Permanent Risk
— When Crisis Defines a Nation’s Writing

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POST-APARTHEID WRITING, sixteen years old in 2010 – what has this proved to be if not a space of persistent trauma and anguish, of continuing suffering? Despite the considerable hope that was attached to South Africa’s iconic literature of racial division becoming something new after Mandela walked free in 1990, what has post-apartheid writing been but a writing, above all, of stuttering repetition, of the seeming reiteration of further sorrows, or what Ato Quayson, drawing on Freud, calls “symbolization compulsions”?¹ Rainbow-coloured hopes for an unprecedented era of freedom notwithstanding, millennial dreams and convivial vistas of World Cup festivities notwithstanding, South African literature since 1994 has, in terms of its thematic, symbolic, and stylistic preoccupations, seemingly staggered, punch-drunk, from one crisis and cry of pain to another, from one classic manifestation of trauma or inner wound to the next. In this the literature has seemingly followed the repetition compulsions that have beset the country, where the pain and violence that apartheid perpetrated were followed with almost unseemly haste by the national crises of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the crime wave, the problem of Zimbabwe, and the 2008 outbreaks of xenophobic attacks, not necessarily in that order. These crises have been accompanied – indeed, have been exacerbated – by a pervasive sense in the country that the rights and freedoms that were promised by the achievement of democracy have not been delivered; that some of the fissures and hence tribulations of the

apartheid era have remained entrenched, though now under the aspect of class rather than that of race.

As registered in a range of South African novels, from J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) to Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* (2001), the place once dominated by the suffering relating to apartheid is now taken over by a new though related set of injuries, both physical and psychic, and barely less severe in their effects.\(^2\) The answer to that perennial mid-1990s question, ‘What shall we South African writers write about now that apartheid and all its woes is dead?’, appears to be more woe, if of a different order; or, to draw upon a well-known South African colloquialism, *snot en trane* (snot and tears) has turned into more *snot en trane*.\(^2\) Following the approach developed by Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, Thomas Laqueur, and others that trauma is a psycho-socially constructed subject category signifying “the psychic and also metaphorical trace” of past suffering in the present, it is as if writers in the post-apartheid interregnum have signed up, whether consciously or not, to the contemporary “empire of trauma” to which many post-conflict national cultures around the world subscribe.\(^4\) Certainly they appear to have espoused the interest in the acts of memory, memory retrieval, and memorialization (whether partial or otherwise) that such empires tend to produce, and to be involved in expressing the unassimilable or unprocessed stress effects associated with them.

A still more cynical view would see the writers addicted, as if as a result of apartheid, to the adrenalin of crisis management, even to the compulsive contemplation of pain and yet more pain. It is as if they were not yet able to come fully to terms with apartheid’s aftermath, which is to say, with the lack or loss of apartheid as opposition, as a fixed negative against which to rally. Domi-

