Confession, Interrogation and Self-interrogation in the New South African Prison Writing

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Abstract

'At unlock' every morning (to use the prison parlance) there are approximately 120,000 people in prison in South Africa, with its population of 55 million. Britain, in comparison, has a daily prison population of 55,000 for a total population of 57 million - proportionally one-fourth of the South African figure. This depressing reality of an inordinate number of South Africans having become criminalized as the result of an unjust political system is further compounded by the detention of about 73,000 people under Emergency regulations since the first State of Emergency in 1960-32,000 in the period between 12 June 1985 and September 1988 alone. How South Africa became what Breyten Breytenbach calls 'the land of banning, censorship, prison' has been documented with varying degrees of candour and necessary masking in an ever-growing body of prison writing. The experience of detention and imprisonment is a major determinant of literary production in South Africa today.
'At unlock' every morning (to use the prison parlance) there are approximately 120,000 people in prison in South Africa, with its population of 35 million. Britain, in comparison, has a daily prison population of 55,000 for a total population of 57 million – proportionally one-fourth of the South African figure. This depressing reality of an inordinate number of South Africans having become criminalized as the result of an unjust political system is further compounded by the detention of about 73,000 people under Emergency regulations since the first State of Emergency in 1960–62, 32,000 in the period between 12 June 1985 and September 1988 alone. How South Africa became what Breyten Breytenbach calls 'the land of banning, censorship, prison' has been documented with varying degrees of candour and necessary masking in an ever-growing body of prison writing. The experience of detention and imprisonment is a major determinant of literary production in South Africa today.

Autobiographies and biographies of political and cultural leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Alan Hendrikse, Frank Chikane (General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches), trade unionist Emma Mashinini and dissidents such as Norma Kitson and Andrew Zondo all have in common a section dealing with the imprisonment of their subjects. The tradition of the prison memoir which began in the mid-60s with Ruth First's 117 Days and Albie Sachs' account in The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs of his bid to hold out against his interrogators during his detention and solitary confinement under the notorious 90-day law, was continued by Hugh Lewin in 1974 with Bandiet, a memoir of his detention under the same 90-day law and his subsequent seven-year prison sentence under the Sabotage Act. Both Moses Dlamini in Hell-Hole, Robben Island: Reminiscences of a Political Prisoner in South Africa and Indres Naidoo in Island in Chains: Ten Years as a Political Prisoner in South Africa's Most Notorious Penitentiary have recorded their incarceration on 'The Island' in works that have helped to establish the prison memoir as a significant genre in South African writing, the genre in which Molefe Pheto has documented his experiences in And Night Fell: Memoirs of a Political Prisoner in South Africa which he
himself describes as ‘the narrative of a nightmare that had lasted for 281 days in South African prisons, 271 of them in solitary confinement’, and as has Caeserina Kona Makhoere in *No Child’s Play: In Prison under Apartheid*. It is also within the general framework of the prison memoir that Breyten Breytenbach undertakes in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* his metafictional essay on the nature of examination and confession.

A semiotic analysis of the South African prison memoir and its fictional variants reveals certain salient characteristics. In the first place, the prison memoir is consciously narrated by a subject whose identity is established by his experience as a ‘political prisoner’. The title of Hugh Lewin’s memoir *Bandiet* is precisely such an exercise in self-identification, the term being defined for the reader by way of prefatory explanation:

*Bandiet*

an Afrikaans word meaning *convict*. No longer in official use because considered derogatory. Unofficially – i.e. in common use throughout South African jails – a prisoner is called a *bandiet*. Plural *bandiete*.

Similarly, Moses Dlamini introduces himself on the title page of his memoir *Hell-Hole, Robben Island* as ‘Prisoner No. 872/63’, the label preceding his name. Indres Naidoo also publishes his account of his imprisonment on Robben Island under the signifier ‘Prisoner 885/63’. It is in the same spirit that even before the title page of the British edition of his autobiography *No Life of My Own* Frank Chikane reproduces in full as his particular South African identity document his Notification of Admission to Prison certificate (on a charge of treason).

