

# Witnessing the Knowable Past: Knowledge, Truth and Humanity in Three Testimonies

Vasu Reddy

## Introduction

If 'history' could be defined as the naming of historical subjects, then what the narrative signals in testimony is the extent to which the speaking subject who is knowable about his or her experience is knowledgeable about his or her past. To be 'knowable' does not necessarily imply the capacity to be 'knowledgeable'. Such a problem may be overcome when we identify a correspondence between the subject who posits this claim in 'telling' or 'writing' and the extent to which it defines its knowing in the conditions it sets up in the narrative.

At the denotative level, knowledge may point to 'facts', 'feelings' and 'experiences' of the subject. Firstly I deploy knowledge as a distinguishing feature in processes of witnessing in the texts by Albie Sachs, Deneys Reitz and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Secondly I root the analysis in a problematization of the supposed 'truth' claims of each text. Thirdly, I assess some of the 'truth' claims in the texts against the so-called humanizing effects of testimony. Fourthly, the article briefly assesses the notions of knowledge, truth and humanity (concepts central to reading the texts as testimonies) in relation to what I describe as the texts' construction of a specialised version of truth in relation to self and event. The strategy used in analysis is a comparative reading, rather than a separate reading of the three texts.

The texts chosen require some explanation: Deneys Reitz's *Commando: A Boer Journal of the Boer War* (1929), Albie Sachs's *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (1966), and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981). It is not the question of geographical and cultural difference which marks a distinction between the three texts that interests me. Sachs' and Ngugi's diaries both foreground their prison experiences, while Reitz's journal accounts for his role as soldier in the Anglo-Boer War. What all three texts share is not simply a mode of self-narration wherein the 'I' as subject figures the 'experience' of a past; nor do they simply reflect a generic similarity as a species of autobiographical writing. My claim is that all three

texts, despite their generic similarities and/or differences, manifest themselves as testimonies, the theoretical possibility shown by all three texts. I am simultaneously aware that the three texts could be replaced by other texts in order to show that any autobiographical text could be construed as a form of testimony.

The three texts reveal the histories of three subject positions: a historical, a contemporary and the perspective of a non-South African subject in order to contrast it with the experience of Sachs as white prisoner. As will be indicated later on in this article the position of the subjects as witnessing subjects focuses on a particular human condition: Reitz as soldier in the Anglo-Boer War; Sachs as prisoner in the scheme of apartheid South Africa and Ngugi as prisoner in a neocolonial prison in Kenya. For the purpose of this discussion one could identify the subject positions as based on the binary opposition of colonial / neocolonial. Another interesting point of comparison between Reitz and Sachs is their discussion of the Anglo-Boer War, since Sachs analyses his family's ordeal during this war.

The article therefore proceeds from the hypothesis that all three subjects testify to a witnessed account of a real experience. It is in this sense that I am showing they are 'knowable' and 'knowledgeable' subjects. And the distinguishing features of these testimonies are their claims to knowledge, truth and humanity, concerns that advance the witnessed account as a special case of both self and event. I offer a reading of these concerns by borrowing concepts from a broad range of theorists such as Lyotard, Fanon, Foucault, Said, Williams and Felman. For the purposes of this article, I read some of their concepts into the text without fully presenting a detailed model of their work. By using this method, I hope to show what insights the work of these critics bring to an understanding of testimony in relation to these texts. My position in this essay is to argue that autobiographical writing, and especially species which belong to it (such as diaries and the journal in this case) are testimonies. And the way I show this is by reading the concepts of truth, knowledge and humanity, which I take to be defining moments of testimony, into the three texts.

## Knowledge and Truth

When Lyotard (1984:77) identifies in the production of scientific knowledge 'the rule that there is no reality unless testified by a consensus between partners over a certain knowledge and certain commitments' (e.a.) he suggests that testified knowledge is not essentially the 'truth' of the self which develops from a relationship between interlocutor and interviewee (as is the case in oral historical projects). He also distinguishes between 'scientific' and 'self-legitimizing narratives'. The latter for him constitutes not simply an alternative mode of knowledge but essentially one which privileges and legitimizes a 'localized' knowledge. By the latter is meant 'knowledge' which is relevant to the extent that it enhances the possibilities of re-

establishing the 'presence' of an event. What we conceive then are the possibilities that such a partnership presents, which is why it is logical to talk about the knowledge-effects and truth-effects of the testimonies as opposed to the essentialist categories of 'knowledge' and 'truth'.

And here there are two questions to which we may attend in addressing this dynamic. Firstly, if 'knowledge' as I claim is recognised as a marker, then what 'type' of knowledge is constituted in these texts? Secondly, if 'knowledge' is closely imbricated in the notion of 'truth' what would this be, if it is understood in the Barthesian (1990:11) sense as 'the legality of the text'? In a sense questions of 'telling' and 'writing', as an exercise in the retrieval of memory and history imply that the subjects in these texts are epistemologically privileged. It also means that to testify as knowable subjects is to consolidate the subjects' superior knowledge.

