Country of my skull/Skull of my country: **Krog and Zagajewski, South Africa and Poland**

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Abstract

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In the ninth poem of the cycle “land van genade en verdriet” (“country of grace and sorrow”) in the collection “Kleur kom nooit alleen nie” (“Colour never comes on its own”), Antjie Krog contends that the old is “stinking along” ever so cheerfully/robustly in the new South African dispensation. This could also hold true for the new democratic Poland. Krog and the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski could, in fact, be described as “intimate strangers”, specifically with regard to the mirrored imagery of “country of my skull”/“skull of my country” present in their work. The notion of “intimate strangers” may be seen as pointing toward the feminine dimension of subjectivity, which could be elaborated along the lines of Bracha Ettinger’s concept of “matrixial borderlinking”. Ettinger has made a significant contribution to the field of psychoanalysis, building on Freud and Lacan. She investigates the subject’s relation to the m/Other, and the intimate matrixial sharing of “phantasm”, “jouissance” and trauma among several entities. Critical of the conventional “phallic” paradigm, Ettinger turns to the womb in exploring the “borderlinking” of the I and the non-I within the matrix (the psychic creative “borderspace”). With these considerations as point of departure, and with specific reference to the closing poem in Krog’s “Country of my skull” and Zagajewski’s “Fire” (both exploring “weaning” experiences in recent personal and public history), I intend to show how the

public/political is connected to the personal/psychological, and vice versa, and how committed literary works like those of Krog and Zagajewski can be clarified further from a psychoanalytical perspective. The image of the skull in the texts under scrutiny is investigated with recourse to the Lacanian notion of the "cavity", as adopted and adapted by Ettinger. True to the mirror experience as described within psychoanalysis, this exercise in mirroring Krog and Zagajewski has confirmed the ambiguous, eluding and illusory nature of identification and identity.

Opsomming

Land van my skedel/Skedel van my land: Krog en Zagajewski, Suid-Afrika en Pole

In die negende gedig van die siklus "land van genade en verdriet" in die bundel "Kleur kom nooit alleen nie", beweer Antjie Krog dat die oue "lustig saamstink" in die nuwe Suid-Afrikaanse bedeling. Dít kan ook geld vir die nuwe, demokratiese Pole. Krog en die Poolse digter Adam Zagajewski kan in der waarheid as "intieme vreemdelinge" beskryf word, spesifiek wat betref die spieëlmetaforiek van "land van my skedel"/"skedel van my land" in hulle werk. Die begrip "intieme vreemdelinge" suggereer die vroulike dimensie van subjektiwiteit, wat verder verken kan word aan die hand van Bracha Ettinger se konsep "matriksiale grensverbinding". Ettinger het, voortbouend op Freud en Lacan, 'n belangrike bydrae tot die terrein van die psigoanalise gelewer. Sy ondersoek die relasie van die subjek en die moeder-as-Ander, en die intieme matriksiale deel/uitruil van "phantasme", "jouissance" en trauma tussen verskeie entiteite. Ettinger rig haar, vanweë haar kritiese standpuntinname ten opsigte van die konvensionele "falliese" paradigma, op die baarmoeder ten einde die "grensverbinding" van die ek en die nie-ek binne die matriks (die psigiese kreatiewe "grensruimte") te eksploreer. Met hierdie oorwegings as vertrekpunt, en met spesifieke verwysing na die slotgedig van Krog se "Country of my skull" ("Land van my skedel") en Zagajewski se "Vuur" (wat albei speen-/afwen-ervarings in resente persoonlike en publieke geskiedenis as tema het), wil ek aandui hoe die openbare/politieke en die persoonlike/psigologiese met mekaar saamhang, en hoe betrokke literêre werke soos dié van Krog en Zagajewski verder verklaar kan word vanuit 'n psigologiese perspektief. Die beeld van die skedel in die onderhawige tekste word ondersoek met gebruikmaking van die Lacaniaanse begrip van die holte, soos oorgeneem en aangepas deur Ettinger. Hierdie eksperimentele spieëlsgewyse opstelling van Krog en Zagajewski het, getrou aan die spieëlbelewenis soos

beskryf binne die psigoanalise, die ambivalente, ontwykende en illusionêre aard van identifikasie en identiteit herbevestig.

1. Country

Contrary to what one might expect, there are several parallels between South Africa and Poland, in fact too many to discuss here,¹ but a quick glance at two key dates in history already starts pointing toward correspondences: In South Africa, 1948 will always be remembered as the year when the National Party won the whites-only elections with their policy of apartheid. They remained in power for more than forty years. In Poland, the Polish United Workers' Party (Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej – PZPR) was formed in 1948, following a forced merger of the Polish Workers' Party (Polskiej Partii Robotniczej – PPR) and the Polish Socialist Party (Polskiej Partii Socjalistycznej – PPS). This inaugurated a period of repressive communist rule which also lasted about four decades. In both countries the years 1989/1990 marked a radical transition, opening the door for round table talks with, respectively, the formerly outlawed African National Congress (ANC) and Solidarity movement, which resulted in far-reaching socio-political reforms. Just as the negotiated settlement in South Africa can be considered a proud example for the rest of Africa (and the world), Poland was a pioneer in the largely peaceful transition from communism to liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (a process set in motion back in 1978 when John Paul II was elected Pope, followed by Lech Wałęsa jumping over the wall of the Lenin shipyard in the Baltic port of Gdańsk in 1980).