A second distinctive feature of the prison book is its Dedication which affirms a continuing community of the imprisoned. Dlamini’s memoir is ‘Dedicated to Sobukwe, to all Azanian patriots who are languishing in prison, and to those who died at the hands of the police and in prison in their noble struggle for a free Azania’; Lewin’s is ‘for Bram Fischer, for all political prisoners inside South African jails, for Jock Strachan (who made things so much better inside) and for all those out of jail but still restricted in South Africa’; and Breytenbach’s *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* he dedicates ‘to the multitude of detainees and tortured ones and prisoners in the land of my birth’.

Thirdly, the actual narrative of the detention or prison process has identifiable contours: an autobiographical introduction; an account of arrest and pre-trial detention; the individual response to solitary confinement, the various methods of interrogation and degrees of torture; the ritual pattern of the security trial with its statements extracted often under duress, witnesses under police control and proceedings in courts often closed to the public; the sentence; induction into prison life; the routine humiliations of prison and the strategies of adjustment and survival that evolve; descriptions of superintendents and warders, prison doctors,
psychiatrists and ministers of religion; the enforced and frequently tense fellowship of convicts and political prisoners; the various systems of support and antagonism among prisoners; the compulsion to develop channels of communication and cultivate human contacts; the solidarity with condemned prisoners; the knowledge of how people behave in the face of execution; all the habits of body and mind that define the prisoner until the day of his release. The narrative design is not peculiar to South African prison memoirs; it is a universal one, structuring the memoirs of the Africans Soyinka and Ngugi, the Argentinean Jacobo Timerman and the Egyptian Nawal el Sa'adawi, the Cubans Jorge Valls and Armando Valladares and the Russians Irina Ratushinskaya and Natan Sharansky.

Two features of the detention and prison experience recounted in the South African prison memoirs offer themselves as providing valuable access to these books as literary constructs. The first is actually contingent upon the second, but needs to be considered before it. A particularly traumatic stage of the induction into prison is the stripping naked of the prisoner and the body search prior to being given prison dress. Makhoere returns almost compulsively to this detail of her experience, recording no fewer than three occasions on which she was obliged to undress. On the first of these, she says,

one of the wardresses, whom I later learned was the head of the prison in the women's section, ordered an elderly wardress to strip me and search my belongings. A thorough search was done of my clothes and I was ordered to open my mouth, put my hands up, and spread my legs apart. She found nothing and ordered me to dress. The door of the room was locked. I was alone. Thus began my solitary confinement. 3

One recognizes in Makhoere's description in No Child's Play the formings of the metaphor of the stripping away of the prisoner's humanity that Lewin used in Bandiet to describe his entry into prison life:

You are stripped of everything inessential. You are stripped bare and given back only what they think is necessary. They strip you at the beginning and they go on stripping you, endlessly, to ensure that you have only what they think is necessary. You are stripped bare of everything that you can call your own, constantly stripped bare of anything that you make your own; you are stripped bare in an endless process of peeling off your protective covering and leaving you naked. So they can watch you. So that you, like the corridor, are without decoration, without covering, with nothing behind which to hide, with nothing they can't see into and watch. 4

The metaphor applies equally to Emma Mashinini’s account in Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life of her sense of total exposure when the police invaded and searched her home in the early hours of the morning and she herself was later stripped in Pretoria Central Prison: ‘I was cold. Everything was taken. I had a gold chain which my daughters had given me for
my fiftieth birthday. That was taken. Everything was removed, up to my rings. I sat in that place with nothing to read. Just with myself. The bare me.5 And in Hell-Hole, Robben Island Moses Dlamini offers as concretization of his introductory claim that South Africa is 'a place where you are stripped of every vestige of human dignity – debased, demoralized, dehumanized'6 not only the humiliating stripping and crude rectal examination of the entire group of political prisoners on arrival at the Robben Island prison (they were kept naked for three whole days before being given prison clothes – 'Criminal convicts were surprised as we walked, to see a long line of naked chained bodies taking their food' (p. 20)), but also the bizarre daily tauza of the convict labour teams before being allowed their food:

