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“The past a repast”: Past and Present in *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* by Yvonne Vera

This article concentrates on how, in *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, Yvonne Vera foregrounds the past as inevitably contaminating the present: the resurgence of repressed memory operates as a determining factor in blurring the boundaries between victim and victimiser, and between past and present. It will be seen that Vera presents the violent Zimbabwean past as influencing the present, leading to a perpetuation of violence. The “repast” which is the past is therefore not a nourishing one, but an unwholesome one, and yet there is a trace of optimism in both novels as the female victims of violence manage to attain some form of liberation or “deliverance.” The tension between Ricoeur’s “destructive forgetting” and “forgetting that preserves” will be explored with a view to exposing how Vera highlights both the negative and cathartic power of repressed memory.

*Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, the final two novels by Yvonne Vera, are set respectively in Zimbabwe in the 1940s and in the early 1980s, and both novels are concerned with demonstrating how “the full weight of the past” (Vera, *Stone Virgins* 172) overwhelms the present, leading to acts of extreme barbarity but also to potential catharsis. As in all of Vera’s novels, the resurgence of repressed memory is a central preoccupation in these two texts in which past and present frequently become intermingled as a result of the narrative style, which oscillates between first and third person narrators and shifting points of view. Both novels contain scenes of violence, perpetrated against the self or another, and, in both novels, women are the victims of these acts. However, the binaries of attacker and victim, destruction and catharsis, past and present are significantly nuanced as Vera proffers a disturbingly lyrical vision of the manner in which the past weighs heavily on the present.

*Butterfly Burning* is set in the 1940s in a township outside Bulawayo, in which Phephelaphi, a young woman, lives with her lover, an older man named Fumbatha. Her heart set on becoming one of the first black nurses in Bulawayo, Phephelaphi is aghast when she realises she is pregnant, as this will lead to her being expelled from the training programme. She therefore carries out an abortion, revealing nothing of either the pregnancy or this act to Fumbatha. He

1. Yvonne Vera passed away in April 2005, leaving unfinished her most recent novel, *Obedience*.
2. Subsequent page references to Vera’s *Stone Virgins* will be preceded by the abbreviation *SV*. 
nevertheless finds out about it, leaves Phephelaphi, who is pregnant once again and who kills herself by self-immolation. *The Stone Virgins*, set in Matabeleland during the period preceding and succeeding Independence, is the story of two sisters who are attacked by a dissident freedom fighter. Thenjiwe is decapitated and Noncéba is raped and her lips cut off. For Sibaso, the attacker, “the past [is] a repast, the future a talisman” (*SV* 84) and this article will show how Vera, in both novels, guards against the danger of using the past to justify the present, as the play on the word “past” suggests. It will be shown that excessively feeding off the past results in a disillusionment with the present which can lead to violence, while the constant tension between Ricoeur’s “destructive forgetting” and “forgetting that preserves” (Ricoeur 442) is revealing of both the negative and cathartic powers of the resurgence of repressed memory. Although Ricoeur makes the distinction between “these two figures of deep, primordial forgetting” (442), the latter referring to forgetting in terms of a “reserve or resource” (440) from which memory can be activated and the former to forgetting as a form of erosion of memory, he ultimately recognises an equivocalness in them, and it is precisely this which Vera represents. On a more structural level, the constant toing and froing between different narrative voices and between flashbacks and the present contributes to the blurring of temporal boundaries in these novels and mirrors the many layers of memory which emerge.

Sibaso, the attacker in *The Stone Virgins*, takes refuge in the mountains after Independence and the emergence of Robert Mugabe’s construction of a new national identity. Anchored essentially in Shona culture, this new historiography refused to acknowledge the contributions and sacrifices of other ethnic groups during the liberation struggle, leading to violent confrontations in Matabeleland.3 Sheltering in a sacred cave in the mountains, Sibaso reflects on the topographies of memory:

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3. A liberation struggle spanning fourteen years took place before Zimbabwe finally obtained Independence in 1980, with Robert Mugabe becoming first Prime Minister and then President. It is important to note that the two nationalist guerrilla groups who fought for Independence (ZANLA and ZIPRA) were dominated by two different ethnic groups: ZANLA (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army) was essentially Shona, whereas ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army) was essentially Ndebele. ZANLA was the military wing of ZANU-PF, Mugabe’s party, and ZIPRA the military wing of the opposition party ZAPU. The confrontations which took place in the five years following on from Independence were fuelled not only by political disagreements, but also by interethnic disputes. The latter were exacerbated by the mainly Shona government’s attempts to forge a national identity which acknowledged little or nothing of the ethnic diversity of the country. The government’s response to a rebellion in Matebeleland in the early 1980s was a brutal repression which cost the lives of thousands, including many civilians (Bull-Christiansen 54-58). The events of *The Stone Virgins* take place during this period.
The rocks continue in their immortal strength. You are separate. Transient. Human strength rises and wanes. Even at its summit, our strength is not rock: igneous. The mind is perishable. Memory lingers, somewhere, in fragments. Such rocks; something happened, an event cataclysmic. Something happened; this is memory. 
You are alive; this, too, is memory. (SV 102)

The first person narrative and the use of the personal pronoun “you” create a disconcerting intimacy. An invitation is extended to share Sibaso’s enigmatic thoughts on memory. The ephemeral nature of human life is juxtaposed to the perennity of stone, and although for Sibaso memory is perhaps less ephemeral than the physical body, it is nevertheless dispersed (“Memory lingers, somewhere, in fragments”). On one level, the unity of stone is opposed to the fragmentation of memory, as Sibaso envisages it, and the use of the indefinite pronoun renders the topography of memory unclear, contrary to that of stone. On another level, the equation by Sibaso of a violent physical action producing changes in the earth’s surface with the violent upheaval during the liberation struggle suggests that the land bears the traces of the confrontations. Indeed, the repeated use of indefinite pronouns adds a mysterious dimension to this vision of memory which, for Sibaso, is yet to be discovered (“something happened”), and the fragmentation of which is reinforced by the disjointed nature of the sentences. The image of the rocks after a cataclysm enables Vera to highlight the many contradictory memories which struggle to find their place in the post-Independence period: “There is no single memory but multiple memories all battling to fill the cultural space that defines the nation.” (Vambe 106)

This particular interpretation of memory takes on its full meaning when Sibaso describes the images of the stone virgins on the walls of the sacred cave. He describes in great detail the artistic representation of these virgins who sacrifice themselves for their deceased king by accompanying him into the afterlife. After a lengthy description of these images, Sibaso touches one of them: “I place my hand over the waist of the dead woman, on an inch of bone, yet forty thousand years gather in my memory like a wild wind.” (SV 104) The power of the myth, activated by the mere act of touching the image, is revealing of the way in which Sibaso, as a way of constructing meaning for his life, hangs on to the past, to the detriment of the present. The weight of the past and the confusion it provokes in his mind re-emerge during his attack. Watching Nonceba after having raped her, he remembers the stone virgins:

He sees her dancing heels, her hands chaste dead bone, porously thin, painted on a rock. Her neck is leaning upon a raised arrow, her mind pierced by the sun. She is a woman from very far, from long ago, from the naked caves in the hills of Gulati. She does not belong here. She bears the single solitude of a flame, the shape and form of a painted memory.
He thrusts her body to the ground: a dead past. (SV 78)
The confusion felt by Sibaso is at its height in the conflation of Nonceba, whom he has just brutally raped, and “the shape and form of a painted memory.” However, the manner in which he throws Nonceba to the ground suggests that history has disappointed him, while the simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the precolonial past that these images represent reveal his discontent in the aftermath of Independence. The association of Nonceba and a “painted memory” indicates the many layers of memory at work: the original virgin, the artist’s memory of the virgin, his representation of that memory and Sibaso’s memory of that image. These layers of memory lead to an erroneous interpretation of the scene being played out in front of him, in which he is the main character, and the move from an aestheticisation of her body to defamiliarisation and then to a brutal reminder of the reality of the situation is perhaps also a reflection of the process of rejection of the ideals of the liberation struggle.