Antjie Krog, journalist and acclaimed Afrikaans poet, formulates a very relevant question in the ninth of a cycle of ten poems “land van genade en verdriet” (“country of grace and sorrow”) in her volume *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie* (“colour never comes on its own”): “wat

1 Koch (1993; 2001), Zajas (2002; 2003; 2005) and Zajas and Koch (2006) have explored the (literary) relations between Poland and South Africa more exhaustively. In several recent presentations Cezar M. Ornatowski (San Diego State University) has been investigating the comparative rhetoric of democracy, transition, persuasion, and public deliberation in Poland and South Africa. He has also compared the respective presidencies of Lech Wałęsa and Nelson Mandela (see Ornatowski, 2006). Furthermore, he is part of a Polish-South African research group working on a project entitled “Public deliberation and strong democracy in Poland and South Africa: two rhetorical models for participatory citizenship in post-totalitarian cultures”. In conclusion, it should also be mentioned that Axer (2003) contains valuable contributions concerned with Poland and South Africa.

doen 'n mens met die oue / wat so lustig saamstink in die nuwe" (Krog, 2000:43) ("what does one do with the old / which so cheerfully stinks along with the new"). Although this question (which is in fact also an assertion) is posed here with regard to South Africa, it could just as well also be asked in the "new" Poland. One example: Whereas in South Africa – through affirmative action, black empowerment and other measures – the majority of the former ruling class has been eliminated from positions of power in the public and even the private sector, those who held power in Poland before the transition have carried on more or less unperturbed in subsequent years, as is underlined by the fact that reformed/rehabilitated communists (the centre-left Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej – SLD) headed the ruling coalition in very recent history, from 2001 until 2005. Untransformed hardliners and turncoats alike are present in both countries, but those in Poland who used to take part in the repression perpetrated by the communist regime have retained more power and influence in various public sectors than those in South Africa who enforced and supported apartheid. Though Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (the Democratic Left Alliance) was defeated in the 2005 elections in the wake of public disillusionment with capitalist democracy and the SLD's festering corruption, the landslide victory of two centre-right parties, PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) and PO (Platforma Obywatelska), can be regarded as neo-conservative, given the strong Catholic nationalism and the anti-abortion and anti-gay policies of the ruling PiS, who could be regarded as the "successors" of Solidarity. There are, of course, more ways than these in which the old either stinks along more, or stinks along less, with the new, but these thoughts should suffice for the purposes of this article.

Unique with regard to facing (up to) the past, was the establishment in South Africa of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1995, mandated to investigate and document gross human rights violations that were committed in the period 1960-1994,² and to provide amnesty to perpetrators (both those who acted on the side of the minority regime and those who supported the liberation struggle), on condition that they came forward. TRC-hearings were held all over the country from April 1996 to December 1997,

2 These two dates demarcate South Africa's unilateral withdrawal from the Commonwealth (when South Africa declared itself an independent Republic) and the first democratic elections.

presided over by Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

No equivalent process was set in motion in Poland, although the past did come to haunt the Polish nation on more than one occasion. PiS, with its telling name Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) has, in fact, been calling for a more full-on confrontation, not only with postcommunist corruption, but also with the communist past, and for a removal of communist-era perpetrators from Polish public life. In terms of uncovering the past, 2005 was significant for another reason: Early in that year a file of the Polish secret service, dating from communist times, was obtained by a journalist and subsequently published on the internet: this secret file contains 240 000 names of informers/collaborators and their victims (the suspects), but with no indication which is which. Although this “revelation” caused quite a stir, it could have neither legal nor moral consequences because the names on the list were not accompanied by the grounds for their inclusion.

In my opinion, three factors need to be stressed when considering Poland’s present, past, and immediate future. The first resides in the noble ethos (“kultura szlachecka”) of the Poles. To gain an understanding of this uniquely Polish social lubricant, one has to go back in history, to the year 1772, when the partitioning of the beloved “ojczyzna” (country of the father or, in English, motherland) started. Eventually, the whole of Poland was partitioned between Russia, Prussia, and Austria, disappearing from the maps – but not from the Polish hearts and minds – till its resurrection in 1918, only to fall under communism after the Second World War. Davies (1984:331-333) explains how the “kultura szlachecka” has become one of the central features of the modern Polish outlook: the annulment of the legal status of the Polish nobility (the “szlachta”) in 1795 did not result in the loss of noble ideals. Quite to the contrary: under the new repressive conditions the common Polish people and the ex-nobles became fellow-sufferers, and the latter, as the educated elite, came to represent and defend the battered ideals of the entire nation. What is more: before the partitions, the Polish nobility had been devoted to the principle of treating each other as absolute equals. This was now expanded to include all social classes. All Poles were now equals: noble equals. The noble ethos has survived communism and is still alive among the Poles: to this day they address each other as “pan” (Lord) and “pani” (Lady) – forms of address which, in the old days, were used only among the nobility.

A second factor, almost on par with the first, can be described along these lines: Poland is an exceptionally homogeneous country, especially in linguistic and religious terms. Predominantly Catholic, old habits tend to die hard, but also, and seemingly paradoxically, the Polish tend to be remarkably changeable, in the sense that what is deemed important today, has lost much of its urgency by tomorrow, and the role-players keep on changing, as is underlined by the fact that Poland has had eleven prime ministers since 1989. The Polish apparently keep on reinventing and reincarnating themselves. A third factor, which goes hand-in-hand with the second, is that words do not necessarily translate into action. Official statements, both positive and negative, usually do not carry much consequence. Verbal outbursts by Polish leaders have often scared the wits out of foreign sojourners and observers alike, however, the bark of these leaders has usually proven much worse than their bite. This is as true today as it was back in 1958 when journalist J.L. Heldring visited communist Poland. His anxious enquiries directed to his Polish hosts and other interviewees about certain statements that had been made at the time by, for example, premier Władysław Gomułka, were met with either laughter or astonishment, and with reassuring explications (Heldring, 2005). Heldring (2005) learned that the situation was much more complicated and paradoxical than he as a foreigner could have imagined, that Polish orthodoxy is mostly a verbal one, and that official statements are usually much worse than the deeds of the regime. Heir to this tradition, is the tough-talking current president of Poland, Lech Kaczyński.

With these considerations in mind, it is difficult to predict whether much will come of the PiS's determination to, finally, deal with the past. Likewise, it is an open question how their intended "moral revolution" will turn out, and how long Polish voters will be willing to put up with the unique set of weaknesses that the new rulers command. A major drawback of the PiS resides in its unholy alliance with the Catholic Church of Poland, in general, and with the Catholic radio station, Radio Maria, in particular, the latter being notorious for its involvement in propaganda. At the time of the elections a joke was circulating, to the effect that Poland now had a remote/radio controlled government, a doubly apt metaphor, given the fact that Lech Kaczyński and his twin brother used to be child actors. Tellingly, much of the electoral support for the PiS was harvested among the devoted, aging listeners of Radio Maria, who generously fund this radio station and who are said to have comprised a substantial part of the disappointingly low number of voters in both rounds of the elections. One could claim that the results of the last

elections may be attributed to the determination of a certain section of the Polish population over against the apathy of the other (the younger, urban Poles). Considerations like these not only cast doubt on whether the PiS are the ones best equipped to head an even-handed investigation into the past, but also points toward the uniqueness of Poland and the many ways in which it differs from South Africa. Poland has not had a Truth Commission so far, and the question remains if anything like it will ever be established and if it is really necessary in the case of Poland. It is to the South African TRC and one of its most prominent literary products that we now turn our attention.