We were commanded to strip naked and stand in eight lines. There was absolutely no privacy. In front of each line was a warder who had to do the searching. Jumping on the left leg, while the right floated in mid-air as though to make a side-kick, simultaneously clicking the tongue to the warder and clapping the hands together, afterwards spinning round on the left leg, then turning round, bending and showing the warder your arse – that was the 'tauza'. And we watched, in astonishment, as one by one the criminal convicts indulged in the orgy, some doing it in style to the pleasure of the warders. When the turn of us political prisoners came, we handed the warders the clothes, opened our mouths, lifted up our hands, turned round with naked dignity and refused to do the 'tauza'. (pp. 37-8)

Enforced denudation suggests, however, a kind of narrative 'tauza' to Dlamini: the exposed self can be deliberately and calculatedly revealed in a narrative about the prison experience in which the reader becomes discomfitingly obliged to occupy the position of witness to the paraded truths of the prison memoir.

The second feature of the prison memoir that is narratologically significant is to be found in the very many accounts of interrogation during detention. The various modes of interrogation, sometimes recurring in cross-examination ploys during the trial and often shaping the various interviews later by prison officials such as superintendents, psychiatrists and even doctors, form an interrogative matrix for an eventual process of self-investigation in narrative. The following example of interrogation during detention must suffice here to dramatize the morbid relationship between interrogator and detainee. It is an extract from the actual inquest proceedings into the death of the detainee S. Looksmart Ngudle who died in detention in 1963:

Q If a detainee, this man or any other, on being interrogated after he has been detained, says 'I am not under any circumstances prepared to give you any information whatsoever' do you leave him alone or do you take further steps?
A Well, he's got to be asked again.
Q And again?
A Yes.
Q And again?
A Yes.
Q And again?
A Yes.
Q And again?
A Yes.
Q I see. The idea being to wear him down I suppose?
A I make no comment.
Q Well, what is the idea, you give me your comment?
A Well, he is there to give information that’s why he’s detained.
Q But he’s already told you two or three times that he won’t talk?
A Then he’ll eventually let go.
Q Well then supposing you had a case of a suspect who was detained because you, the police genuinely believed that he could give certain information, and if in fact your belief was wrong and this man couldn’t give you information, would you keep on questioning him over and over again?
A I would question him, yes.
Q You would, over and over again?
A Yes.
Q That would be a dreadful thing to happen to a man, wouldn’t it, if in fact you were wrong?
A Yes.
Q It would be. And all that man would be able to see as far as his future is concerned would be an endless vista of imprisonment coupled with repeated questioning?
A Yes.

This pattern of inquisition, frequently misnamed information- or intelligence-gathering, is the standard one that can be recognized in most accounts of interrogation. It is the strategy described by Coetzee’s Colonel Joll of the Third Bureau in his novel Waiting for the Barbarians for the probing of a prisoner who apparently has nothing to yield. Training and experience, he maintains, has taught him to recognize the tone that enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth: ‘I am speaking of a situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see – this is what happens – first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth.’ Pain is truth, Colonel Joll’s interlocutor bears away from his conversation with the torturer; all else is subject to doubt. In her bewilderment and fear from being at the receiving end of such relentless interrogation at John Vorster Square, Emma Mashinini is able in her autobiography to describe the mind of the inquisitor: ‘Always they wanted the truth, when I had no more truth to tell. I don’t think they ever really understood that in fact there was nothing to give away. But they always tried to find it, this nothing’ (p. 75). Molefe Pheto also describes how he had reached breaking point and stated the simple truth about himself to his interrogators during his detention in 1975. Finally, he says, the confession they had all been
awaiting came suddenly, as he could no longer endure. Enough was enough:

'It is the truth now. No more. And the truth is that I do not know what has happened to the missing pages of my passport! I don't know any of the Coloured people except Clarence-Hamilton, and I am not a Communist. That is all!'

I felt very tired after that. The silence in the room was stunning. Only my breathing and whimpering could be heard.

His disbelief was unimaginable! I must have been the devil himself. He sucked in a deep breath. 'Is that the truth?' [sic]

'It is the truth.'