During the attack, which is narrated alternately from Nonceba’s and Sibaso’s points of view, the violation is described as being both physical and psychological: “He holds her dark bone”; “He owns her memory.” (SV 70-1) This appropriation of Nonceba’s body can also be read as an appropriation of the memory of the stone virgins, and it becomes clear that Sibaso is using the memory to inflict pain. His present disillusionment drives him to call up the memory of a precolonial past and to act it out. Memory for Sibaso is synonymous with pain: “I am a man who is set free, Sibaso, one who remembers harm,” (SV 97) and this memory of harm is inextricably linked to his disappointment and his invisibility after Independence: “Independence is the compromise to which I could not belong”; “They remember nothing. They never speak of it now; at least I do not hear of it.” (SV 97) The deictic “they” reinforces the alienation felt by Sibaso, as although it is not clear whether he is referring to the government or to the general population, this plural personal pronoun is in tension with the singular pronoun “I.” Vera presents the pain Sibaso feels at this quelling of part of the national memory and of his unacknowledged sacrifice as the pulsion driving him to commit his violent acts, and this in turn creates a degree of understanding for him, blurring the boundaries between victim and victimiser.4

In an attempt to find “an immaculate truth” (SV 84) which would help the country find “a balm for [its] own wounds” (SV 81), Sibaso reflects on different types of spider which represent, for him, different types of truth. Having described a certain spider that devours her partner during mating and then transforms him into a paste with which she entices her next partner, he continues:

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4. Edna O’Brien (2003) has suggested that “Sibaso remains a phantom—more a personification of evil than a full-fledged character.” Yet it seems to me that Vera’s choice to give Sibaso a voice, the chapters narrated by him alternating with those narrated by Nonceba, is indicative of a desire to break out of the binaries of good and evil, attacker and victim, and to provide a more complex vision of the violent heritage of the liberation struggle.
Such a spider possesses a valuable secret—the knowledge that love cannot be founded on mercy but that mercy can be founded on love. It knows the true agony of ecstasy, that violence is part of the play of opposites, and that during the war, there are two kinds of lovers, the one located in the past, and dead, the one in the future, living and more desirable. The past a repast, the future a talisman. This kind of truth also belongs to the fantasy of a continent in disarray. (SV 84)

The numerous oppositions in this passage are accentuated by the structure of the sentences, in which antithetical parallelisms can be observed, which highlight the plural nature of “this kind of truth.” Similarly, the play on words in the phrase which gives its title to this article suggests the way in which the past is taken apart, transformed and fed blindly in order to nourish the future. This is clearly a metaphorical commentary on the way in which the liberation struggle was used by the new government to give a legitimacy to Mugabe, who then used the past to justify what is widely recognized as a genocide in Matabeleland (Ranger 206-9).

It is no coincidence that Vera chooses not to reveal whether there is any catharsis possible for Sibaso. Simultaneously portrayed as attacker and victim, his destructive and violent acts do not seem to appease him, as his act of throwing Nonceba to the ground in disgust suggests. The fusion and resurgence of different layers of collective and individual memory (precolonial, colonial and postcolonial) leads to confusion, frustration and a grotesque parody of the stone virgins’ sacrifice after which Sibaso retreats to the mountains where, we must presume, his disillusionment will continue to haunt him. What is clear, however, is the fact that the new government’s rewriting of history and the exclusion of certain aspects of contemporary Zimbabwean history is an example of the selective aspect of narrative, which, according to Ricoeur, “opens to manipulation the opportunity and the means of a clever strategy, consisting from the outset in a strategy of forgetting as much as in a strategy of remembering” (Ricoeur 85). The fact that Sibaso’s war memories remain unsanctioned by official discourse results in his own corruption of memory and leads to his acts of violence.

The central male character of Butterfly Burning, Fumbatha, experiences similar confusion (though with less devastating consequences) regarding both collective and individual memory. Although his name means “clenched fist” in Ndebele, immediately calling up the notion of resistance, Fumbatha is no resistant. He is the son of a man hanged along with seventeen others in 1896 by the British during the first chimurenga. Fumbatha works on a construction site in Bulawayo; his hands leave their mark on the city, through the buildings he helps construct.