Antjie Krog, or Antjie Samuels (as she is known in her role as journalist), led the South African Broadcasting Corporation team that for two years reported daily on the TRC hearings at which thousands of victims and perpetrators told their stories, in either English or their mother tongue (with the aid of interpreters) and often containing horrifying details. Krog's (1998) landmark book *Country of my skull* is her personal account of the testimonies and revelations, and traces her own intellectual and emotional seesaw in unison. On publication this book was remarkable for several reasons, two of which are: it was not a work of poetry, and it was Krog's first book published in English straight away. Not only her own narrative, but also the stories of some of the witnesses are presented here in English, being the South African language of instrumentality, compromise, and reconciliation. However, much gets lost in translation. In her partly fictionalised reading of the TRC process, Krog (1998) thematises and enacts the problematic and impalpable character of the concept truth, and the naively conceived idea that there existed a necessary link between *truth* and *reconciliation*. It goes without saying that rendering in English narratives first told in indigenous languages, recasts the already ambivalent truth once again.

Krog has been constructed and has, indeed, constructed herself as struggling at the forefront of the post-apartheid South African transformation process, as one of the most transformed Afrikaners, leading the way but also, through sheer scrupulousness, diverging from the road "her" people have launched themselves on (Van Schalkwyk, 2004). *Country of my skull*, accomplished though it may be, comes across as rather overzealous in demonstrating not only Krog's new South African "right-on-ness" and remorseful self-prostration as a white Afrikaans-speaking South African, but also in presenting her personal suffering and transformation as exemplary. It is a book of others' trauma witnessed and consequent personal

trauma monitored in the mirror. The earnest striving apparent throughout the pages of *Country of my skull* might betray either the baggage of excessive apartheid-era privilege, or the weight of suitcases rather empty in terms of real suffering (suffering comparable to that of the victims whose stories Krog heard). The book concludes with one of Krog's (1998:364-365) own poems, dedicated to, or rather, laid at the feet of the Commission:

because of you
this country no longer lies
between us but within

it breathes becalmed
after being wounded
in its wondrous throat

in the cradle of my skull
it sings, it ignites
my tongue, my inner ear, the cavity of heart
shudders toward the outline
new in soft intimate clicks and gutturals

of my soul the retina learns to expand
daily because by a thousand stories
I was scorched

a new skin.

I am changed forever. I want to say:
forgive me
forgive me
forgive me

You whom I have wronged, please
take me

with you.

An Afrikaans version of the same poem has been included in Krog's *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie*. There it stands as the eighth of the cycle of poems already referred to above. Unlike the English poem, which honours the Commission for the transformations, the Afrikaans version is not dedicated to the Commission. The emphasis here is

rather on the *stories* of the wounded: *these* have sparked transformation.³

The seventh line of the English version, “in the cradle of my skull”, echoes the title of the book, *Country of my skull*. Though this title is self-explanatory, it has a somewhat peculiar ring to it, which makes the inquisitive reader puzzle over its conception. It does resonate vaguely with Alan Paton’s novel *Cry, the beloved country*, that unforgettable and eye-opening “Jim-comes-to-Jo’burg” tale published in the fateful year of 1948. And indeed, crying is both recorded in, and elicited by, both books, being testaments of individual and collective trauma. Paton’s *Cry, the beloved country* has been called the “great”/“big” South African novel, and perhaps Krog’s title gestures toward such pretensions. One cannot be conclusive as to the origin and meaning of her book’s title. Its wording does, however, strike an uncanny resemblance with a line from a poem by renowned contemporary Polish poet Adam Zagajewski. Far from suggesting that Krog has obtained/adapted the line/title from Zagajewski, it is, nevertheless, tempting to juxtapose Krog’s poem with the Zagajewski-poem in question: “Fire” from the 1985-volume *Tremor*, as translated from the Polish by Cavanagh, Gorczynski, Ivry, and Williams:

Probably I am an ordinary middle-class
believer in individual rights, the word
‘freedom’ is simple to me, it doesn’t mean
the freedom of any class in particular.
Politically naïve, with an average
education (brief moments of clear vision
are its main nourishment), I remember
the blazing appeal of that fire which parches
the lips of the thirsty crowd and burns
books and chars the skin of cities. I used to sing
those songs and I know how great it is
to run with others; later, by myself,
with the taste of ashes in my mouth, I heard
the lie’s ironic voice and the choir screaming

3 The Afrikaans version: “vanweë die verhale van verwondes / lê die land nie meer tussen ons nie / maar binne-in // sy haal asem / gekalmeer na die litteken / aan haar wonderbaarlike keel // in die wieg van my skedel sing dit / ontbrand dit / my tong my binneste oor die gaping van my hart / sidder vorentoe na die buitelyne / van ’n woordeskat nuut in sag, intieme keelklanke // van my siel leer die retina oopgaan / daagliks – ’n duisend woorde / skroei my tot ’n nuwe tong // ek is vir altyd verander. Ek wil sê / vergewe my / vergewe my / vergewe my // jy wat ek veronreg het – seblief / neem my / met jou saam” (Krog, 2000:42).

and when I touched my head I could feel
the arched skull of my country, its hard edge
(Zagajewski, 2004:29).

Though Zagajewski's poem seems more cool and collected (at a first reading), and does not cut as thin and haggard an image as Krog's, both poems present a comparable vast sweep of things, tracing the poets' tremendous personal growth in relation to their respective countries. Being with, or at loggerheads with, others out there, in the world, gives way to a stronger kind of identification or solidarity, a sensing and cradling of the country within/as the own skull, which, however, may render it inaccessible/hidden (from the own direct gaze), though it is the very "organ" one thinks and feels with.