In the case of Sachs the 'knowledge' that we (as readers) bear witness to is the following: his political activities as an ANC activist, his professional support as an advocate to members of the banned ANC and South African Communist party, his subsequent detention and the conditions of both the prison and his 'experience'. The latter is significant for it directs us to the 'absolute power' of the prison authorities, the disciplinary regime of the prison, and a more localized feature of the broader state machinery translated as the 'law' as a 'superior power' (152). Sachs' fiction is therefore premised on describing the extent to which his detention, imprisonment and subsequent release represent as Rosemary Jolly (1996:62) would have it in her study on colonization and violence in white South African fiction, as the 'structures of violence, and an attempt to confront these structures'. The anecdotes and a bit of personalised history that Sachs frames, as recounted by the Station Commander in Wynberg, point firstly to the question of his 'relationship' with the latter (who is the focus of part two of his text). The 'history' he recounts in relation to his family, their losses and oppression at the hands of the British in the Anglo-Boer War shows that Sachs considers such information valuable evidence to reinforce the account of his own oppression. Ironically it also points to the contradiction in the actions of the apartheid political system in the wake of the Afrikaners' own oppression by the British. His situation as political detainee is represented in the narration by probing his own consciousness as he informs about his interrogation, his physical and mental battles. His account forces us to recognise that the memory that is 'internal' is 'internal' firstly to the extent that it signals his 'presence' in a confined space (the cell), and secondly, that it is 'internal' to the extent that he is able to externalise it by bringing to the fore the 'evidence' of that consciousness.

If Ngugi's testimony is labelled in broad terms as an account of detention and imprisonment in a neo-colonial and anti-imperialist project, then it stands to reason that his fiction is bent on recuperating the signifiers central to that event. His arrest and the detail that goes with it, ('a yellow Volvo driven by Superintendent

Mburu', 18), the recording of his detention in the Kenya Gazette 6 January 1978 (19), the prison conditions which he describes as 'animal degradation' (104f) and the violation of 'democratic and human rights in prison' (113) point to his status as 'knowable subject'. The 'evidence' in the narrative is his knowledge to which he bears witness. The epistemological basis of his testimony, like Sachs', is borne out of the power that the state wields over him. The latter calls into question the structure of conflict and violence. In Paul de Man's (1979:270) reading of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, particularly his reference to the state (as a defined entity, *état*) and the state as a principle of action (*souverain*) we may read into both the testimonies by Sachs and Ngugi that the power the state wields is one which is linguistically operating here as 'souverain'. In other words, the power that is exercised is one which paralyses Ngugi; and he says, 'one had no power to resist if it was forced on one' (99).

This 'knowledge', which forms the 'evidential' focus in the text, operates to re-produce the 'knowable' subject as knowledgeable. The latter may be hypothesized as the extent to which the subject succeeds in legitimating its position in relation to the 'event' and its description. Such an operation might seem particular to testimony in the sense that the 'knowable' subject labours to 'prove' its past in the narrative.

The 'knowledge' Reitz recounts about his war experiences also operates as the subject's will to explain, to dramatize his position both as a member of a commando in the war effort, and his position as sight-seer with a claim such as 'I personally witnessed' [a range of episodes and events - 162]. This subjectivity that Reitz espouses (like Sachs and Ngugi) suggests that the epistemological underpinning of his telling, such as the skirmishes on the battlefield, is designed to suggest that the 'knowledge' which we read into his account is itself a condition for reasserting the relation between agency, power and struggle.

There are also some revealing 'statistics' which lend a level of objectivity to Reitz's project. On the battlefield Reitz takes notice of a 'French gentleman' (138) and a Jew (234) fighting on the side of the Boer forces, named by the 'knowable' Reitz as evidence of his eye-witness account. By Boer forces is understood the Dutch and Huguenot settlers in the Cape colony, Orange Free State and Transvaal. But Reitz's 'quotation' of these foreign nationals working in tandem with the Boer military opens for his testimony an epistemological significance that suggests, as a historical episode, that the 'discovery' of these subjects is a 'moment' of 'truth'. For the reader this may also signal a moment which occasions an evaluation of the possible significance that Reitz's 'discovery' poses as a way of reading the Boer War as a war fought solely by Afrikaners. An identification such as this opens up a critical space in which the reader is compelled not simply to read the representation of the 'Jew' and 'Frenchman' as allies of the Boer forces, but tempted rather to ask what the knowledge of such an episode poses for the truth claims of his testimony. It might be

the case that Reitz's reference to these allies serves to reinforce the 'truth-fullness' of Reitz's witnessing.

Another issue informing the question of knowledge that could be comparatively illustrated especially in regard to both Sachs and Ngugi's testimonies is the citation of the Bible and Christian imagery. In both texts we read the Bible on one level is the only reading matter for both Sachs and Ngugi as prisoners. On another the 'Bible' takes on symbolic significance: it calls into question the State's religious duty to its prisoners. That 'duty' might be an attempt to 'constrain' their aggression and resistance by providing both Sachs and Ngugi with the Bible.

In Ngugi's text, Christian imagery is used as a vehicle to advance a millenarian belief in a possible political 'freedom' from oppression, one which does not represent his support of a theological understanding of salvation. An example is his deployment of the figure of Lazarus to condemn the corrupt history of the Kenyan neocolony: 'Colonial Lazarus raised from the dead: this putrid spectre of our recent history haunted us daily at Kamiti prison' (63). The biblical figure of Lazarus becomes a symbol of hope and redemption. Gikandi (1995:61) refers to the figure of Lazarus as follows: 'Since the 1920s, the Africanized Christian Churches of Central Kenya used the figure of Lazarus (Lazaro in the Gikuyu bible), as a symbolic—and quite dramatic—site for representing the emotions of loss and the possibility of redemption'. In this sense Lazarus (as knowable figure), is not just a character from the Bible but a cultural symbol of hope which Ngugi valorizes to explore the suffering of oppressed Kenyans in the postcolony.

