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Memory, Power and Bessie Head: *A Question of Power*


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Memory says: Want to do right? Don’t count on me.

Adrienne Rich: “Eastern War Time”

Born in 1937 in the Pietermaritzburg mental asylum where her white mother had been institutionalised¹, Bessie Head was rejected by almost all of her mother’s family, classified “coloured” when her appearance indicated that her father had been (an unknown) black, and became initially a teacher, then a journalist. She left South Africa for Botswana in mid-1964 on a so-called exit permit, having been denied a passport because of her fairly peripheral involvement with the PAC (the Pan Africanist Congress led by Robert Sobukwe). By 1973, when *A Question of Power* first appeared, she had published two earlier novels, also set in Botswana. She was, however, not given citizenship of her new country until February 1979, seven years before her death at the age of 48. In 1982, in an account of her life published in *Drum* magazine, she wrote, stating points pertinent to the consideration of *A Question of Power* offered in this essay (the quotation vividly illustrates her vision of the inextricable entanglement of personal, political and historical matters in the context of a perpetually dangerous, risky world):

> I feel that people, insofar as they are able, need to have a sense of alertness about destiny, a sort of alertness about their spiritual history. ...each individual, no matter what their present origin or background may be, is really the total embodiment of human history, with a vast accumulation of knowledge and experience stored in the subconscious mind....

The African experience of slavery, colonialism and exploitation arouses feelings of intense anguish and there was a fear in me that monsters would merely change roles, that black faces would simply replace
white faces of cruelty, hate and greed and that the people would bleed forever.

... in an internal and private way, I perceived the ease with which one could become evil and I associated evil in my mind with the acquisition of power. (Woman Alone 77)

All of human history is here conceived of as constituting the huge ‘memory’ in which all people participate and for which responsibility must be borne. In Head’s thought, minds are so open – both inclusive, and invadable – that Elizabeth’s ‘memories’, for instance, range freely over Ancient Egypt (Osiris-Isis); Ancient Greece (Medusa); Ancient Rome (Caligula); Ancient India (Buddha) and refer to the South African political past (1910; the Act of Union) and many other historical incidents and periods. Jacqueline Rose writes: “It is not clear whether we are dealing with an outside-in or with an inside-out situation – the writing doesn’t let you decide. Projection is one way, ghosts another, of reading what is taking place” (113).

As an opening perspective on the study of the function and possible contexts of memory in A Question of Power, I want to suggest a link between quotations from two pieces by the author. The first, “Social and Political Pressures that shape writing in South Africa” (Head 1979), reads: “literature is very functional in Southern Africa and bound inextricably to human suffering” (Alone 67). The second (Head 1981) states: “Southern Africa isn’t like the rest of Africa and is never going to be. Here, we are going to have to make an extreme effort to find a deep faith to help us to live together” (Alone 31). Linking the two excerpts involves recognising that the “extreme effort” to which Head refers in the second quotation can be thought of as an ongoing or continuing suffering incurred in the arduous process of somehow accommodating the supposedly past, yet insistently ‘self-presenting’ suffering, which persists by means of ineradicable memories. In South Africa where the difficult arts of restitution are all too easily overwhelmed by glib and premature claims of achieved recovery or reconciliation², there is need to call Head’s witnessing to mind. “I fear the countries that have suffered after independence and are going to suffer, have been the ones where people lived in fear”, she wrote to Vigne in 1978.³ Head deromanticises the ‘victorious victim’ image. Her novel works hard against the self-soothing and socially comforting belief that those who endure and survive the “terror of power” (Woman Alone 77) are by definition strengthened, ennobled, or triumphant.