Zagajewski's portrayal of the skull, more so than Krog's, may remind one of the 1944-painting *Head of a Hostage No. 14* by Jean Fautrier: saturated with the experience of the war, the head in its surrounding bed of ground is marked by elusive figuration and anonymity, hinting at the facelessness of war's victims. Graham (2004:370) maintains that *Head of a Hostage* also carries connotations of solitariness, of death and decay which serve to align it with the Existentialist sensibilities of the postwar period. In my opinion, Zagajewski's "Fire" warrants an Existentialist reading within the broad scope of Modernism and its variants. The first four lines allude to Existentialism's focus on individual freedom and responsibility, and its concomitant rejection of group thinking and all kinds of determinisms behind which one may hide in an attempt to escape personal responsibility. One such determinism is socialism, which in itself is infused with determinism. In Marxist guise, for example, man's condition tends to be put down to class distinctions and power relations that facilitate access to the means of production. Instead of breaking down class inequalities, socialism has in practise often rather entrenched and even exacerbated socio-economic divides.

In the late 1940s, while the Poles were painstakingly rebuilding their demolished cities, the Soviet model was being introduced, which brought about severe censorship and other restrictions. The collectivisation of farmland had a crushing effect on the Polish economy, resulting in the reintroduction of food rationing in 1951. Following the death of Stalin in 1953, Władysław Gomułka, who became premier in 1956, introduced various concessions to prevent

Poland from going the Hungarian route. These included a relaxing of censorship and travel restrictions, and the discontinuation of collectivisation. Gomułka's moderate regime permitted a fair degree of intellectual freedom, which also extended to the Catholic Church. No other country within the Soviet bloc went as far as Poland in terms of "liberalisation", deviation from Stalinism, and securing a relatively high standard of living for its citizens. The 1960s, however, saw an economic decline, a rise of anti-Semitism, and a restoration of restrictive measures, notably state censorship, which sparked the student demonstrations of March 1968.

Zagajewski became known initially as one of the leading dissident poets of the Generation of '68, or the Polish New Wave ("Nowa fala"), which included names such as Stanisław Barańczak, Ewa Lipska, Julian Kornhauser, and Ryszard Krynicki. Having left Poland for Paris in 1982, the mature Zagajewski, who had meanwhile gained intimate knowledge of solitude, is no less committed a writer in 1985 than either his younger self who used to know the joy of "running" with others, or Krog who has remained in her country of birth and tenaciously inscribed herself — a white Afrikaans woman — in the recent history of the black-dominated fledgling democracy. Only, disillusioned with (rational) Western culture as he got to know it during his exile, Zagajewski had now adopted a new kind of engagement, a commitment to mystical insight/revelation, small decisive moments, and truths of expatriation. When Zagajewski touches his solitary head, he feels the hard skull of his country, an image which, in addition to, possibly, carrying overtones of thick-skulledness, seems to confirm: you can take the poet out of the country, but not the country out of the poet. *Country of my skull, skull of my country*: the same difference. Or so it seems.

2. Of my skull

Judith Coullie (2004:12) quotes approvingly from the above poem by Krog toward the end of the introductory chapter of her collection of South African women's life writing in the 20th century.⁴ The book's title, *The closest of strangers*, seeks to suggest that, despite the almost unbridgeable divides of apartheid, South African women have shared a paradoxical intimacy of experience, which Coullie (2004) paints as follows: whereas black women have been prisoners

4 And she contends: "In *Country of my Skull*, Antjie Krog recognises gratefully that it is through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that a new South African-ness is emerging" (Coullie, 2004:12).

of discrimination, white women have been prisoners of privilege; and both groups have been forced into a subservient position within their respective patriarchal environments. In my view, one could also say that black and white South African women have been “intimate strangers”. Such a notion may be seen as pointing toward the feminine dimension of subjectivity, which could be elaborated along the lines of Bracha Ettinger’s (2004) concept of “matrixial borderlinking”, referring to a trans-subjective psychic co-emergence in difference.⁵ Ettinger – Israeli-French painter, psychoanalyst, feminist theorist – has made a significant and highly original contribution to the field of psychoanalysis, building on Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Her writing weaves a dense, intricate and richly textured discourse which is quite resistant to paraphrasing, and which deserves the attentive kind of reading usually reserved for literature. Ettinger (2004) investigates, among other things, the subject’s relation to the m/Other, and the “matrixial” sharing of “phantasm”,⁶ “jouissance” and trauma, in which the (female) artist can play a crucial role. Critical of the conventional “phallic” paradigm of psychoanalysis, Ettinger (2004) turns to the womb and the foetus in exploring the “erotic” attraction of the I towards the non-I, their “borderlinking” within the “Matrix”, the latter being the psychic creative borderspace of encounter, the sphere where phantasm, “jouissance” and trauma are intimately shared:

The matrixial difference conceptualizes the difference of what is joint and alike yet not ‘the same’, of what is uncognized yet recognizable with-in a shared trans-subjectivity. This is not the difference of that which is *opposite* versus that which is the *same*. The trajectories and effects of the matrixial field shed light on sexual difference as a question that women direct not to a man, but to another woman-m/Other-encounter, to a subject conceived as *alike-non-same*, from whom one is differentiating-in-joining and from whom one *in severality* can open a distance but only in proximity. In the phallic framework, hysteria, disguise, masquerade, and parody or revolt are subjectivizing responses on the part of women to men’s definition of female sexuality. These phenomena are unavoidable, because the

5 The first number of the 21st volume of *Theory, culture & society* (2004) has been devoted entirely to Bracha Ettinger’s contribution to the field of psychoanalysis. Also, for a highly readable general introduction to psychoanalysis and the feminine, the reader can consult Luepnitz (2004), who, however, fails to incorporate Ettinger’s work.

6 This refers to the illusory *sighting* of, or *reunion* with, the lost object. More on this further on in this section.

phallic sphere is at work alongside the matrixial sphere. However, in the matrixial borderspace, what is at stake is an originary feminine difference that doesn't confront, submit to, or fight the phallic difference. Hysteria, therefore, does not exist there, because hysteria is produced precisely when the passage to the matrixial field is blocked and when a woman cannot ask herself what is her difference from another woman (not from men) and what is her desire *au féminin*. The matrix – 'womb' in Latin – as a major signifier gives an approximate sense of this originary difference that is always *already in the feminine* (Ettinger, 2004:78-79).