In Ruth First's *117 Days* (which Sachs refers to), she also captures the significance of the Bible when she states that 'in giving us the Bible, they seemed to think, fulfilled the State's Christian duty to us as prisoners' (66). 'They' in this instance, marked as the oppressive 'other' as the prison officials explicitly cites the linkage between State as *état* and State as *souverain*. The latter confirms that the 'Bible' only becomes significant in its association with the propagation of the Christian National ethic of the apartheid government when it is actively and judiciously imposed on its subjects.

The 'Bible' in Sachs' text occupies an ambivalent position. He turns to it not by coincidence; in fact it is his only reading material in solitary confinement. In Maitland prison, in a chapter titled 'A Day in my Life' (chapter 6) he reads from the Book of Judges and reads the story of Samson. In his introspection he considers the 'nobility' of Samson even in death and ponders: 'I wonder how it is that so many people find the Bible to be a source of comfort', to which he administers an 'answer': 'Perhaps they are consoled by attributing all the slaughter and pain of human history to a plan of God to test humanity' (65). The thought overwhelms him but the point here is the relationship he identifies between 'pain' and 'suffering' and the possibility that this might be part of a divine scheme. What Sachs reveals in his questioning of

this possibility is a belief that the knowledge he has of 'suffering' is one which is brought about by human 'error'. The next sentence of this passage bears this out: 'I doubt if I shall ever understand how people can be consoled by submission to such a God' (65). For Sachs to submit to 'God' would be possibly to misrecognise that the 'power' that constrains is not a transcendental 'force' removed from people, but one which is 'familiar' and therefore known. In a later chapter, in Wynberg prison, the station commander's knowledge of the Bible inspires him to read a few passages as a matter of curiosity.

In the chapter, 'Convert', he explains: 'It's given me a *new insight* into things I *knew* very little about before, and there are many things I *understand* now which I did not *understand* before' (177; e.a.). The highlighted words indicate a 'knowledge' that the self reveals about 'things' which are not immediately relevant to questions of spirituality. He confesses, in the sentence following his response to the station commander, 'he would not understand me if I told him what my new views were' (177); he thus secures a 'private' thought as a secret best untold. 'Privacy' exists only insofar as he keeps it to himself, but this is an impossibility. As reader I have access to that 'private' thought as he discloses the fact in the narrative. The Bible signifies for him a 'historical record' (178) that 'contains a magnificent truth': 'That the New Testament both in letter and in spirit (apart from the book of Isaiah) does not support apartheid' (178). Apartheid in this sense is the transgression of state doctrine. The Bible for Sachs, initially a 'curious' document, now turns out to be a 'record' that enables him to bear witness to the historical stories that it tells, and its significance is what he wishes to read into his own situation.

Another epistemological axis which is thematized in all three texts is racism. For example, in the disciplinary regime of the prison we identify a form of racism that is symptomatic of the divisions that existed in South Africa. The food prepared for inmates is also 'racialized'. Where the food for white prisoners is prepared by the station commander's wife, the food for non-white inmates is prepared by a black chef working for the prison (chapter 6). It is particularly telling when Sachs congratulates the station commander (Mr. Kruger) at Wynberg prison on his wife's cooking, the former replies 'Ach, it's just boerekos' (farmer's food, 51). At the very 'insignificant' level of the production of food the signifier of 'race' becomes symbolic of the social divisions in the prison. And it is not unsurprising that Sachs would explain later in this section that 'everything is *divided* into significant fractions, for these are the dimensions of my world' (53; e.a.).

The 'divisions' that circumscribe the three texts is the operative word. It takes the form of racism, the economic, political and social divisions of the South African and Kenyan context, as well as the physical divisions of the battlefields between the British in Reitz's narrative. In *Commando* the geographical boundaries of the Cape Colony, Orange Free State, Transvaal and Natal demarcate 'territory',

are at best spaces which call into question the 'knowing' past of Reitz. 'Race' as knowable signifier is introduced into the text's economy of signification as his commando prepares itself for the journey to the frontier (ch. 3). At this point Reitz recognises Charley, an 'old native servant' belonging to his family, 'a servant of ours' (20; e.a.) who is also a 'grandson of the famous Basuto chief, Moshesh' (21). The entry of Charley onto the scene turns out to be significant for him: 'he was more than welcome for we could now turn over to him our cooking and the care of the horses' (21). Charley could be theorized here as the 'silent' Other who is present in the commando performing tasks such as cooking, washing and grooming the horses. Later on in the battle at Nicholson's Nek he sees 'a party of Indian *dhoolie* bearers, who brought down some wounded English soldiers' (41; e.a.). 'Dhoolie' could be identified as a morphological variation of 'coolie', a pejorative reference to Indians. Closer to the Tugela Line during another battle the text speaks of the shells as 'little niggers' (*klein kafferokies*, 61), so whenever one came through the air a warning cry would signal 'Look out—a little nigger' (62) and there would be a dive for cover. And whereas Charley is the loyal and 'welcome' native servant, later in the battle at Spion Kop Reitz speaks of 'an old Kaffir servant [who] came whimpering up among us from below, looking for his master's body' (76f). Equally revealing is his description of the Basutos during an attack: 'Fortunately the native is a notoriously bad marksman, for he generally closes his eyes when he pulls the trigger' (205).

