HE PROBLEMATIC NATURE of the representation of trauma in literary and historical texts has been productively explored in the work of trauma theorists. In emphasizing the centrality of the unassimilated nature of trauma that demands a continued return to the ‘wound’ (the original meaning of the word ‘trauma’) that represents the damage inflicted on both body and mind, Cathy Caruth, for example, suggests that “if Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing.”\(^1\) She continues:

> it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of reality or truth that is not otherwise available […]. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (4)

The difficulty of narrating a traumatic past is partly related to the difficulty of coming to terms with the crises of death and survival, as well as with the unrepresentability of what Caruth suggests is “unclaimed” experience. While history seems unable to imagine the unimaginable, literature can engage metaphorically, formally, and stylistically with silences and aporias. Thus the imaginative qualities of literature can bear witness to “the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated, witnessed in the given categories of

While most trauma theory has, of course, been concerned with the Holocaust as its central experience, it is not surprising that, for contemporary writers in a post-apartheid South Africa, the novel of trauma has continued to provide a productive genre for the exploration of ‘unfinished business’. This is not just because it provides a thematic opportunity to uncover the “secret” or hidden history of the past (what Caruth refers to above as “reality or truth”) but also because it engages a style and form that, like the workings of memory and psychoanalysis, are in a state of constant return that mimics the “repetitive intrusion of traumatic memory” and that transforms traumatic memory into narrative: from present to past, from personal to collective memory, from individual to official records of the past, from known to unknown, from representation in tropes of trauma to an awareness of the ultimate unrepresentability of trauma.

The text of trauma itself is therefore essentially and of its nature unstable, always turning back, and it is this very instability that points up the partial and partisan nature of ‘official’ historical accounts that have often papered over the cracks or gaps of what might be termed “traumatic history.” Vickroy sees such fictional texts that enact traumatic history as employing specific narrative approaches that convert historical into personal trauma:

Social conflicts are enacted in characters’ personal conflicts, where historical trauma is personalized by exploring its effects in bodily violations and wounds, in sexuality, or in the struggle to achieve emotional intimacy [...] the body becomes the testing ground of human endurance. (168)

With these elements of traumatic fiction in mind, most particularly the centrality of the trope of “bodily violations and wounds,” it is clear that Marlene van Niekerk’s *The Way of the Women*, translated by Michiel Heyns into English (2006) from the original Afrikaans version entitled *Agaat* (2004), provides a useful focus for an analysis of the treatment of trauma, memory, and history in the South African novel. Its central character, focalizer, and

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4 This term is used by Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville & London: U P of Virginia, 2002): 167.