I am here of course alluding to the notion of healing-through-telling
that was so discernible in the workings (even in the very title) of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In one of the best accounts of that process, Antjie Krog’s *Country of my Skull*, one can, however, see many instances of unsatisfied victims, unassuaged feelings of loss or outrage, or even of recurrent abjection. An example of the latter kind of effect can be seen, for instance, when a former torture victim, now a prominent member of parliament, is re-humiliated at the TRC hearing (Krog 73; 76). Many male victims of gross human rights violations, in particular, experience literal or symbolic emasculation or impotence. The so-called ‘Shepherd’s Tale’ of the aged Mr Lekotse leads to the following conclusion: “His worth as a father, a brother, a son has been negated ... He’d be happy, he says, if someone would kill him immediately” (Krog 220). The report of the testimony of Mr MP Mhlongo ends: “I’m getting these children, and I suspect I am not the father of the children” (Krog 139). Among the women, even the chairperson of the Gender Commission, Thenjiwe Mthintso, testifies: “Even now ... I feel exposed and distraught” (Krog 179), whilst the relative of a ‘necklacing’ victim, Nozibele Madubedube, tells the TRC: “I saw two of those who grabbed me and my sister in the hall ... and they are still ... nothing ... only ... now I am also nothing. My life keeps slipping through my fingers” (Krog 136). Particularly memorable, and heartbreaking, is the testimony of Mrs Elsie Gishi: “I have holes [caused by bullets], I can’t sleep well. Sometimes when I try to sleep, it feels like something is evaporating from my head. ... My son Bonisile ... was never well again” (Krog 79-80). Her words are strangely reminiscent of Elizabeth’s experiences as described in Head’s novel.

Despite Head’s well-known declaration (in an interview concerning *A Question of Power*) that “Elizabeth and I are one” (MacKenzie and Clayton 25), there are at least two major differences between Bessie Head (author and person) and the protagonist of her third ‘Botswana novel’. Firstly, Elizabeth – even though her son knows that she “like[s] to write”, as he says when he offers her the gift of a pen (178) – is not presented to the reader as a writer, but as a former schoolteacher who became a vegetable gardener and who may become a writer, since, by the end of the novel, she begins to devise an account of the period of her ‘breakdown’ (or her “work-out”, as Head called it in the Marquard interview – 53). Secondly, although Bessie Head in the course of her correspondence with Randolph Vigne (now published as *A Gesture of Belonging*) relates numerous actual instances where she felt herself or her son to be the object of racial abuse, or of a more generalised racial/racist disapproval (in Botswana), she does not in the novel include a single instance where Elizabeth is, by any actual person, so treated or described (in her new country).
The omission is remarkable, given the woeful litany, exemplified over many years, in Head’s letters concerning her experiences in Botswana.

A list of some of these rejections as she experienced them would include the following examples: (a) “they don’t want me here” (*Gesture* 9 – written 27 October 1965); (b) “…especially the disregard and degradation of women. It’s terrible” (*Gesture* 18 – written December 1965); (c) “… my own condition which is one of unbelievable isolation” (*Gesture* 27 – written early 1966); (d) “…I feel so ill and frightened, Randolph, because the things essential to my survival – like generosity and a rich flow of ideas – I can’t seem to find” (*Gesture* 31 – written March 1966); and:

(e) … but it’s been Batswana people I’ve been fighting with, so God help me, and that does not endear me to anyone, especially as I’m some kind of half-caste. You’ve no idea how frightened I really am because I thought Africa was my home and now I don’t know what to do (*Gesture* 37 – written August 1966);

and the following:

(f) No sooner did he go to school this year than the children at school told him [her son Harold, then first going to school] he is a coloured. Apparently being a Motswana is a very exclusive thing. He kept on complaining about this and I used to break out into a sweat not knowing what to say because I started it in the first place. I don’t think he understands words like human being and mankind. Eventually he got assaulted by children twice his age apparently on the grounds that he’s an usurper into the race of Motswana, or some filthy specimen. I withdrew him from school because he can’t handle such a situation. Neither can I. (*Gesture* 64 – written October 1968);

(g) People are deadly faithful to their own, not to you, the outsiders. One of the most painful moments of my life came when a Batswana woman said to me, with actual hatred: “What do you want running after the Batswanas?” (*Gesture* 68 – written November 1968);

(h) I can’t change myself from being a bushman, half-breed or … into anything to please anybody. I look like a Bushman, who is a despised tribe here. … There is no-one who is going to un-bushman me (*Gesture* 71 – written January 1969);
I walked into a shop and asked for half a pound of cheese. The crazy Motswana behind the counter said to me: “Look here, if you don’t treat us with respect, we can’t serve you.” What has that got to do with asking for half a pound of cheese in a normal voice? (Gesture 83 – written February 1969);

she averred that “here I am Bessie Head, the Bushman dog …” (Gesture 85-86 – written May 1969) and reported that