In the scheme that Reitz sketches, the text reveals the identity of the white subject against the 'native' and 'kaffir' who is knowable, irremediably Other, and 'degenerate'. Todorov's study, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (1984:254) takes up the issue of the Other and he asserts that 'self-knowledge develops through knowledge of the Other'. Reitz's testimony of this 'knowable' past does not appropriate racism; rather, it cathectes some stereotypes to prop-up, regulate, organise and fasten on the *negativity* of the Black man. Though the connotation of 'kaffir' in Reitz's time may have not been as negative as it is today, the significance it opens up for the question of 'race' can not be overemphasized. By anxiously declaring the 'native' as an alien Other of civility, Reitz could be simultaneously (and perhaps unconsciously) disclosing his own racism by affirming his own identity as the 'I' as 'witness'. In this sense the loyal Charley is as much a historical subject of the event as he is representative of the master-slave dialectic that the text opens up. But the operation of 'race' as a difference not to be erased has significance beyond the negativity that it foregrounds. It synecdochically informs throughout Reitz's discourse by specifying personhood through pigmentation by constructing the 'native' as type and therefore subordinated to the 'white' economy of meaning. Charley belongs to the Reitz family as a loyal servant, therefore he is 'possessed', he is his master's asset. And though not immediately relevant we may read into this Fanon's (1991:110) observation in *Black Skins, White Masks* in which he argues

against an ontology of 'race'. He posits a view which foregrounds the structures of imperialism which bring 'racial' discourse into operation, such that 'not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man'. Against this background one could make a case that though Reitz as subject fought as soldier against imperial forces, in his characterization of the 'native' as a negativity, he consequently effects a racist interpretation of the black man. This characterization is not necessarily an 'imperialist' modality but one investing in the mythology of 'racial' superiority.

In extending this point to Ngugi we note that the text's identification and critique of 'race' is founded on the imperium, especially its reference to the writings of the colonial period by Huxley, Blixen, Meinertzhagen, including the treatment of native Kenyans by their colonial masters. This for Ngugi is not simply a historical 'memory,' nor a usable past but a 'knowable' and thus knowledgeable entity. But 'race' in Ngugi's text is closely connected to sexuality. The sexual exploitation of Kenyan women by foreign nationals (especially military and naval officers) is a further indication according to him of the exploitative colonial apparatus. He refers to an incident reported in a newspaper where an American sailor, after sleeping with a Kenyan woman, killed her, and was fined for the act on condition that he would 'be of good behaviour for the next two years' (59). We may read into this a possible relationship that Ngugi wishes to establish between colonialism, racism and exploitation. Colonialism, as a 'knowable' form of domination operates not simply by *misrecognizing the racialized Other*, but by denigrating it, even destroying it. Rather, the colonial authority possesses the power to 'protect' its privileged subjects even when they 'transgress'. And by privileging the 'transgressed' white colonial subject in the case of the American soldier, Ngugi is attempting to establish for us a way of reading the contradictions of the imperial operation, since it marks the very point at which his testimony touches its own 'truth', a concept he explains in the text in analogical terms: "Truth, a peasant once told me, is like a mole. Try to cover it, and it will still reappear in another place" (118). Ngugi's statement is closely associated with the Foucauldian notion of 'confession' that the 'secret' to be told (exposed?) assumes a 'subject' for its cause and therefore cannot be suppressed or extinguished for it 'reappears' albeit deliberately even when it is assumed to be lost, thereby strategically working against an erasure. Such a procedure might be telling in the sense that this is what could be constituted as the work of testimony.

If 'knowledge' in terms of Sachs, Reitz and Ngugi could be read as the location of subjectivity in the matrix of epistemology, then 'truth' would not be the analogue given its resistance to erasure but the very symptom of the witnessing exercise. Knowledge in this sense may be viewed as a positive (and strategic) link between the *known* and the *knower*, if the former is to be read as *evidence* and the latter as subject because it subjects itself through its ability to know. Knowledge



therefore may be further hypothesized here as an ontological and epistemological positioning which these texts signal in the chronicling of various efforts in an event. At best the subjects that seize upon and exploit the crisis of their 'event' as they strive to maintain themselves by seeking out those aspects and contradictions of the crisis cannot choose not to be read. Sachs, Reitz and Ngugi simultaneously assert knowledge and truth as a 'guarantee' of their texts by marking their positions as contra positive to *silence*.

That these texts call into existence their respective 'events' as a crisis of witnessing, must assure us that we become the very 'belated witness' to a crisis of knowledge and truth. It is in terms of this modality that an epistemology emerges as a *constructed knows*, not as a constative act, but as a performative because it translates the *known* by a received *knower*. And, to characterise the knowledge to which Reitz, Ngugi and Sachs testify and to which we bear witness, is to understand that the narration of their project is dependent on an intersection between knowing (epistemology) and being (ontology) as a practice of writing. If we claim that the subject is fractured and decentred as a result of its transgression, then we may equally argue that the knowledge we see emerge, is transgressive and dissident knowledge as a 'truth' to be disclosed about self and event. Dissident knowledge could be understood in the context of these texts not only as a right to belief, but also as a right to practice those beliefs as a modality of difference which is oppositional. The humanizing truth-effects that the texts project are to be read as a new privilege which they circulate for their subjects.