As far as trauma and "jouissance" are concerned, Ettinger (2004:90-91) maintains:

The artist-woman channels anew trauma(s) and *jouissance(s)* coming from non-I(s) that are linked to her. She bifurcates, disperses and rejoins anew-but-in-difference their remnants and traces, and she acts on the borderline, transcribing it while sketching and laying it out and opening it wide to turn it into a threshold and to metramorphose it into a borderspace.

Ettinger's (2004:77) concept of "metramorphosis" is particularly telling: "Metramorphosis is a process of inter-psyche communication and transformation that transgresses the borders of the individual subject and takes place between several entities." In this regard, Ettinger uses the concept "severality".

Though further theoretical elaboration of these issues is beyond the scope of the present article, the above introduction, by necessity cursory, should already evidence the relevance of the notion of "intimate strangers" when exploring the relations Krog-Zagajewski (and their dealings with "jouissance"-trauma), South Africa-Poland, Krog-South Africa, Zagajewski-Poland.

In the poem by Krog, quoted above, the skull containing the country is described as a cradle, suggesting motherhood/babyhood. The poem begins with the words: "this country no longer lies / between us but within // it breathes becalmed". The country "laying" in several I's, "us", simultaneously, may point toward the matrixial borderspace, site of co-poietic "metramorphosis". This is evoked through images relating to inner-outer, such as the "inner ear" and the "cavity of heart" which "shudders toward the outline", the retina learning to expand, to make possible an absorbing/absorbent gaze. Moreover, in Krog's experience, phantasm, trauma, and "jouissance" are

connected, almost mystically,⁷ and formally presented as such: “I was scorched // a new skin”.⁸ Note how effectively this *joining* of *extremes* is suggested here through typographical means.

Although, according to Ettinger (2004:77), female subjects have privileged access to the matrixial sphere, since they experience the womb not only as a past-site, but also as an embodied potentiality, men can “enter in contact with the matrixial time and site through transference relations and via art, when they are affected, like women, by joining-in-difference with others” (Ettinger, 2004:77-78). In numerous poems, Zagajewski has proven not only exceptionally sensitive to the *severality* of the I/non-I and the self as something small that “lodges between / granite blocks, between serviceable / truths” and that “camps in the Rocky Mountains of the skull” (“The self”; Zagajewski, 2004:31), but also finely attuned to traces/remnants of phantasm and trauma in Self and Other(s).⁹ His poem “A wanderer”¹⁰ can serve both as an illustration of the above and as a backdrop for the remaining paragraphs. Note, in particular, the suggestion of *borderlinking*, of joining-in-difference:

I enter the waiting room in a station.
Not a breath of air.
I have a book in my pocket,
someone's poems, traces of inspiration.
At the entrance, on benches, two tramps and a drunkard
(or two drunkards and a tramp).

7 Within psychoanalysis, *jouissance* has occasionally been described in terms of
the experience of the mystic (Luepnitz, 2004:228-229).

8 This is reminiscent of Afrikaans poet Sheila Cussons, who in an accident suffered severe burns, and in whose work, fire is a recurrent motif, presented within the context of Roman Catholic mysticism, fire being a leitmotif of mysticism. The following short poem by Cussons, “Bedeekte naak”, can be seen as illustrative: “’n Gloed dra ek / tussen die wêreld en my bloed / meer myne, meer eie aan my as enigets / ’n sonder-naam / wat, om te vernietig / sou wees vernietiging van my: / o ondraaglike, tere, weerlose hemp van vlam” (Cussons, 1988:27).

9 To mention only a few examples of such poems by Zagajewski (2004): “A wanderer” (p. 17-18), “Ode to Softness” (p. 18), “Life Sentence” (p. 25), “Good Friday in the Tunnels of the Métro” (p. 27-28), “In May” (p. 28-29), “In the Beauty Created by Others” (p. 47), “Watching *Shoah* in a Hotel Room in America” (p. 78-79), “In Strange Cities” (p. 84-85), “From the Lives of Things” (p. 90), “Mysticism for Beginners” (p. 99-100), “You Are My Silent Brethren” (p. 109) and “Self-Portrait” (p. 112-113).

10 Translated by Cavanagh, Gorczynski, Ivry, and Williams.

At the other end, an elderly couple, very elegant, sit
staring somewhere above them, toward Italy and the sky.
We have always been divided. Mankind, nations,
waiting rooms.

I stop for a moment,
uncertain which suffering I should
join.

Finally, I take a seat in between
And start reading. I am alone but not lonely.
A wanderer who doesn't wander.

The revelation
flickers and dies. Mountains of breath, close
valleys. The dividing goes on
(Zagajewski, 2004:17-18).

In Zagajewski's "Fire", the country of origin is (contained within) the own head, as in the Krog-poem in question, but this is not welcomed and celebrated, and there is no talk of "cradling"; rather, it is described as an eerie discovery following closely on the heels of disillusionment. Moreover, in Zagajewski's poem, fire is connected with the "blazing appeal" of collectiveness, whereas individual disillusionment ("later, by myself") tastes like ash. The phrase "later, by myself" and the gesture of touching the own head, may suggest solitary contemplation, leading to a hard conclusion as to the mendacity of collective appeal. If the fire of group-solidarity "parches / the lips of the thirsty crowd and burns / books and chars the skin of cities", what remains is the skull, "the arched skull of my country". As in Krog's poem, the skull of "my country" is also "my" skull, but Zagajewski's "Fire" contains the additional suggestion that both poet and country are marked by disillusionment, even "death", whereas Krog's celebrates communality right to the end, culminating with the (perhaps too) earnest-sounding plea, typographically dragging after the Other: "please / take me // with you." Markedly open-ended, it faces toward a future. The short lines and typography suggest passage, a passage to/in jointness.

Krog's (1998) book *Country of my skull* attempts to demonstrate how one *dies* into reconciliation and acceptance (hence the emphasis on the *skull*), into co-emergence from a traumatic past. *Country of my skull* (Krog)/*skull of my country* (Zagajewski): the syntactical inversion gives a sense of a mirrored image. Do Krog and Zagajewski somehow mirror each other? Viewed psycho-analytically, they certainly do.

Lacanian psychoanalysis has taught us that a baby recognises its image in the mirror for the first time when it is around 18 months.

