
\textsuperscript{59} Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics.” For a notable entry in the new Holocaust historiography, see Raz Segal, Genocide in the Carpathians. For the globalization of Holocaust memory, see Amos Goldberg and Haim Hazzan’s volume, Marking Evil.
\textsuperscript{60} Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory, 7.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{63} See Bethlehem, “Research Proposal,” and Roni Mikel Arieli “Remembering the Holocaust” which draws centrally on Rothberg’s model. In later work, Rothberg engages with apartheid and its legacies in the context of a discussion of
referencing of Nyiszli, Bettelheim, and Simone Weil is explicitly multidirectional in Rothberg’s sense.\textsuperscript{64} The novel suggests that the “ordinarily unacknowledged cross-referencing” which obtains between the evolution of a globalized Holocaust memory and decolonization also plays out on the specific terrain of the anti-apartheid struggle.\textsuperscript{65} Benson’s entextualizations triangulate between the South African liberation struggle; the genocide of European Jewry; and via Camus, the French war against Algerian independence.\textsuperscript{66}

Without discounting this synergy, I would like to point to additional factors that arguably inform Benson’s evocation of the Holocaust. At the Still Point was published toward the end of a decade that commenced with Eichmann’s capture by Israeli intelligence agents in Argentina in May 1960 and his subsequent trial in Jerusalem between April and December 1961. Broad scholarly consensus exists around the claim that the Eichmann trial served as a “threshold moment of Holocaust memory” in R. Clifton Spargo’s helpful articulation, “ushering in an era of widespread knowledge about the Holocaust as a historical event, distinct from the events of the Second World War.”\textsuperscript{67} Rothberg’s stated aim of elucidating a “long-term minoritarian tradition of ‘decolonized’ Holocaust memory” through juxtaposing its evolution with unfolding discussions of state violence, racism, and decolonization in the context of the Algerian war leads him to contest the preeminence of the Eichmann trial in existing historiographic accounts, without wholly dismissing its importance.\textsuperscript{68} That Benson’s At the Still Point, is explicitly multidirectional does not imply that we should discount the Eichmann trial as one of its tacit contexts. The emergence of the cultural construct of the Holocaust survivor, partly a consequence of the Israeli state’s strenuous deployment of testimony during the Eichmann Trial, contributed massively to the shifting terrain of memorialization.\textsuperscript{69} The use of testimony – a decision grounded in the pedagogical priorities of the Israeli state under David Ben Gurion rather than in the formal procedures of criminal jurisprudence, as critics including Hannah Arendt have pointed out – had important consequences.\textsuperscript{70} Survivor testimony allowed for the legitimation of a powerfully teleological arc that served to vindicate Zionist nationalism through, among other things, the latter’s appropriation of narratives of Jewish armed resistance against the Nazis, among them the Sonderkommando revolt that Benson’s character, Paula Waszynski, foregrounds.\textsuperscript{71} At the same time, the trial crucially
conferred upon those who testified “the social identity of survivors because society now recognized them as such,” Annette Wieviorka has argued, thus opening the way for the personalization of the memory of racialized suffering and mass political violence.72

The status of the Eichmann trial in the English-speaking public sphere would be inseparable from the polemics surrounding Hannah Arendt’s volume *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, particularly in the US.73 While it has been argued that the impact of Arendt’s work was more muted in Britain,74 it is nevertheless the case that the Eichmann trial was the object of considerable scrutiny in the intellectual circles to which Benson belonged. David Astor, Benson’s close associate, and novelist Muriel Spark, who traveled to Jerusalem for the Eichmann trial on Astor’s behalf, were both centrally involved in its cultural mediation: Astor in his capacity as a journalist and Spark through her own representation of the trial in her 1965 novel, *The Mandelbaum Gate*.75 As the decade progressed, the diffusion of Arendt’s ideas in specifically literary spheres in Britain and America led to the emergence of recognizable repertoires of literary response dominated by what Spargo terms an “aesthetic of complicity.”76 In Spargo’s account, this aesthetic pivots on a constitutive misreading of Arendt’s claims, chiefly “the notion that Eichmann’s so-called ordinariness could be taken as a figure for humanity in its everyday function within society.”77 For diverse writers publishing in the aftermath of Arendt’s intervention, including Saul Bellow, Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath, and Muriel Spark, Eichmann serves not only as “an occasion for recollecting the Holocaust,” in Spargo’s words, but also for “figuring the average person’s complicity with or obedience to unjust political structures.”78