## Constructing Humanity

'To me it is a wonderful book—wonderful in its simplicity and realism, its calm intensity and absorbing human interest,' writes Jan Smuts, Prime Minister of South Africa (1919-1924; 1939-1948) in his 'Preface' to *Commando*; he adds:

The Boer War was other than most wars. It was a vast tragedy in the life of a people, whose *human* interest far surpassed its military value. A book was wanted which would give us some insight into the *human* side of this epic struggle between the smallest and the greatest of peoples. Here we have it at last (1975:5; e.a.).

In Smuts' note of confidence in Reitz's testimony as an authoritative document of the Boer War (note his classification as an Afrikaner himself of 'Boer War' and not 'Anglo-Boer War'), we may look with a certain curiosity at the status he accords it; enabling us to glimpse a certain species of social and historical relations in the act of

labelling. I shall return to the question of 'authority' and 'status' but for now it is worth inquiring on a productive announcement that Smuts articulates here.

The labelling of Reitz's testimony as a 'wonderful book' in its 'absorbing human interest' may be grasped firstly as a sanctioning by evaluation (and thus judgement), but perhaps also as a codification insofar as it registers that a social and human struggle is at the root of the narrative. It may be that Smuts' approach recognises that the narrative is focused not simply on the Boer War, since that which circulates is not just the 'war' as event, but the way the text speaks to human interests, if by this Smuts intended the 'individual' and his emotions. We may also read into his affirmation another possibility. While it seeks a fuller understanding of the Boer War, it also wishes not to reduce the 'war' simply to its 'institutionalised' place in terms of the narrative. This for Smuts would mean that the question of human interest which he feels the text underwrites is essentially a mimetic, moral and thus humanistic feature of Reitz's testimony. After all, for Smuts the 'human side' of this war is what matters. In this sense Smuts sees in Reitz's account nothing less than an 'authentic' and 'accurate description of life among the Boer forces' (6) in the version of a 'true personal story which is often stranger than fiction' (6). Such a scheme, then, might be one which works against recognising the manner in which the text programmes the notion of 'human interest' where Smuts privileges concrete facts as markers of 'human interest'. Given that Smuts' comments may lend a high-profile sponsorship to the text as a marketing strategy, we may argue that it is framed in terms of a summary rather than as analysis. This, in a sense, ought to suggest that where Smuts 'describes' an effect, the text itself constructs that possibility. But Smuts' comments (interference perhaps?) is significant here. While it is apparent that Smuts signals his 'endorsement' of the Reitz version of the Boer War effort as a conciliatory gesture between two peoples (Boers and the British), it is difficult not to read more into Smuts' strategic agenda. The human in this sense is a 'vehicle' for Smuts which signals also his own political interests. We might also recall that it was Smuts who suggested to Reitz that he remove the 'bitterness' from the original unpublished manuscript (cf. Pakenham's introduction 1992). Here we may clearly identify Smuts' tactical manoeuvre to insert a local testimony into the grand narrative of the wider South Africa he was to lead from 1939-1948. In effect, humanity in this sense is clearly imbricated in structures of power, as it is advanced in the Foucauldian project. Power operates here to facilitate testimony, a 'facilitation' which serves to further the interests of Smuts' political aspirations.

Comparison of the three diaries reveals a common set of structures which serve to organise the notion of 'human interests'. This could be described temporarily as the subjects' allegiance to a 'human struggle'. If there are 'interests' that inform these testimonies, it is analogous to a suggestion that the processes involved in witnessing are bent on recuperating also questions of humanism. Smuts' usage of

'human interest' encapsulates two related signifiers: human and emotions. And to this we could add the subject, which would read as follows: the human subject of emotions who determines the dimensions of humanism in the text. A distinguishing bent of these testimonies is its capacity to 'contain' yet simultaneously not overcome the emotion. A further possibility as a comparison could be that Reitz, Sachs and Ngugi are subjects that attempt to transcend the conditions which lead to their suffering. Implicit in the notion of 'suffering' is the assumption that suffering humanizes. In the context of the three testimonies, to recuperate a past is contingent on utilizing it as a basis to appeal to a humanism.

Burdened with suffering either on the battlefield or in the prison, the 'weight' this produces as a 'negating' effect suggests that a concern for human suffering as the subject witnesses and testifies, is about postulating in its memory precisely a *positive* counterpoint to mark 'suffering' as antihuman. I am not suggesting that both 'humanism' and 'suffering' are appropriated; only their effects may be discernible. For when it is claimed that the subjects transcend their suffering by this is not meant a neutralization of personal pain and 'struggle'. The point is that 'transcendence' in the context of these testimonies allows us to view *survival* and the celebration of a *presence* as an antidote to *death* and *erasure*. To survive, is to transcend detention and imprisonment for Sachs and Ngugi, to transcend 'death' on the battlefield for Reitz. In other words, to survive is to celebrate life, to recuperate and unpack what it is to be human. But even more: to bear witness to 'suffering' and 'trauma' is to cast these as oppressive Other, a demon to be dispensed with. Felman (1992) attends to this issue in her psychoanalytical treatment of trauma in Holocaust survivors. But what she does not account for is precisely the extent to which 'suffering' in the psychic structures of the trauma subject of the Holocaust signifies an antihumanism, or for that matter the extent to which Holocaust testimony is predicated on establishing some sort of ethical universal. I state this possibility as I think about the present texts, but to assess the issue at length here does not fall within the scope of this project. At any rate, if I have claimed that Sachs, Reitz and Ngugi are positioned to 'tell', then what they cultivate in the course of the narration are the very effects of that suffering as a human dilemma to be reckoned with.