This is a joyous discovery, but also a haunting one: "Having recognized ourselves in the mirror, we are bound to go through life looking outward for evidence of who we are. We will seek out ordinary mirrors (which deceive if only by reversing left and right) and we will look into the mirroring gaze of others which will just as surely distort, diminish, aggrandize" (Luepnitz, 2004:225). Within Lacanian thinking, birth/weaning is a primary separation which takes the form of "castration" (the split between subject and object). This constitutes an originary loss, a lack, which sets the subject off on a lifelong quest for "das Ding" (the lacking object of desire), in a succession of substitutes, a series of displacements, a signifying chain: "every 'refinding' of the object of our desire throughout life will never be entirely separable from illusion" (Luepnitz, 2004:225).

Krog's *Country of my skull* is as much about the author herself as it is about others (countrymen and -women); the beloved country is her mirror image, and vice versa, with all the distortions and departures from the "truth" inherent. Zagajewski's "Fire" traces the poet's quest through life; it recalls youthful "refindings" of completeness, in his case, the joy of running with others in collective political engagement, of experiencing companionship and finding himself within the group of dissidents. Toward the end of the poem the screaming choir (reminiscent of the commentating/judging chorus in Greek tragedy and/or post-World War II dissonant compositions for choir) is the voice of disillusionment and (self-) accusation, dictating the conclusion: it was all (self-)deception. The poet has been *weaned*, so to speak, from one of the "substitutes" embraced during a certain period of his lifetime: the group solidarity of his younger days. Although not directly stated in this poem, we know from Zagajewski's biography and oeuvre that Western Europe also, as the next in the chain of substitutes, had left him disillusioned and, indeed, solitary.

It is generally accepted in psychoanalytical theory that weaning is a traumatic experience, leaving the child with a feeling of lack which drives it toward identification with objects in an attempt to compensate for the loss. The child has now entered the imaginary domain, which precedes the symbolic order (language), the latter being characterised by the rules and taboos of the father. The mirror stage is still part, and perhaps the culmination, of the imaginary phase. With recourse to Wright (1992:156), this can be explained as follows: the discovery of the self in the mirror is a joyful experience, for the child has now found a substitute, but seeing itself as a separate entity is also alienating, and the child resorts to fantasy to overcome this. Its self-concept, picked out in the mirror, will never

match up to his own being; the image in the mirror with which the child seeks to identify, is an object which is apparently “whole”, but in fact it is an imaginary projection, an idealisation. Identity/-identification, both personal and collective, will remain, throughout life, ambiguous, evasive, and illusory.

Krog and Zagajewski, and the two poems in question, can then be seen as mirror images of each other, a reverse likeness. Both refer to weaning processes – in Krog’s case, the weaning from separation to becoming part of the whole South Africa; in Zagajewski’s case, the weaning from being part of the group to separation from them. The poems both examine the tensions between belonging and separation, but from opposite starting and ending points. Put together, they complement each other, illuminating loss and desire from different perspectives; together, they (perhaps) come closer to expressing the “comprehensive truth” of unfulfilled desire in separation as well as integration. Zagajewski’s poem relates a stage following on that of Krog’s poem: the disillusionment following on the attempted identification.

Country of my skull, skull of my country, both formulations suggest strong identification with an object,¹¹ and a rather primordial association at that, which, although expressed in language, preserves a strong link with the pre-linguistic, the pre-patriarchal, and, indeed, the pre-Oedipal, thereby seemingly favouring a “matrixial” paradigm, in which the process, the “borderlinking”, is more important than the object of desire. At this fluid level one can indeed assert: *Country of my skull/skull of my country*, South Africa/Poland, Krog/Zagajewski: the same difference.

What still has to be accounted for more specifically, is the *skull* as object of “borderlinking” and identification, and the artistic nature of the two texts (by Krog and Zagajewski, respectively) in which the connection *I-skull-country* is evoked.¹²

11 Note the emphatic effect achieved by using both “of” and “my” in *Country of my skull/skull of my country*, underlining identification, “possession”. According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, desire works in both directions: the child desires the mother; the mother desires the child.

12 The reader is advised, at this point, to reread the Krog-poem and Zagajewski’s “Fire” before moving on to the remainder of my analysis.

3. Skull

Ettinger (2004:79) investigates the role of the (woman) artist within the “matrixial” encounter-event, with recourse to the Lacanian notion of the *cavity*:

Art, says Lacan, is related to *jouissance* through the ‘anatomy’ of a cavity. An inaccessible trace of a lacking part-object, an *objet a*, tickles the Thing (*das Ding*) from within, and this is the essential quality of everything we call art. An artwork attracts, shifts or originates a desire for an object that mysteriously embodies a space in that cavity. A desire, still saturated with the drive, awakens where an artobject (sic?) joins forces as beauty and horror with an extimate (an outside captured within) gaze or *objet a*, by-passing repression and regression at the price of dangerously approaching the Thing [total fusion would lead to psychosis], the primary source of [the] *Unheimliche* – uncanny anxiety – which appeals to the viewer to follow it into a mysterious, invisible space beyond yet inside the visible, to abandon defenses (sic?) and to weave into the work its own invisible affect, phantasy, engagement, knowledge (Ettinger, 2004:79).

With these thought-provoking observations about the psychic *cavity* as a backdrop, *country of my skull/skull of my country* can now be explored in greater detail. The skull is, of course, a cavity and, as such, supremely “unheimlich”. Apart from being a symbol of death, the skull is generally used as a sign indicating danger or a border that may not be crossed or crossed at one’s own peril. With the word skull the notion of transgression is activated quite inadvertently. Possession/invasion by the indeterminate (the Thing) is in itself also an uncanny experience. Although celebratory and reconciliatory, Krog’s poem does communicate something of the “Unheimliche”, although not nearly as intensely as Zagajewski’s “Fire” in which beauty and horror merge. “Fire” begins in a speculative, argumentative manner (“Probably ...”), but becomes increasingly disturbing as the poem progresses toward its resounding end: Unsettling are the “fire which parches / the lips of the thirsty crowd and burns / books and chars the skin of cities”, the ashes in the mouth, the screaming choir, and, finally, the touching of the own skull’s “hard edge”.