…a lot of influential people don’t like me and how dare I set foot back here. What really made me mad was that they created for me a reputation so horrible …The thing is they really believed it, those things they confronted me with. Eventually I cornered three of the buggers in a room and started screaming “You bloody bastards” (Gesture 88 – again May 1969);

There was a woman in my dreams torturing me. She was a black woman, as though I had no right to live on this earth in my own complexion. There was a mocking smile on her face as though nothing I could do would ever make up for the crime of my complexion … (Gesture 108 – written January 1970);

Everything went wrong from the time Howard was assaulted. I never seemed to recover and the nightmare was so persistent and inward-turning in my own mind that nothing seems to wash away the horror of this racial business (Gesture 112 – written February 1970);

To tell the truth a racial feeling never entered my mind, except towards what I called “the enemy” and even there he was too far removed from me to give me nightmares. It is different if a racial feeling is created by people and I mean African, who are also human to you. (Gesture 121 – written May 1970)

Head even asked herself: “Why did I give my most beautiful lines and experience to a Motswana [in Maru] when they all spat at me for being Coloured?” (Gesture 124 – written June 1970).

Yet in the novel Elizabeth is the one who yells racial abuse at the innocuous Motswana shop clerk in the event of her first major ‘public’ breakdown (A Question of Power 49-51). Rooney notes that “on this map South Africa is here too” — in the sense of its influence being felt even in the supposedly ‘safe space’ of Botswana, where acceptance and a sense of social solidarity had been expected (199). In the novel, Elizabeth reverts defensively to mimicry of the very racism that so terrifies her: a complex and shameful memory-effect, it might be called.

In 1979 Head wrote: “That rejection of my application for citizenship
was one of the gestures of evil that was done to me. ... They still think they can treat me as the coloured dog” (quoting Eilersen 226). This and the other quotations illustrate the range and duration of the hurt Head suffered in Botswana and contrasts with the way in which she did write of—and record—these experiences in A Question of Power. Despite the avowedly “autobiographical” or “verbatim” nature of the novel (her own words, quoting MacKenzie and Clayton 24), Head’s deliberate ‘omissions’ from and adaptations of the ‘raw material’ of her Botswana experiences—as told to correspondents like Vigne—show her to be the shaping, selective novelist. Head was using her imaginative powers first to ‘read’ and analyse the experiences she had undergone and then—in her blabbermouth role—as witness for the exposure of evil—to communicate her understanding of the origins of abusive power use in the unusual novel that she composes. The argument here is not that Head the novelist in writing A Question of Power is applying ‘self-censorship’ (so blatant is the very obverse—exposure of numerous shameful aspects of selfhood—the case here), or that she is perhaps afraid to criticise the ‘new’ society. Instead, the creative, self-critical and socially conscious transference or transformation of her material—in order to produce a more searching and psycho-philosophically challenging document than ‘raw’ reportage—becomes discernible. ‘Autobiography’ is here therefore both an act of memory and of construction, as well as a deed of social enlightenment, in which what has been learnt can be told and taught to others. The idea of transferable knowledge is suggested by Elizabeth when she queries Tom’s acceptance of the ‘Black Power’ idea by saying that she does so “because of what I’m learning internally” (Head, Power 133, emphasis added). This point can be compared to Boyce Davies’ comment on “this process of ordering a life, giving meaning to it, and rewriting the self” (287-288, emphasis added). Trinh Minh-ha says of exiled autobiographers that “they do not so much remember for themselves as they remember in order to tell” (10, emphasis added).