The truth insisted upon in each of these interrogations emerges as the unequivocal ignorance of the victim, as an irreducibly simple statement of fact, or as the idée fixe, the fiction into which the mind of the interrogator is obsessively locked and for which he seeks verification. Interrogators, says the Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica in 'Pity for the Powerful', can never learn anything: 'They are here for the sole purpose of attaining a pre-established result, which is to make other people see eye to eye with themselves.' The 'truth' of the interrogator provides the detainee with no relief from the burden of supposed guilty knowledge nor respite from the process of interrogation itself. 'Truth' surrendered through systematic torture is meaningless. Ultimately, the only incontrovertible truth that each interrogation yields is the one contained in Colonel Joll's banal and terrible equation, 'pain is truth'.

The experience of detention, whether accompanied by actual physical torture or not, is the experience of pain. Detention, Ngugi argues in his prison diary — that is, the fact of being wrongfully held in captivity for an indefinite period, the termination of which is entirely dependent upon somebody else's political fears — is in itself torture. 'These people have fine ways of torturing you,' Mashinini corroborates, 'They let you torture yourself' (p. 65). The actual physical pain that a tortured person undergoes, Timerman asserts in Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number, is impossible to transmit: 'it is a pain without points of reference, revelatory symbols, or clues to serve as indicators.' The solitary universe of the tortured has to be inhabited alone. It is best, he offers, 'to allow yourself to be led meekly toward pain and through pain, rather than to struggle resolutely as if you were a normal human being' (p. 35). In his Jail Diary Sachs explains his need to understand that the pain of detention is neither an attitude nor a state of mind, but a reality, not ennobling and not useful, apropos of nothing but itself and simply destructive. In Bandiet Lewin first gives an account of his own interrogation during which he reached a stage of detachment from his own violated body and the sound of his own screaming voice, and later describes the same terrible detachment from the effects of psychological torture inflicted by the arbitrary pettiness of prison warders. 'What kind of nightmare is this?' is the title given by Pheto to
the two sections of his memoir dealing with the physical assaults on him during interrogation by the Security Police as he is thrust over the threshold of pain so that it alone fills his awareness.

The literal truthfulness of the accounts of torture and the actual degree of pain experienced behind these South African prison memoirs is less important than an understanding of the full implications of the relationship between interrogator and detainee that gives these works their real narrative interest. If, as Ngugi insists, detention without trial should not only be interpreted as a punitive act of physical and mental torture of certain individuals (and, Elaine Scarry reminds the very word 'pain' has its etymological home in poena or 'punishment'), but also as a calculated act of psychological terror, 'a terrorist programme for the psychological siege of a whole nation', the psychology of the detainee in relation to his interrogator is of the utmost significance.

A recurrent motif in the prison book is the need for the prisoner, in order to survive in such a system, to cultivate a particular frame of mind. Lewin refers to it as the ability on the one hand to accommodate the system so as not to be ground down by it, yet on the other hand constantly to fight it so as to retain one's self-respect. Soyinka refers to a similar dual condition of the mind: 'the duality of its numbed despair and the weird instinctive cunning'. But a closer examination of all these prison books reveals a more far-reaching ambivalence in the detained person resulting from the relationship with his captor. Different personalities have different styles of coping with stress that is outside the range of normal human experience, but, as the young revolutionaries in Driver's novel Elegy for a Revolutionary all learn, in the end almost anybody can be broken: 'Some are broken by violence, some are strengthened by it; but all are destroyed by being alone.' There are no heroes and no traitors in the interrogation room. The so-called truth obtained under duress is the result of the lines of demarcation between fiction and reality being blurred deliberately or unwittingly in the mind of the detainee since the end of the interrogation process is simply to produce compliance in him.