In Krog’s poem, and to a lesser extent in Zagajewski’s “Fire”, the skull is portrayed as a womblike cavity, which, in psychoanalytic terms, may be seen as an intra-uterine phantasm, as described by Ettinger (2004:80) within the “matrixial” framework, according to

which a cavity is also a passage. Ettinger (2004:80) shows that, in Hebrew, the verb passing (“avar”) describes pregnancy. The pregnant woman is “meouberet”. She is a place of transit: “To be pregnant, *meouberet*, is to expand the boundaries, to be a ferryboat (*maaboret*). The fetus, *oubar*, is ... passing-by, crossing ... going beyond. The same root corresponds to: transgression, transport, crossing, transformation ...” (Ettinger, 2004:80). These resonances of this Hebrew word invite us, according to Ettinger (2004:80), to give specific meaning to the human primordial psychic cavity. As indicated in the above quotation, to be pregnant is to expand the boundaries. In this regard the reader is immediately struck by the keyword “expand” in Krog’s poem: “my soul the retina learns to expand”. This also suggests transgression, as does the experience of being scorched by the stories of others. Transformation, or more accurately, “metramorphosis” (the process of co-becoming), is implied by the words “this country no longer lies / between us but within”, by the notions before and “after”, and is explicit in the line “I am changed forever”. *Passage* is suggested with words like “toward” and “please / take me // with you”, the latter which also suggests the beyond. In Zagajewski’s “Fire”, transformation is registered, as is passage, in words such as “I remember”, “I used to”, “to run”, “later”, and, most notably, “arched skull”, “arched” not only describing the curved, convex structure of the skull, like that of a chamber, but possibly also suggesting an arch, an opening: the womblike skull is also a passage.

Ettinger (2004:80) goes on to point out that, in psychoanalytic theory, the most primitive cavity capable of producing meaning is considered the oral cavity. Intra-uterine phantasms are often based on the early oral experience, the oral cavity being one of the classical objects in the chain of substitutes. The best-known Lacanian drive-objects are the gaze and the voice, with the latter the more primitive of the two. When the “matrixial” cavity of passage becomes an acoustic resonance “camera obscura”, Ettinger (2004:80) argues, partial-objects and partial-subjects are “border-linked” by resonance and vibrations:

They are sharing and they are shared by the same vibrating and resonating environment where the inside is outside and the outside – inside. The borderline between I and non-I as co-poietic poles of the same vibrating string is transformed into a threshold and transgressed (...) More effectively than the Gaze even, the Voice as a matrixial erotic antenna for psychic emission and reception testifies to the metramorphic processes of transformations in the unconscious cavity. The psychic voice-

link opens in us a matrixial time-and-space of encounter where, as in a resonance-cavity, inside and outside vibrate together. The resonant *camera obscura* where metamorphic event-encounters take place locates the inside as a shareable space-in-time and the outside as in-corporated-without-fusion (Ettinger, 2004:80-81).

The voice reverberates not only between two entities, but among several, “borderlinking” with each other by resonances that connect “the inside of several different individuals in a shareable outside” (Ettinger, 2004:81). Very importantly, and here Ettinger (2004:80-81) diverges strongly from Lacan, is that this linking constitutes a trans-subjective passage, “producing desire not for an object but for further borderlinking and further resonances” (Ettinger, 2004:81). The latter comes to the fore very clearly in Krog’s poem, most notably in the ending which suggests (the plea for) a joint journey. Krog’s poem *contains* several cavities: the “wondrous throat” (resonance chamber for talking/singing), the cradle, the skull, the mouth (suggested by “my tongue”), “my inner ear”, and explicitly stated: “the cavity of heart”.

Quite overtly, the interconnectedness of inside and outside is signalled in Krog’s poem by, for example, referring to the breathing action and the retina which learns to expand (in order to take in), but most notably in: “my inner ear, the cavity of heart / shudders toward the outline”. And, although the gaze is evoked, specifically by referring to the expanding retina, it is the voice as psychic element which dominates Krog’s poem and its/her cavities. Already in the line “it breathes becalmed”, the vocal cavities and chords are “activated”, so to speak. More explicit is the reference to the “wondrous throat” which, significantly, had been wounded in the past, thereby repressing/silencing the country’s voice of desire-as-passage/process. Images of the auditory fill the third stanza: the country within sings, it ignites the poet’s tongue; her inner ear and the cavity of the heart shudder outward in “soft intimate clicks and gutturals”, which may suggest those indigenous South African languages (the Khoisan family) most brutally silenced by the colonising powers. Some of these languages are extinct, and have only recently been “heard” again, faintly though, thanks to research and “reconstructive” work undertaken also by Krog herself (Krog, 2004). The phrase “thousand stories” (by which the poet was scorched) suggests narration, the oral tradition, the compelling vibrations and modulations of the narrating voice.

In Zagajewski's "Fire", the voice is also the primary psychic element. The oral cavity is suggested by "the lips of the thirsty crowd" and "my mouth". Note how the "fire" and "blazing appeal" of desire's substitutes are connected with specifically the oral/auditory: "I used to sing / those songs"; "I heard / the lie's ironic voice and the choir screaming". Then, the poet touches his head, perhaps in exasperation, being adversely affected by "the lie's ironic voice and the choir screaming", or maybe he touches his head in disillusionment or solitary contemplation (he is left with his head in his hands). He *touches* his head and *feels* his country's skull. At this point Ettinger (2004:81), once again, provides key insights: "Via the resonance, in the matrixial resonance *camera obscura* which is both intra-subjective and trans-subjective, the acoustic is entwined with touch, the touch with movement, and all of those with fluctuations of light and darkness". And:

Trans-subjective and sub-subjective affected synaesthesia between movement, touch and vision seems pregnant with ... possibilities ... In the matrixial late pre-natal period, where the fluctuations of lightness and darkness accompany a touching-in-separating movement within the shadowy, palpable world of visible and invisible, pre-subject and pre-object intersect and imprint poietic archaic traces in a web which is plural-several from the outset, and this process involves imprinting of, and being imprinted by a pre-other, the archaic non-I-m/Other (Ettinger, 2004:82).

In "Fire" it is the touching of the own head that leads to the discovery of the womblike skull of the poet's country. Touch is also evoked by referring to ash in the mouth, which alludes to the palpability of disillusionment. There is also a reference to skin, here the skin of cities that got charred by the same fire that parched the lips of the thirsty crowd ("skin of cities" suggests that it is the people in those cities who have been charred). In Krog's poem, fluctuations of light and darkness are accommodated by (the reference to) the retina, and the poet's skin has been scorched (touched) by the stories of her countrymen and -women, but there is movement/transition/"metamorphosis" in that the very scorching that destroys her skin, provides her with a new one. This leads on to the plea for future forgiveness and a joint passage ahead.