All readers of the novel are familiar with Elizabeth’s words, “The evils overwhelming her were beginning to sound like South Africa from which she had fled” (57), and since to read this novel is to battle with the terrifying complexities of evil felt in the psyche with which it confronts us, almost all readers register this statement as an important clue to its meaning—only to find how little it actually explains. (For to be persecuted by means of imagined racial rejection [by a black woman], to be sexually humiliated [in the imagination] by a triumphant African male and to have the mind constantly invaded by obscene visions in various forms bears no obvious resemblance to Elizabeth’s South African experiences, although these visions are felt by her to be simultaneously grossly evil and deliberately visited upon her alone).
Moreover, the reference to South Africa has a ‘counterpart statement’ elsewhere in the novel: “Elizabeth felt that some of the answers lay in her experiences in Botswana” (19). Both Botswana and South Africa have therefore contributed to Elizabeth’s torture; moving to Botswana from South Africa has not effected an escape from power subjection. ‘Apartheid abjection’ persists.

Yet Head wrote, three years after the publication of A Question of Power, that she was sick to death of all that has been written about [the novel] by white reviewers ..., whether racist or liberal, [for in their eyes] a black man is not a whole man, with whole, horrific, satanic passions [, but ] a wee, sleekit, timorous beastie they mowed down with maxim guns a hundred years ago. A black man could not possibly be the characters in my books, so hugely vile, so hugely demonish. (qtd in Eilersen 222)

“They [i.e. such reviewers] had to re-set the work in South Africa because this sort of thing ... could not apply to Botswana”, she wrote sarcastically to Vigne in 1974 concerning reviewers’ responses to A Question of Power (Head, Gesture 187). She profoundly resented reductive readings of her work that would push it into the mould of the standard protest novel depicting a black victim of white oppression—ironically only another failure to respect the African victim or to acknowledge the existence of African forms of evil.

This has its equivalent in the novel when the narrator, who is a remembering, interpreting commentator, remarks: “Too often the feelings of a victim are not taken into account ... a process of degradation, scorn and blind cruelty had its equivalent of wild, savage vengeance in her” (98, emphasis added).

What is it that arouses such ‘vengeance’ in Elizabeth that it maddens her? This is not abjection, but its flipside: so desperate is the victim of humiliation to escape its agonies that she allows the furies of a vengeance-lust to boil up in her soul, hence re-enacting her torturers’ roles. The shock of experiencing her awful past, in which she was racially, morally and sexually humiliated, is resurfacing ‘mirror-fashion’ in Botswana, in Elizabeth’s mind. This type of haunting is, then, a memory-form. In South Africa, racism caused Elizabeth “permanent nervous tension” in a “torture” that went “on and on and on” (19); secondly, she was told with shocking suddenness at the vulnerable early adolescent stage of thirteen (in the indelible, “cruel” comments of the missionary school headmistress) that she did not have a ‘home’, was ‘racially contaminated’ as well as prone to genetic mental instability and morally tainted.
because her mother had had sex with "the stable boy, who was a native" (16); thirdly she had been subjected to the subsequent sexual humiliation inflicted by a husband both voraciously and indiscriminately promiscuous (18-19).

Head gives us no recognisable sign in the novel (beyond the spite shown towards Elizabeth by the Motabeng headmaster, depicted later), of anything done to Elizabeth by Batswana people to explain why "her life began to pitch over from an even keel" (21) in the country where she had sought refuge. Yet in the persecutory hallucinations to which she is subjected, her torturers have Batswana incarnations and their 'blackness' is emphasised (37; 57; 128). In fact, both "Sello" and "Dan" are said to have actual counterparts in Motabeng village. Though clearly the mix of Elizabeth's South African memories supplies the witch's broth from which the demons who torture her emanate, their having black African embodiments signifies that Elizabeth has discovered that there is, for her, no escaping from the forces of humiliation. As Head wrote to Vigne from Botswana: "Something really went wrong for me to be openly insulted and spat at..." (Gesture 121).

I suggest that the novel rewrites the social prevalence of racism that Head wrote about in her letters as a psychic persistence. This re-setting occurs because there is no society entirely free of hierarchies, and because the memory of degradation embeds itself in the recesses of the psyche, from which it inevitably resurfaces. Head wrote to Vigne concerning this period in her life: "I was re-creating inwardly a past where I continually brought myself to death through sheer aggression of personality" (Gesture 154, emphasis added) and in the novel we are told that "South Africans usually suffered from some form of mental aberration" (58). Elizabeth learns that she "recognises" the discriminatory workings of power because she understands through her very hatred the gloating delight, the profoundly pleasurable sense of empowerment which victimisation of others produces. The description she sent to her friend Vigne indicates Head's understanding of the slippage from power into evil:

Hell is like this. I have power and exquisite sensations. I'll give you a little to eat you dog. I'll put my mouth on the spring of your life and suck it dry because I'm really the most important person around here. Now dog, get down to the level I dictate to you. You are inferior. You are filth. I hate you, but ah, I need a dog to lap up a little bit of the exquisite sensations I dish out now and then. I only need dogs around here and you are my chief dog. Crawl, bitch! (Gesture 162)

This is clearly reminiscent of Elizabeth's tortures in A Question of Power (for example the gloatings of "Medusa" and "Dan" in passages on pages 44; 13;
191; and elsewhere), in which she herself enacts both the victim’s and the perpetrator’s roles in her mind.

Elizabeth’s isolation in Motabeng is described as her circumscription by “a barrier of solitude” (11): she is cut off racially, culturally and linguistically from those among whom she now lives. This ‘empty stage’ provides the opportunity allowing her damaged psyche to re-enact the racial, moral and sexual persecution she underwent in South Africa, but now with the torturers in Batswana guises – which is to say, those harmful categorisations are (re-) asserting themselves, with even greater force, as products of her inner self: memories are masked as actual recurrences or reincarnations. The trapped energy of unassuaged resentment and hatred has not died down, but has been resuscitated and intensified. In Elizabeth’s identification of “the feeling behind it – a deep, cringing shame” (117) lies an important clue to what is happening in her mind. Since she naturally hates her persecutors with a profound fury and indignation (the “wild, savage vengeance” (98) referred to earlier), the anger seems a reassurance of how ineradicably different the victim of cruel power is from its perpetrator. But the figures in Elizabeth’s psycho-drama (who are, of course, the inadequate, weak, but “good” “Sello” who is nevertheless himself the former power figure “Caligula”; the pitiless “Medusa”; and the grotesque “Dan”), if these three are not “real people”, they are nevertheless not strangers either. They are (it seems) ‘possible selves’.

A number of quotations strewn throughout the narrative hint at this point – such as: “[t]he roots of evil, as a creative, propelling force, had become as close as her own breathing” (85-86) and: “Medusa... is really the direct and tangible form of [one’s] own evils... power lusts... greed... self-importance” (40) and Elizabeth’s acknowledgement that she is “living with a strange ‘other self’... [who] has a terrible Medusa hidden away in his subconscious” (58, emphasis added) – a mental region which is thus Elizabeth’s deeper subconscious and deeper self. If, “wherever relentless cruelty and hatred erupted, it was like the dark geyser of Medusa’s soul erupting” (92, emphasis added), then Elizabeth has herself become the conduit of evil power. The eruption image portrays power as a force slumbering in all human souls. It links with a whole chain of other references to Elizabeth’s wrathful vengefulness (at her victimisation) as a “lava” slumbering within her:

One would go stark, raving mad if a deep and endless endurance of human suffering, such as one could encounter in Southern Africa, were really brought to the surface. Subterraneously it was a powerful willing of the total extinction of the white man... [a] terrible hatred.

(83, emphases added)

50
We are told that the “disregarded” feeling, a “ferocity” at centuries of victimhood, “rumbled beneath her consciousness like molten lava” (98) and later that “Dan [one of her imagined torturers]... saw the hidden molten lava within – ‘Now, I know what to do with that’, he said, triumphantly” (136). Then we learn that “[Elizabeth] began to believe her own nightmare. It was a combination of Dan and the hidden, molten lava” (140). All these images of a volcanic power smouldering within Elizabeth culminate in the final, great crisis during which she assaults the inanely “Christian” Mrs Jones, when “the propaganda records, the repetitive images of evil, ...shattered her sanity.... The day she broke down she simply howled, and like a volcano the evil erupted in a wild flow of molten lava.” (171, emphases added)