We may also be in agreement with Said (1991:112) when he speculates that 'human history is human actuality is human activity is human knowledge'. Also when Lukács (1982:335) talked about a 'new humanism' in relation to the historical novel he explained 'humanists' as those who 'start in their writing from a protest against the dehumanizing influences of capitalism'. The three texts proceed from an understanding of the anti-human effects of oppression, through which they have come to be defined. So if we claim that history is not necessarily human or that knowledge is not necessarily human, then we need to evaluate more rigorously what the concept signifies. If Lukács' historical novel mediates a 'protest' as the bearing of witness to

a dehumanizing influence of capitalism (where the latter is not simply a mode of production but a development of meaning), then what is 'dehumanizing' is the extent to which the texts define a sense of humanity as its opposite. We could claim then that under such conditions these texts anticipate questions of humanity in relation to power.

The interrogation, violation of privacy, the disregard for human dignity and the conditions which typify the penal system in which Sachs and Ngugi find themselves, together with the shootings and injuries on Reitz's battlefield, inform the 'human suffering' as well as the suffering of others these subjects bear witness to. In an incident Sachs recalls, which could be defined as the prehistory of his imprisonment, he describes his interrogation in the presence of clients by two lieutenants who ransacked his drawers, searching through his papers and clothes: 'It was particularly hurtful when they untied and examined my briefs, for I felt as though they were violating a privacy between me and my clients' (27). We read into Sachs' protest, which he verbalises as resistance in the next sentence with 'these briefs are privileged', a statement that enunciates his disapproval of the actions by the lieutenants as an 'attack' on his humanity. In other words to violate and invade privacy, which in this instance reads as private property and private space, is at once to disempower Sachs but also to deny him is 'right' to privacy. But there is a more telling revelation in this scene. The actions of the violators reveal in the language (and the emotions) of Sachs' description, acts which are antihuman. In a few sentences earlier, when Sachs says of Lieutenant Wagenaar (in comparison to Potgieter) 'I feel somehow that he is the more human and less cruel of the two' (27), Sachs responds to the organising imperative of humanity, shaped in this instance by invasion and violation. By 'organising imperative' is meant the conditions in Sachs' text which counter the actions of his interrogators, the system they represent, and the 'evidence' that bespeaks in his rewriting of those moments. In another less-explicit retelling, Sachs speculates about his involvement with what he terms left wing politics, where he views 'sacrifice as an intellectual concept relating to the future rather than an ever-present reality' (46). This statement does more than merely acknowledge a political position; it is an acknowledgement on which he predicates an understanding of 'sacrifice' as a humane act. Beyond this, its metaphoric significance allows us to view 'sacrifice' as a symbolic offering of his human(e) services to a political cause. In a later section, in response to the prison authorities' refusal to allow him books, he reinvokes the topos of humanity as a necessary moment which he captures in existential terms. I quote the entire passage:

They deprived me of books just as they *deprived me of human association* so that I would suffer *the torture of inactivity and loneliness*, and so that they could make themselves my sole source of ideas and information. But

now by means of the pages which I hold in my hands I am *restored to mental activity* and, above all, *I resume my position as a member of humanity* (165; e.a.).

This constitutes a face-making moment as Sachs feels fractured and fragile in the face of an isolated cell with no books to read. The mode of the narrative is confessional, suggesting that writing for Sachs is therapeutic. It is largely through the template of the 'I'-they' difference that he is able to posit his desire for human contact: 'I want people, not ideas, the living, not the abstract' (165). Where Sachs needs people, books and intellectual stimulation, Ngugi desires 'freedom' from prison (167), and Reitz on the other hand expresses a desire to reunite with his family (325).

Returning to Sachs. In the above passage Sachs wishes to measure his own humanity and lack of human association against the machinery of the penal system and its officials. Not only is the choice of adjective, verbs and nouns appropriate (deprived, suffer, torture, inactivity, loneliness) as paradigmatic units of 'suffering' they signify writing as a therapeutic practice for Sachs. But in the scheme of the narrative they also describe his 'suffering' and 'loneliness' in the cell as the dehumanizing effects of an oppressive Other. The latter is figured as opposite in Sachs' dehumanizing treatment in terms of dominance and submission, implying again that the 'power' that circulates over Sachs is meant to injure his human potential. The signs that clamour toward this signification ('deprive' and 'torture') suggest that 'they' operate to subjugate and disengage, to erase 'human association'. The units of 'suffering' further confirm the criminal status accorded to Sachs, a consequence of his transgression, and the price he pays is imprisonment. We ought to reconsider the possibility that when Sachs says 'I want people' he might be thus speaking to what Auerhahn and Laub (1990:446) postulate as testimony's desire to 'resurrect an empathic tie'. And where this notion is theorized in the oral project as a dialogic structure that apostrophizes interviewer and interviewee and the community that invokes an absence, we could argue that the desire for human association in Sachs' text is only a theoretical possibility. Given that Sachs as subject could be likened to the oral project's expository agent who 'determine(s) the production of history as narrative (of truth)' (Spivak 1988:283), we may hypothesize in this instance that to desire human association is firstly a recognition that the subject 'lacks' it. Secondly, the desire for association participates in precisely the same practice of resurrecting an 'empathic' structure. To associate with another human is to enter logically into 'contact' with feeling. Where in the oral project the expository agent acts as a delegate or guarantor in both the prehistory and posthistory of the narrative, Sachs conflates this responsibility as guarantor of his narrative. This conceptualization also opens the possibility for rethinking the reader (as witness), not