The value of the prison book as literature is to be found in Soyinka's testimony in The Man Died: 'I testify to the strange, sinister byways of the mind in solitary confinement, to the strange monsters it begets. It is certain that all captors and gaolers know it; that they create such conditions specially for those whose minds they fear.' The psychological matrix of the interrogator-detainee relationship and consequently of the extensive body of writing it has produced, is what West calls the D D D – for Debility, Dependency and Dread – syndrome: the complex of forces that seem to make people compliant to their captors and likely to provide what they want in the way of testimony or confessions. It is the syndrome that Breytenbach discusses in the 'Note on the Relationship Between Detainee and Interrogator' and in the 'Note About Torture in South African Cells and Interrogation Rooms' at the end of his True Confessions: 'The detainee
and the interrogator both know that there is, obscurely, a measure of ritual involved in their relationship, a ritual as old as the history of human intercourse.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{Debility} is the term West uses to describe the consequences of all the factors that grind a prisoner down physically – fatigue resulting from painful physical exercises or alternatively from enforced inactivity, physical injuries or sleep deprivation – and produce a general state of deterioration that can cause mental changes, misperceptions of reality and distortions of recall. It is this debility induced by physical assaults, solitary confinement and the degradations of prison life that Pheto records in \textit{And Night Fell} as having contributed to his decline and disorientation to the point that he failed to recognize his own daughter. In his own words, when he realized the toll interrogation had taken on him, ‘As we Africans say, “I wept like a woman”\textsuperscript{19} A comparable instance from Emma Mashinini’s autobiography is her account of the occasion when she was so traumatized by the experience of detention that she simply could not remember her youngest daughter’s name: ‘I’d go without eating, because this pain of not being able to remember the name of my daughter was the greatest I’ve ever had’ (p. 86).

The second factor is the one West identifies as \textit{dependency}, the dependency of the captive on his captor because the captor has the power to destroy him – to kill him or let him die, and so all degrees of care between that and being treated like a member of the family depend upon the motives of the captor’ (p. 72). This dependency tends to grow during captivity, West says, especially if the captive is held in isolation since he has to depend on his captor for immediate social intercourse and for life itself. And since all power rests with the captor, this leads to startling behavioral aberrations such as identification with the aggressor. In order to survive, the detainee needs to understand his captor, to adapt himself to his personality and to explore those few precious areas of intimacy in what is otherwise a wall of hostility. He comes to understand the idiom of his captor and even to adopt his language. Eventually, devastatingly, he finds himself having to come to terms with the almost inconceivable ordinariness of his captor, the fact that the figure of power who is keeping him in limbo simultaneously inhabits an everyday world of kinship and fellowship – belongs, in fact, to a breed of men who, in the words of Coetzee’s magistrate in \textit{Waiting for the Barbarians}, can ‘pass without disquiet between the unclean and the clean’. ‘Do yourself a selfish favour,’ Breytenbach advises, ‘if you want to remain whole, recognize the humanity of your enemy.’\textsuperscript{20} A few of these must suffice to represent the brotherhood of interrogators in South African writing: Brigadier van den Bergh, head of the Security Police as seen by Hugh Lewin: tall and elegant, looking like a smooth English businessman, polite and quiet; the Security Police officer Heystek whose office in which Molefe Pheto was assaulted was decorated with a Van Gogh print and photographs of his family; the
Robben Island warder Oom Dellie, whom Dlamini describes as both brutal and sentimental, later becoming a sectarian lay preacher and finally a suicide; the head of the Kroonstad prison, Brigadier Venter, whom Makhoere presents as 'hard to describe,' warm and approachable, diplomatic – and cunning; and lastly, the infamous man known as 'The Controller', mentioned by Mashinini in her autobiography as the one she most hated, but described here by Bruce Loudun in The Sunday Times of 10 October 1982 during the inquest into the death in detention of Dr Neil Aggett:

He's young, with boyish good looks. He's smartly dressed in a black suit and what look like Gucci shoes. He peers through fashionable teardrop glasses.

... The 'Controller' is Lieutenant Steven Peter Whitehead, a member of the Security Branch of the SAP and the officer in charge of the late Dr Neil Aggett from just before Christmas last year until February 5 when the doctor turned trade unionist was found dead in his cell at John Vorster Square. (p. 17)

The third factor in the D D D syndrome is dread, which West defines as 'a type of continuing and pervasive fear that is made up of all the small fears a captive is entitled to have; a fear that the captivity will continue indefinitely, fear of what the captors might do, fear for the safety of one's loved ones' (p. 72). It is the unknown, he continues, that is most frightening, especially where one's freedom is concerned. Indefinite confinement is a fearsome thing.