In South Africa of the early 1960s, the Eichmann trial saw Jewish and Afrikaner constituencies pitting foundational narratives of suffering central to their respective nationalisms against one another, as Jewish claims concerning the singularity of the Holocaust were opposed by Afrikaner references to the British concentration camps of the South African War.79 Commentary on the potential analogy between Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa in the national press was rare, but not entirely absent. The *Cape Times* observed,
regarding Eichmann’s notorious defense that he was merely carrying out orders, that

It is easy to gasp with horror at the extreme effect of this outlook in the case of an official like Eichmann; it is easier still to ignore similar situations at home when the effects are less spectacular but the principle is identical.\footnote{Cape Times, 12/7/1961. S.A. Rochlin Archives, Johannesburg, 527 Eichmann A.1961. I want to thank Roni Mikel Arieli for this reference.}

Benson raises the stakes of this analogy through a more radical calculus of complicity. Anne Dawson’s involvement with the apparatus of the political trial precipitates a reckoning with what Benson elsewhere terms the “special culpability” of white South Africans.\footnote{Benson, \textit{A Far Cry}, 147.} Dawson’s insight – “I was one of this corrupt society”\footnote{Benson, \textit{At the Still Point}, 155.} – may be juxtaposed against the rather histrionic analogy that Waszynski constructs between Nyiszli’s complicity with the Nazi regime, and the corresponding complicity of segments of English-speaking or Jewish South African society:

Indifference equals support of Verwoerd and Voster. Apathy led to the Nazis’ gas chambers. To be indifferent is to condone. Worse! It is to collaborate. What is the moral distinction between the doctor who cut up his fellow Jews, who dissected two-year old twins, \textit{knowing} they’d been killed specially, knowing knowing KNOWING, and Hitler and the SS who ordered the experiments? Where draw the line between Jews here who gave a gold medal to the Prime Minister and the farmer who beats a laborer to death? Between Verwoerd and the English-speaking businessmen who whitewash apartheid? Business as usual!\footnote{Ibid., 46. Capitalization and italics in the original.}

Yet the letter that Paula Waszynski writes to Anne Dawson from jail toward the end of the novel reconfigures her understanding of this field of relations.

[Each] of us is involved in the deeds of all men since the beginning. It is not a question of white and black or have and have not, not a question of liberal communist christian muslim hindu [sic]. It was quite clear I am the prisoner and the jailer, the victim and the executioner. I am the jew and the nazi [sic]. They are in me and I in them by reason of our common humanity and inhumanity.\footnote{Benson, \textit{At the Still Point}¸ 186.}

At this stage of the novel, the character’s embrace of a kind of universal complicity is autarkic: complicity is no longer opposed to action, nor does the generalized state of complicity that Paula Waszynski describes serve as a path of entry into the political along the lines of Mark Sanders’s well-known reworking of complicity as “human foldedness,” for instance.\footnote{Mark Sanders, \textit{Complicities}, 17.} Instead, it is left to a different character, Nathaniel Qaba, Beatrice Qaba’s brother, to take up the imperative of resistance: “I am going for guerrilla training. Our brains, our bodies, must be made one with our weapons […] How else can we, the black people, win back our land and our dignity?”\footnote{Benson, \textit{At the Still Point}, 241.} Through facilitating Nathaniel Qaba’s flight into exile, Anne Dawson expiates her complicity while indirectly aligning herself with armed resistance – a stand that Benson herself found problematic.\footnote{Benson, \textit{At the Still Point}, 241.}
framed with explicit reference to the Nazi genocide of the Jews and with implicit reference to the Eichmann trial, reveals some of the tensions generated around the so-called turn to violence on the part of the South African liberation movements, at a time when the legitimacy of armed struggle on the part of racial minorities and third-world liberation movements was much debated in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968, the civil unrest in France of May 1968, the Vietnam War, and the radicalization of such solidaristic bodies as the World Council of Churches.88

Afterlives

In 1988, Mary Benson’s *At the Still Point* was reissued in the Virago Modern Classics series. The re-edition contains an afterword by Benson, dated London December 1987, and presented in the future perfect:

South Africa in 1965: as Ben Lowen puts it in the novel, though the sabotage has been well and truly crushed, the Security Police continue “bulldozing every crumb of protest.” He is referring to the Eastern Cape. Yet within a few years Steve Biko and other young Blacks from that area were to found the Black Consciousness Movement, helping to inspire the 1976 uprising when Black schoolchildren in Soweto confronted heavily armed police.89