as a distant Other but rather as the 'belated witness', the 'person' who might be that 'abstract' figure of human association that Sachs desires: 'I must work on this idea of writing about detention one day to someone who will understand my feelings' (63).

Comparatively speaking, where Sachs' text urges toward 'human association' in its predominantly introspective and confessional modality, Ngugi pointedly focuses on a critique of the dehumanizing aspects of prison conditions by attending to the imperial history of Kenya. Ngugi's narrative mode is deliberately transgressive, and questions of humanity occupy an ambivalent position in his text. He too identifies in the monotony of prison life his human potential to resist: 'the human mind revolts against sameness' (7). To lay bare an antihumanism stems from his recreation of an 'inhumane' past to an indictment of politics in terms of the power exercised over him and his citizens in his search for 'human solidarity' (21). And the space of the prison, characterised by a 'smell' he describes as 'a permanent heavy pall of perpetually polluted air' signals unhealthy living conditions and a bad hygiene as well as a lurking sense of death. Related also is the absence of privacy as a result of the constant surveillance by the warders. But more revealing in his recall of the disciplinary regime is the animal motif he utilizes to critique the inhumane treatment of prisoners. He invokes an old saying, 'when a cow is finally pinned to the ground and tied with ropes to a slaughterhouse it cannot refuse to be slaughtered' (104). He defines the locus of prison oppression as a 'slaughterhouse' that 'butchers' its subjects as a way of eradication. By 'pinning' to the ground is meant both the power to destabilize and thus the capacity to de-humanize the 'biological' ground of humanity. For example, detainees were chained during medical treatment, during family visits in front of spouses and children (99) and he includes a letter written by detainees outlining these problems (125).

It seems the prison set-up is characterised as disruptive, regressive, falling short of a human element: 'A narration of prison life, is in fact, nothing more than an account of oppressive measures in varying degrees of intensity and one's individual or collective responses to them' (100). Here Ngugi is very aware of the 'prison' set-up in neocolonial Kenya as a critical, assertive and contradictory public space. But in advocating as the 'oppressive measures' which structure and disavow the prisoner, he also raises questions about the postponement of a 'human' element which conflicts with strategies of surveillance, discipline and power. 'Oppressive' suggests a metonymic relationship with suffering and persecution bearing upon the prisoner as accused subject. To 'oppress' would entail to subjugate by 'cruelty' and force in the manner of denying the subject free will, and freedom is understood only in relation to its opposite: non-freedom. Ngugi claims that 'the very act of forcible seizure of one's freedom for an indefinite period' (100) is 'in itself torture'. He also says that 'all other forms of torture, not excepting the physical, pale besides this cruellest of state-inflicted wounds upon one's humanity' (100), is a strategy to lay bare the

responsibility for those actions with which the state as sovereign limits the 'freedom' of the subject. The signs that circulate ('forcible seizure', 'torture' and 'state-inflicted wounds') suggest an antihuman practice.

What is important for Ngugi (like Sachs), is an understanding of what it is to be human. This is the case when he explains the welcome given to him by fellow inmates who recognise him as a 'hero' in the struggle: 'There's a fellowship which develops among people in adversity that's very human and gives glimpses of what human beings could become, if they could unite against the enemy of humanity: social cannibalism on earth' (118).

This above exchange reflects a concern with morality, specifically also in its naming of 'human' and 'humanity' as that which is to be distinguished from 'social cannibalism'. What is significant in this discourse is its metaphoric allusion. If 'social cannibalism' is a sign of a neocolonial oppressive politics, then its denotative significance, which suggests a savage and inhuman cruelty, takes on more importance in the context of the text as it foregrounds the anarchy which works against Ngugi as prisoner. Ngugi's text seems to me to be deeply associated with his declared intention to posit himself as human (humanist) subject caught up in a power dynamic that he 'experiences' as violent and anti-human.