The notion of memory is used in a strange, much enlarged way in this text. It might be associated with the notion of contamination or complicity. Having been subjected to power as its victim, and having consequently apparently escaped from its clutches, only to find that it is living (on) within her own mind, Elizabeth has been forced through experiencing this lingering after-effect of power to acknowledge that it cannot be safely parcelled away in her South African past, labelled ‘apartheid’. The voices of “the soul of the black man”, of “the poor” (134) themselves instruct Elizabeth that the “roots” and “creators” of “evil” (134) are “nothing like the white fools shoving us around”, but lie in the ubiquitous “arrogance of the soul,... its overwhelming lust for dominance and prestige” (135). This is not a comforting, but a “tortur[ing]” (135) thought to Elizabeth. Unlike Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, in which the weak white soul succumbs, when exposed to the opportunities for evil which ‘Africa’ offers, to an indeterminate13 “horror! The horror!” (Conrad 149), Head (through Elizabeth) in her novel acknowledges evil personally and denies it a racial tag.14 Through the text Head insists on the taking of responsibility by each individual for all the power forms of society – even when one is their victim. This startling, frightening discovery which Elizabeth so arduously attains (“the possibilities of massive suffering were being worked out in her” – (39)) establishes that her awful experiences are nevertheless a learning process15 – the difficulty, disturbing effects and immense poignancy of the novel reflect the terrible warning which is its ‘lesson’: that “[e]vil is a complexity so monumental that everything becomes a tangle of lies” (12).

Once heard, the “roar” (36; 159) of power16 echoes on and on in the soul. A Question of Power offers no glib, enduring or certain reassurance of recovery from the damaging effects of harmful power; its truth is not reconciliatory, but demanding and warning. What Elizabeth’s German friend tells her (after relating the incident in which an Afrikaner humiliates an African
tea-server), concerning the Jews and the Nazi period (as a supposed historical parallel to South Africa) that “once the liberation came and the war was over it [the ‘[cringe]’ of ‘inferior[ity]’ caused by power] disappeared overnight” (46-47, emphasis added), is surely meant to be recognised (in the context of this novel) as an invalid and foolishly sentimental claim. This false reassurance of the possibility of an ‘erasure’ of the harm caused by power abuse, parallels the other hopeful beliefs which Elizabeth learns to discard – such as belief in a powerful, justice-dealing and rescuing God (200; 86) and the dream of a romantic male soul-mate who will be simultaneously protective, powerful and faithful. The latter (naïve) ideal or yearning constructs the charade that “Dan” upholds for so long.

One description of Elizabeth’s actual experience explicitly brings in the ‘memory’ notion:

So many people ran away from South Africa to forget it or to throw it off. It seemed impossible then, the recurring, monotonous song in her head: “Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death”.... It broke her instantly. ... There was nothing she could think of to counter it: I’m not like that. I’ve never been a racialist. Of course I admit I’m Coloured. ... Maybe people who are Coloureds are quite nice too, just like Africans ... (47, emphases added)

The pathos of this passage, its harrowing effect, comes from one’s sense of the extent to which it is saturated with the experience of the recurrence of victimisation and manifests the continuing cringe of the beaten victim.

In the piece published in 1982 in Drum magazine, Head (looking back on her own past) wrote:

This terror of power and an examination of its stark horrors created a long period of anguish in my life and forced out of me some strange novels that I had not anticipated writing.

It was almost as though the books wrote themselves, propelled into existence by the need to create a reverence for human life in an environment and historical circumstances that seem to me a howling inferno. (Woman Alone 77)

This ‘aftermath’ piece both testifies to the way power “terror[ises]” and subjugates its victim in “anguish”, and simultaneously records how it can impel the victim to “create” that which was formerly unimaginable — because the
“need” of ‘reverence’ is intensified in the “inferno”. Thus unendurable memory becomes a source of creative energy; it makes possible the recognition of the huge effort of the imagination required to establish a liveable world, against the perpetual, insistent thrust of power lust – both outside of and within people. In 1972 Head wrote:

It is impossible to guess how the revolution will come one day in South Africa. But in a world where all ordinary people are insisting on their rights, it is inevitable. It is to be hoped that great leaders will arise there who remember the suffering of racial hatred and out of it formulate a common language of human love for all people. (Woman Alone 103 – emphases added)

As in A Question of Power, an unsentimental “language of love” would (as Head imagines it here) be forged from memories of the harm caused by racist abuse.