Elements of the D D D syndrome, to be found in varying degrees in most South African accounts of detention and prison books, are also subsumed into the psychiatric classification of the post-traumatic stress disorder, the clinical features of which are also amply documented in these works. To illustrate, the condition that Caesarina Makhoere explicitly states as her increasing paranoia and hallucination during her periods of punitive isolation in prison, and exemplifies in her apparent indifference to receiving the news of her father's death, has as its equivalent Emma Mashinini's retrospective diagnosis of her own state of mind:

I did not know anything about the psychological effects of trauma. These are things I've only learnt about since coming out of hospital. I thought instead that I was going mad. Really going mad. And I was fighting very much against it because now I could read in the newspapers that people were going into psychiatric hospitals and I didn't understand that you could go mad from being arrested. I just thought I was sick. (p. 86)

It was, however, Mashinini's treatment after her release in the Danish Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims that first motivated her whole autobiographical enterprise. In direct contrast to her initial obedience to the police instruction not to discuss her detention with anybody, in this second place of confinement she was encouraged to tell what had
happened to her during the whole period of her imprisonment, ‘to dig and dig and speak about everything’ (p. 92). Therapeutic interrogation was not without its problems at first. The Danish doctor was initially perceived as yet another in a line of white women in positions of detentive authority, yet by eventually coming to terms with her feelings of fear and shame, Mashinini learned the value of self-interrogation as healing, and when she later approaches Dr Liz Floyd, friend of Neil Aggett, for assistance, narrative is consciously perceived as therapy: ‘when I went and told her about all my problems it was like a psychological release. I started emptying and talking, and it was a great relief. This was not a doctor and patient discussing. It was two friends who’d come from prison, and prison is not something you can leave behind’ (p. 105).

The stripping of the prisoner, both literally and mentally by a series of interrogators provides the metaphor for the compulsive baring of self that is autobiography, conscious self-disclosure through narration. The former victim of a relationship in which he or she was forced into compliance – to see eye-to-eye with an oppressor – now engages intersubjectively with a sympathetic hearer in a relationship of I-to-I. The certainty of having experienced pain, of having been reduced to a state which, as Elaine Scarry argues in *The Body in Pain*, language itself has been destroyed to the pre-language of cries and groans, is recorded in a work that also documents ‘the passage of pain [back] into speech’ (p. 9). Physical pain, Scarry says, is destructive of language:

> Torture inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying, but torture also mimes (objectifies in the external environment) this language-destroying capacity in its interrogation, the purpose of which is not to elicit needed information but visibly to deconstruct the prisoner’s voice... The prolonged interrogation ... graphically objectifies the step-by-step backward movement along the path by which language comes into being and which is here being reversed or uncreated or deconstructed. (p. 20)

In this unmaking of one’s world in which the self is turned inside out and one’s most secret and inward parts revealed, Scarry continues, all disintegrates: ‘World, self, and voice are lost, or nearly lost, through the intense pain of torture and not through the confession as is wrongly suggested by its connotations of betrayal. The prisoner’s confession merely objectifies the fact of their being almost lost, makes their invisible absence, or nearly absence, visible to the torturers’ (p. 35). The confession of the prisoner Scarry sees as a halfway point in the disintegration of language, ‘an audible objectification of the proximity of silence – the torturer and the regime have doubled their voice since the prisoner is now speaking their words’ (p. 36). This halfway point, it seems to me, is extremely suggestive for the way in which the body in pain is transformed into voice in the prison memoir. The restoration of voice can occur through the victim’s confessional echoing of the voice of the interrogator, through his being
compelled to return to his interrogator the desired text of himself and through his involuntarily assimilating by being tortured the methods of interrogation and employing them himself as strategies of self-interrogation in the memoir.