When we turn from Ngugi to Reitz we find a less explicit mediation on this subject. The construction of a humanist trajectory occupies a space not in terms of the 'human interest' that Smuts refers to, but in the way Reitz defines his own conception of humanity in relation to his description of situations and events as a spokesperson for an anti-imperialist 'campaign'. His text gestures towards explaining not simply a witnessed account of the suffering of Boer forces, but also a recognition of humane moments displayed by the British forces. This might be read as a conciliatory gesture quite unlike what Ngugi advances. For the latter, the desire is to lay bare the dehumanizing effects of colonialism, and the very modality of his representation is characteristic of a transgression that seeks primarily to fasten on past violations. For Reitz, however, his energy is directed toward explaining the conditions prior to the build up to the war which he views as 'inevitable', and questions of humanity are registered in the reproduction of 'war' as it operates on the battlefield. In the context of Reitz's text, a projection of a humanist agenda would seem to operate in relation to the manner in which the British forces practice warfare. To stake the claim that war is inhuman is to state the obvious. But to explain the manner in which it is effected enables us to 'see' its inhuman(e) side. The loss of life, the merciless killing and tactics that relate to denouncing the enemy carries with it an inhumane logic whether it emanates from the Boer or British forces. The resistance to the pressure of the British and Boer forces in the context of witnessing brings us to Reitz's interest in epitomizing those differences which testify to the war effort. The 'on-scene' descriptions about personal losses, food shortages, starvation, lack of

ammunition, horses, clothing, the destruction of livestock by British forces and 'the death-roll among women and children, of whom twenty-five thousand had already died in the concentration camps' (322) secures a necessary relationship to his text as it alludes to the inhumanity not of the British forces but of the war prerogative itself which he labels as 'universal ruin' (322). By this is meant the question of a 'universal' that Reitz attempts to establish, an issue worth examining in relation to two central passages:

Amid all the cruelty of farm-burning and the hunting down of the civilian population, there was *one redeeming feature*, in that the English soldiers, both officers and men, were *unfailingly humane*. This was so well known that there was never any hesitation in abandoning a wounded man to the mercy of the troops, in the sure knowledge that he would be taken away and carefully nursed, *a certainty* which went far to soften the asperities of the war (169; c.a.)

The British, with all their faults, are *a generous nation*, and not only on the man of war, but throughout the time that we were amongst them, there was *no word said that could hurt our feelings or offend our pride*, although they knew that we were on errand of defeat (318; c.a.)

The trope of humanity as a necessary moment in Reitz's text pinpoints an imperative to universalize 'ruin' (if the latter is to be understood as inhumanity) as that which he identifies as recognisable by the actions of the British forces. Reitz's use of the word 'redeeming' has an added significance here: it confirms his interest in the narrative to use it for purposes of reconciliation. The effect of focusing on this issue might lend a moral framework to his text. This identification shows Reitz not as the determined soldier representing Boer interests, but as a subject positioned in retrospection, working towards identifying in the crisis of war, a humanist logic. Because the function of war is to reveal the force of power between opposing forces, the result being a privileging of the triumphant, the humanity which Reitz brings into purview is one which attempts to establish that 'ruin' (if it is synonymous with suffering) as a humanist response to that struggle.

This humanist trope might allow us to see a type of humanism constituted by all three texts as a way of possibly suggesting in Lyotard's (1991:1) observation that 'humanism administers lessons to 'us'(?). And though the question mark occasions doubt as to whether such a possibility could be concretized, it nevertheless allows us to view the texts as products in a crisis of witnessing which steer the subject towards a humanist conception of both 'event' and 'self'. For if these texts are to be read as testimonies it may be claimed that the subjects who bear testimony play on precisely



questions of a humanism in order to advance and project their experiences onto the 'belated witness'. Like the testimony of victims of apartheid at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings suggest that a survivor's 'loneliness' proceeds from separation, where the desire to re-establish a dialogue with a 'humanized executioner' emanates from a survivor's loneliness, we find in the case of these texts, humanism operates as an important modality of the testimony. To evoke the conditions which give rise to the witnessing subject is to appeal to a unique human relationship of each subject: Sachs as prisoner in the scheme of apartheid South Africa, Reitz as soldier in the Anglo-Boer war and Ngugi as prisoner in a neocolonial prison in Kenya.

## Conclusion

If humanism is to be understood as a developed sense of learning, then the epistemological axis that frames these subjects is what is at stake in the witnessing exercise. The key signifier in this process is 'humanity' which Raymond Williams (1983:148) explains as a cluster to which belong 'a complex group of words' such as human, humane, humanism, humanist, humanitarian, all of which signal toward 'specializations' of the root word man. For to talk about a 'humanity' in these texts, is to simultaneously identify and read in each case an opposition to what is animalistic. The latter is most apparent in Ngugi. And yet in all three texts humanism might be the constative epistemological mode while the very identification and construction of a humanity may be read as a performative, for it establishes the subject as a structure, one which is invented in the nature of the discourse by organising 'self', 'other' and 'event'. Could it be the case then that these texts, underpinned by a humanism, advance a humanist logic of a witnessed crisis in a case of the self and event as grand narrative?

Also, it may be the case that there are benefits for the subjects in this process, a process in which Reitz's, Sachs' and Ngugi's living to tell the tale of their suffering in war and imprisonment, is a case which might be therapeutic as an exercise to 'heal' the self. First, the texts, in the humanist sense in which they are enunciated, are possibly therapeutic for a 'community' to remember its past. Second, in telling the tale, it is also the case that the authors desire to tell the price each has paid for the suffering each has endured in a political cause. And third, the further profit for Reitz, Sachs and Ngugi is the extra benefit that the reader (and witness to the subjects' constructed event) becomes a 'belated witness' to the authors' knowable and human past. In each case the critical question has often to do with the subjects' insistence that their suffering is a unique case.

University of Natal (Durban)  
Departement van Afrikaans en Nederlands

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