Reminding us that “the novel in Africa has been dominated by historical and hence nationalist themes”, Elleke Boehmer asks “how are [African] women to find a voice? How are they to interrupt the duologue of colonial master and national father?” – a question which she answers by pointing to such women “giving voice: speaking for themselves, telling their own histories” (244). Like the writers Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera after her, Bessie Head had the courage to give voice to the ‘underground’ of nationalism and decolonisation and to the psychic hardships of being female, without any family connections, darker than white and a person of ‘mixed race’ in these (sociopolitically) rigidly hierarchising contexts. Head’s insistence on uncomfortable realities, it needs to be recognised, grew out of agonising, shameful memories – and to overcome that agony and its awful, attendant shame required great effort and daring.

Victim, “blabbermouth” (40), “warrior” (103), Bessie Head produced in this text an enduring testimony to the ineradicable awfulness of violation and abjection and to its horrifying aftermath. Nothing as facile as a ‘talking cure’ is offered in her vision of the contorted memory that succeeds trauma. A huge, slow and arduous effort is required to outmanoeuvre the temptations and seductions that power offers even to its victims. It seems that for Elizabeth it is possible to opt out of hierarchies and power struggles only by embracing the humanly ordinary. Elizabeth bases this insight on another memory, one she brought with her from the “slums and hovels” of South Africa (26), a recollection to which she comes back in the end (206). For, in Head’s view, “[t]here [is] no
direct push against those rigid, false systems of class and caste” (206). All power forms are shown to be forms of “aparting”; their only true opposite being presented as acceptance of our own and others’ “ordinariness” — the interlinking force which creates community and “belonging” (206). A Question of Power ends, all readers remember, with Elizabeth “placing one soft hand over her land”, moving from memory into a future with that “gesture of belonging” (206).

The word “belonging” is crucial. It indicates an achieved dedication that avoids both the arrogance of possessiveness and the humiliation of homelessness. It also points the way out of the memory trap in which victims are caught, for to belong is to be future-directed, like the enduring “land” itself, the soil on which Elizabeth lives among plants, creatures and other “ordinary” people (206). Is this attained relief to be imagined as a condition immune from reversion into agonising memories? Such a question remains unanswerable. For Head herself, the plaguing psychic disturbances of the violated would certainly recur, contributing to her increasing addiction to alcohol and her premature death. Perhaps her anguish intensified, as it shortened, the life of this profound spiritual guide, who saw her account of remembered suffering and her vision of its arduous transcendence as a testament to posterity.

Notes

1 Head’s biographer Eilersen has established that Head’s mother was not institutionalised because she had had a child by a black man, although the evidence of the child’s racially ‘mixed’ parentage led to her existence being ignored by all but (occasionally) her maternal grandmother, and to her adoption into a ‘coloured’ family (3-10). See also Birch.

2 Manuele Mamphela mentions:

...a few impediments to the building of a moral culture in South Africa. The first obstacle is that the ghosts from the past refuse to lie down. ... We can talk about the Rainbow Nation as loudly as we like, but we need to confront the implications and the consequences of the fact that a large group of South Africans were made to feel subhuman. Voting in 1994 and again in 1999 did not remove those scars of humiliation, particularly as the majority of people continue to live in squalor, are unemployed and without hope. This inferiority complex is a reality of most people’s lives. Until and unless we confront it we will not succeed. In the same vein, the superiority complex amongst white people needs to be confronted (173-174).

Cf Kristeva:

...a portion of autobiography in a narrative ensures its moorings in reality; but another portion, one of transformation or distortion, that is, the share of fiction, collects the intensity of the subjective bonds that fasten the narrator to others and to himself or herself. And that fictional portion, in contrast with the autobiographical one, acts as a filter that produces a certain discretion, a certain modesty, while changing real-life characters into prototypes (78-79).

See, e.g. pp. 66-67, 178, 216 from the Vigne letter collection (Head, Gesture), in addition to examples quoted in this essay. Cf A Question of Power’s reference to ‘the Coloured dog, Elizabeth’ (129).

An allusion to Head’s alleged affair with a member of the Batswana nobility as well as the murder of a (resulting) baby by her drowning it in a pit toilet – an idea she found especially horrific (Gesture 87-88).