4. Of my country

With regard to "containing" their respective countries, the claims made by Krog and, albeit to a lesser extent, by Zagajewski, could be construed as mere words, a pose, for such an evolution is not lightly

attained. Guillaume Apollinaire's famous and exceedingly ironic poem about the First World War, "The marvels of war",¹³ ends with a stanza denying the possibility, at the time at least, to contain within himself the things in which the traumatised self resides:

I bequeath to the future the story of Guillaume Apollinaire
Who was in the war and could be everywhere
In the happy villages behind the lines
In all the rest of the universe
In those who died tangled in the barbed wire
In women in cannons in horses
At the zenith and the nadir and the four cardinal points
And in the unique intensity of this eve of battle
And without doubt it would be more beautiful
If I could suppose that the things everywhere in which I reside
Could be also in me
But there is nothing so made in this respect
For if I am everywhere right now there is still only I who can be
in me (Forbes, 2000:15-16).

Indeed, concluding a poet's story with such a vast embrace "would be more beautiful", but perhaps too beautiful to be true. It is, in fact, somehow disconcerting to discover how comfortably both the Krog-poem and Zagajewski's "Fire" (seem to) lend themselves to a psychoanalytic reading in general and a "matrixial" one in particular. One is left wondering whether these poets premeditatedly "planted" evidence for a psychoanalytic interpretation. The presence of the basic psychic elements (the voice, touch and movement/passage), the references to cavities, inside/outside, et cetera, cannot be attributed to mere coincidence. Perhaps we are witnessing, in the poems under scrutiny, the workings of the subconscious, which could also account for my decision to pursue a comparison of these poems beyond the obvious correspondence of the country-skull association. Within Lacanian thinking, the subconscious is, in fact, generally believed to be structured like language. Language, the symbolic order, is something "foreign" to the subject, being the discourse of the Other that the child has to gain access to through learning and accepting rules. Together with the subconscious, language constitutes the Other of which the subject has been separated (through birth/weaning).¹⁴ Each word (signifier) within the semiotic network of the subconscious expresses the absence of,

13 Translated from the French by Roger Shattuck.

14 This might account for the notion of *mother tongue*.

and desire for, the “real” thing (the signified), the lacking object. Unlike Freudian psychoanalysis, which states that the subconscious only reveals itself in dreams, slips of tongue, et cetera, the Lacanian paradigm is built on the premise that every word and linguistic structure, spoken and written, is influenced, inadvertently, by the subconscious.

A poem, then, may *know* more, *intend* something more or *Other* than its author does. Well-read as both Krog and Zagajewski are, despite the latter’s claims made in “Fire” as to his political naivety and average education, it can be supposed that neither one of the two is entirely unfamiliar with psychoanalysis. Zagajewski has, in fact, studied philosophy and psychology in Krakow, Poland. If indeed Krog and Zagajewski are rather unfamiliar with this field, their poems may be seen as providing superb evidence of the “accuracy” of psychoanalytic theory, in that the described phenomena are seen to be indeed “active” in actual texts. Even if Krog and Zagajewski are well-versed in psychoanalysis, this does not necessarily imply that its theories were uppermost in their minds at the time of writing and that they consciously incorporated some of its ideas, or that “clues” were planted deliberately. Prior reading, then, might have asserted itself subconsciously or, perhaps, it was simply the subconscious, or language, that asserted itself directly. Subconscious influence might even account for the similarity of the phrases *country of my skull/skull of my country*: Krog may well have read Zagajewski’s “Fire”, published in his 1985-volume *Tremor*. Or, perhaps, linking *country* and *skull* is somehow a subconscious given.

Inward-moving analysis is the hallmark of conventional psychoanalysis and, indeed, even of radical psychoanalytic theory, and therefore it cannot escape the charge of being apolitical (Billig, 1997). This paper started out fully within the public and political domain (which was obviously also intended to provide crucial background information), after which the discussion turned toward an exploration of the intricate (poetic) workings of the psyche. This was, however, not an exercise in denial or avoidance. My aim has been to show how the public/political is connected to the personal/psychological, and vice versa, and how committed literary works like those of Krog and Zagajewski discussed here, can be clarified further from a psychoanalytical perspective.¹⁵ Both Krog

15 It should have become clear that what I am proposing in this article is by no means a probing into the psychology and autobiography of the actual author, for

and Zagajewski, both South Africa and Poland, have gone through traumatic “weaning” experiences in recent history. Hanging on to the past is a common individual and collective phenomenon. Therefore the old is “stinking along” (in Krog’s words) in or with the new, “stinking” not only suggesting an unfavourable reading of the past, but also hinting at dying and decomposition: the past is dead but can still be “smelled”, the past had died but the skull remains as a reminder. Exploration of the skull is necessary to move on and to transform. The two poems, by Krog and Zagajewski, can be characterised as: psycho-forensics, psycho-archaeology of the personal and public past. Understanding, reconciliation, healing cannot be achieved, in my view, without recourse to the insights provided by psychoanalysis, particularly those of the new psychoanalytic branch which explores the “matrixial”.

As has been seen above, “borderlinking”, as a sharing of “jouissance” and trauma among several entities, causes the inside and outside to “vibrate” in unison: the inside of several individuals is connected in “a shareable outside”, as tersely formulated by Ettinger (2004:81). This is precisely what is committed to writing and memory in Krog’s *Country of my skull*, in her concluding poem in that book, and in Zagajewski’s “Fire”, obviously not without some manipulation from the authors and the distortions and delusions inherent in the mirror-experience. But, as psychoanalysis has taught us: nothing human is ever pure and uncontaminated. True to the mirror experience as described within psychoanalysis, this exercise in mirroring Krog and Zagajewski has confirmed the ambiguous, eluding and illusory nature of both identification and identity.

Of central importance is the movement inward-outward, and my analysis has attempted to follow that.

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if that was my objective I would have taken quite a different route, one littered with cheap “facts” about the poets in question. Rather, I am investigating the influences of the subconscious in a more general way, based on the view that the subconscious is shared and shareable.

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Key concepts:

Ettinger, Bracha L.

Krog, Antjie: Country of my skull

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Krog, Antjie: Country of my skull

poësie

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