In their study *Detention and Torture in South Africa* Foster, Davis and Sandler outline the various distorted communications that are used as the stock-in-trade of interrogation: verbal abuse; false accusations; contradictory information such as when detainees are given information only to have it denied later; sham total information in which the prisoner is weakened by the impression that all is known to the interrogator in any case; counter-effect, or the good-guy, bad-guy or Mutt-and-Jeff method of locating the victim between alleged brutes and friends in the interrogation situation; double-bind techniques to trap the unwary victim; the standard verbal and non-verbal reinforcement ploys of ordinary conversation; hypnotic techniques and the common coercive device of lack of information. 21 Their analysis of the frequency of these methods of interrogation is corroborated by the exposure in the newspaper *New Nation* last year (4 (25) June 30-July 6, 1989) of a highly confidential manual, allegedly used by the SA Defence Force during interrogation, and which in its 119 pages details an identical range of psychological ploys interrogators can use to exploit the weaknesses of individuals and force them to give information to their interrogators.

In conclusion: the prison memoir is best approached within the general category of autobiography, and more specifically as confessional narrative. It shares with autobiography that combination of a process of self-discovery with the art of self-invention. Autobiographical truth, Eakin maintains, is 'not a fixed truth but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation', ceaseless identity formation based on the 'intimate and necessary linkage between the acquisition of language and the emergence of self-awareness'. 22 In its very broadest sense, a confessional narrative, according to Dennis A Foster, 'involves a narrator disclosing a secret knowledge to another, as a speaker to a listener, writer to reader, confessor to confessor'. 23 Confession is an attempt to present the self as a knowable object, he argues, 'through a narrative that 're-structures' (Lacan 48) the self as history and conclusions'. 24 In each of these South African prison memoirs the first-person narrator recounts the deconstruction of his own world and language by a whole range of physical and psychological stressors, up to the point where the compulsions to confess provide the very means of restructuring the self, and the interrogator's devices for destroying the language of the victim become the victim's strategies for self-creation. On the most obvious level memoirists like Makhoere and Dlamini extend their understanding of the debility, dread and dependence syndrome to embrace not only the relationship between all overseers and their political prisoners in South African jails, but also the very relationship between an oppressive regime
and the oppressed. On a more sophisticated level, however, Makhoere describes her sustained campaign of resistance in the various prisons in which she was held - her refusal to wear prison clothes, to do prison work, to accept food discrimination, to attend church services in prison, or to be interviewed by the prison psychiatrist - as part of a larger political agenda specifically formulated in terms of the prison experience. Detention and the structures of interrogation have stripped her of a sense of self; those very structures of undoing are employed to re-create and define a resistant self: When visited by the different prison officials asking for complaints, she returns to them the stubbornly distorted communication of the interrogator: 'we took a resolution that we were not going to speak to them: they knew our position. They would come and we would ignore them. We called it 'dis', for 'disregard' - you 'dis', you give them 'dis'. That one weapon completely frustrated them; they became flustered. They did not know how to handle that.'^{25} And on a level of still greater narrative self-awareness, Moses Dlamini confronts the reality of post-traumatic stress disorder after his incarceration on Robben Island ('I could imagine leaving prison like a vegetable, unable to speak coherently' (p. 33)), in a narrative in which the denial of the most ordinary standards of human decency evokes the dispossession of an entire people of their humanity. Prison gangs invite comparison with township gangs, the violent rapes, other physical assaults and killings on Robben Island merely symptomatic of the structural violence in society outside. The histories of other prisoners are recorded together with his own story, as texts are opened up within the framing text and reminiscences yield up further narratives in a structure of parallelism and reflexivity. Voice is restored to a being stripped on Robben Island to a state of virtually inexpressible pain in a narrative in which hypnotic intensity alternates with descriptive assault, information is sometimes withheld and sometimes fully given, and reinforcement ploys are constantly used in an elaborate - and representative - act of self-interrogation.

NOTES

1. Indres Naidoo (as told to Albie Sachs), Island in Chains: Ten Years as a Political Prisoner in South Africa's Most Notorious Penitentiary (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).


17. Dr Louis J. West, 'Effects of Isolation on the Evidence of Detainees', in A.N. Bell and R.D. Mackie, eds., op. cit., pp. 69-80. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


24. Ibid., p. 10.