Head’s 1977 application for Botswana citizenship was rejected (no reasons being provided). She wrote to Vigne at the time: “So, there’s not much to go home to” (Gesture 216).

Cf Gesture 116 where Head refers again to herself as a “blabbermouth” with the novel: “That was the crux of it, once she knew and was certain of the truth, she would disclose it, no matter if it was the most horrific truth mankind had ever heard” (Power 200). This idea may be theoretically expressed as “[the] political question of... gaining access to positions of enunciation” (Innes and Rooney 207).

In 1963 Head wrote what it felt like for a ‘black’ person like herself to live in South Africa: “Every white face that you see passing you by chums you up till you could just cry to be delivered from this unceasing torment of hate, hate, hate” (Alone 14). The ‘torment’ caused by “hate” may be either the suffering caused by being hated, or a responsive, but anguishing hatred of the persecutor – the latter being emphasised throughout A Question of Power.

The narrator informs us that “they played on her experiences in South Africa [where]... she had been rigidly classified Coloured” (44, emphasis added). Adetokunbo Pearse writes that “Dan’s strategy is to destroy any sense of love or respect Elizabeth may have for herself, and thereby destroy her love and respect for others” (89).

Head’s notion of evil is like a ‘working definition’: she refers to “the misery and suffering [evil] inflicts on human life”; evil is “inflicting harm on others” (Alone 63); in addition “I associated evil in my mind with the acquisition of power” (Alone 77 – cited earlier). Her images of evil are of extremely selfish, greedy, cruel and obscene acts.

Cf Fanon’s remarkable passage: “The important theoretical problem is that it is necessary at all times and in all places to make explicit, to demystify, and to harry the insult to mankind that exists in oneself” (246, emphasis added). Rose posits that the ‘universality’ Head achieves in A Question of Power is “the universality of madness” (11-15), but I argue that Head’s more disquieting, indelible discovery is of the ‘universality’ of the capacity to inflict hurt – to use power evily – even in victims. Cf my commentary on A Question of Power in my book (Gagiano, 153-159)

See Head’s reference to “the lofty statements of mankind’s great teachers” as “indistinct statements about evil” (12; emphasis added).
In a letter to Vigne in 1967 Head wrote: “There are really wicked people on this earth. BUT THEY ARE NOT IN CAMPS” (Gesture 54).

“There was no beauty or tenderness in her learning” (70) precedes the list of ‘fundamental questions’ to which Elizabeth is subjected. Cf her references to herself as “learning, internally” (133), and having been “born for this experience” (192).

Most terrifyingly illustrated when Dan “opens Elizabeth’s skull... and talk[s] right into the exposed area [with his]... unintelligible... ‘RRRRRRRRRRRRRR’” (177). It is a gesture enacting violation of the individual by power abuse, as well as the invasion of the mind by power.

Cf Elizabeth’s reference to “this record inside her head” and to “feeling behind it ... [:] a cringing, deep shame” (Power 117).

Nancy Holmstrom emphasises racial and gender ‘identities’ as markers of power subjugation: “Racism... has created the group that needs to struggle against it” (97); “hetero)sexism creates the group that needs to struggle against it” (98).

Tucker notes that “Absolute power... relies on the victimisation of an Other” (175, emphasis added). Head’s two main discoveries, according to Evasdaughter (77; 81 emphases added), are that “power over others has no good form” and that the “interpretation of paranoia [is] a reaction to power”.

Head repeatedly uses the term “ordinary” to express a major discovery: see pp. 196-206; 31; 39; 63; 79 ; cf. “I am just anyone” (Power 11).

She once wrote of “a wild terror that I had stumbled upon a world of evil that ... would live forever....I felt that I would go through this experience again were I re-born...if I recorded the evil ...I would read A Question of Power and it would save me from such suffering” (qutd Sarvan 15). Cf her more despondent reaction to the public response to the novel in 1976: “Since the material used is authentic, ... It caused people to pause and consider; ... But generally, at a more sophisticated level, it was branded the work of a deranged mind — ...as such it had its place but was not worthy of regard” (qutd Nichols 18).

Works Cited