Benson’s afterword goes on to trace additional developments that have occurred in South Africa since the publication of her novel: Bram Fischer’s death, the killing of Steve Biko in police custody, the assassination of Ruth First, and the murder of the Cradock Four, among other losses. The passage of time also authorizes a kind of textual afterlife for the protagonists of Benson’s fiction. Anne and Matthew have married and have remained in South Africa, whereas Paula’s impassioned earlier realization that “Israel is not the answer” is retracted by the author in a gesture that abrogates the character’s South African nationalism.90 On Paula’s release from prison, Benson tells us, she “would emigrate to Israel” – her political engagement on this new terrain prefigured by her time in an apartheid prison. “Soon she would be among the outspoken few, criticizing West Bank settlement and the activities of the security services.”91

Benson’s afterword entertains a staggered temporality. It is proleptic in relation to the events of the novel that it frames.92 At the same time, the afterword is also radically

88 Although Mandela meticulously argued for the legitimacy of armed struggle in his own speech from the dock, his position was not universally accepted by progressive coalitions in Britain at this time. Writing of the mid-1960s, Genevieve Klein observes that “The AAM and Amnesty International established good relations, although they clashed over the issue of armed struggle. Amnesty International chose not to declare Mandela a Prisoner of Conscience as a result of his participation in the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC, while the AAM believed that its role was merely to provide solidarity with those struggling against apartheid. Klein, “The British Anti-Apartheid Movement,” 457. On the question of violence in Mandela’s courtroom address, see Derrida, “Laws of Reflection,” 40–1.” For the radicalization of the World Council of Churches, see Zalmanovich, “What is Needed.”
89 Benson, *At the Still Point*, 243.
90 Ibid., 249, 43.
91 Ibid., 250.
92 To this extent, the novel mimics the responsive futurity that Carrol Clarkson sees as inhering within the “time of address” of Mandela’s speeches from the dock. Carrol Clarkson, “Time of Address,” 235. Mandela’s iteration of his political credo after his release from prison on 11 February 1990 Clarkson argues, concretizes a national community anticipated decades earlier in his appearances in the Pretoria and Rivonia trials. Mandela countersigns his speech from the dock enabling us to perceive its “anticipation of a future ‘what happened then now.’” Ibid., emphasis in
synchronous with its own historical moment, at least as far as Paula Waszynski is concerned. The writing of the paratext in December 1987 coincides with the outbreak of the First Intifada (intifādah or uprising in Arabic) in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Benson does not offer her contemporary readers a fully fledged comparison between apartheid South Africa and the Israeli regime, but neither does she skirt it entirely. And if Paula travels in Mary Benson’s imagining of her, it is already the case that apartheid, as a political signifier, has long since also traveled – emerging into the Hebrew-speaking public sphere in Israel as early as 1953 when liberal Zionist, Ezriel Carlebach used Alan Paton’s Cry, The Beloved Country to criticize the policies of the socialist government of the day regarding the allocation of confiscated Palestinian land. 93 In our own times, the “restlessness” of apartheid as a political signifier is perhaps nowhere more deeply contested than when the “apartheid analogy” is used in the context of the Israeli Occupation of Palestine or in relation to policies implemented by the Israeli state within the 1967 borders. 94 Restlessness, Benson has already intuited, whether at the level of political semiosis or at the level of the itinerary of the exiled activist, is not easily contained. Through its entextualizations, At the Still Point rehearses a metaleptic capacity to authorize new forms, new fictions of cultural solidarity.

Paula Waszynski’s middle-aged daughter begins a notebook. “Pre-trial motions of a young Palestinian girl accused of slapping a soldier started today,” it transcribes. “‘For her own good’ – she turned seventeen in prison – the military judge decided to hold the proceedings behind closed doors with only her lawyers and family present.” 95

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original. Clarkson draws the phrase “what happened then now” from Scott Veitch’s account of amnesty, “Legal Politics of Amnesty,” 36.


94 I address the apartheid analogy in greater detail elsewhere within the framework of a broader analysis of the “restlessness” of apartheid as an itinerant political signifier, where the notion of “restlessness” draws on the work of sociologist, Robin Wagner-Pacifi. See Bethlehem, “Restless Itineraries”; and Wagner-Pacifi, “Theorizing the Restlessness of Events.”

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