5. Chimurenga, the Shona word for struggle, is frequently used to designate specific periods of resistance to colonial rule in what was previously Southern Rhodesia. What is commonly referred to as the first chimurenga took place in 1896-7 when the medium Mbuya Nehanda encouraged the indigenous population to combat British colonial rule, and the second chimurenga, which ultimately resulted in Independence, took place between 1965 and 1980.
However, although he feels pride at his work, he wonders about its negative effects:

He has built. When he is dead, his hands will remain everywhere. He does not know if he is part of the larger harm. He does not understand it at all except the lingering hurt which needs not to be understood to be felt. Sometimes the present is so changed that the past is linked to the present only by a fragile word. To build something new, you must be prepared to destroy the past. (Vera, *Butterfly Burning* 25-6)

The diglossia which is recurrent in all of Vera’s novels is evident here. While the beginning of the passage is in free indirect discourse, the narrative voice of the following sentences is more difficult to determine. It is, however, quite clear that Fumbatha has a sense that he is contributing to the evolution of the colonisers (and, by extension, to the exploitation of the indigenous population), but this feeling is not completely understood. It is expressed by periphrasis (“he is part of the larger harm”), and it is the narrator who elliptically renders explicit his feelings of guilt in relation to his father’s sacrifice. Fumbatha’s clenched fist is used in the service of the opponent, to wipe out history. Working in construction, Fumbatha is going against his father’s resistance, paradoxically “destroying” all traces of the past as he helps to construct a future in which he will be unable to partake fully. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that the residual feelings of guilt, even if they are not fully understood, reveal to what extent the past continues to exert an influence on the present, through the form of pain. It is worth noting that Phephelaphi (whose name means refuge or shelter) was originally called Sakhile by her mother, a Zulu word meaning “we have created something,” before being renamed at the age of six. This imposed change of name is significant in the light of Phephelaphi’s acts of destruction (the self-performed abortion and self-immolation) and in the light of Fumbatha’s dubious pride in his acts of construction.

Phephelaphi too is preoccupied by the past, and her response is to project herself into the future. One particular memory haunts her—that of the murder of the woman who brought her up (but who, she later learns, was not her biological mother). Gertrude was a prostitute and was killed by a jealous client as Phephelaphi looked on. Her memory of this traumatic event is hazy and focuses on the recurring image of Gertrude’s arm falling from the doorframe and her body following onto the ground. Although this continually resurfacing memory is described several times in the novel, it remains vague each time as Phephelaphi is unable to remember it fully, despite the fact that she “argue[s] with the memory of her mother” (*BB* 33). The choice of the verb “argue” here presupposes interaction, and it is therefore significant that the *anamnesis*, the act of

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6. Subsequent page references to Vera’s *Butterfly Burning* will be preceded by the abbreviation *BB*. 
recollection of the memory of her mother (to be distinguished, as Ricoeur points out, from mnene, the mere presence of the memory [Ricoeur 44]), should be rendered by a synecdoche: “For days and days after that, the arm kept falling from the doorway. This to her was now the symbol of death.” (BB 34) All memories of her mother have been usurped by this image of one specific part of her body. This movement of the arm later becomes the symbol of Phephelaphi’s own death, as her metamorphosis from woman to butterfly takes place: “The fire moves over her light as a feather, smooth like oil. She has wings. She can fly. She turns her arms over and sees them burn and raises them higher above her head, easily, tossing and turning her arms up like a burning rope. She is a bird with wings spread.” (BB 150) Diglossia is again effectively used as the almost imperceptible shift from free indirect discourse to the narrator’s intervention simultaneously renders the beauty and the pain of her death: while Phephelaphi sees herself as a butterfly, the narrator reminds us of the grim reality of the situation through the simile equating her not with nature but an inanimate object on fire.

Just as Sibaso harms Nonceba and Thenjiwe because of the unbearable weight of the past and the conflation in his mind of past and present, so Phephelaphi harms herself because of a need to escape her past and to free herself from reproducing the maternal schema. Having decided to “forget what memory was there” in her past, that is to say, her mother’s prostitution and untimely violent death, she sees the year 1946 as being “fast paced and promising a sultry escape” (BB 32). Phephelaphi’s awareness of her mother’s sexuality, described at length in the novel, results in her rejection of it, symbolised by the moment when she throws out the revealing dress her mother was wearing when she died. It is no coincidence that this same chapter opens with the statement “Phephelaphi wanted to be somebody” (BB 74), and a description of her desire for more than just a relationship with the man she loves: “who could she be and how, where could she be and with what wings” (BB 78-9).

Phephelaphi, however, can only fly with her own wings (as it were) through her self-immolation, the lyrical description of which highlights the sense of freedom this act brings about. Her failure, in her eyes, to leave her past behind her by becoming a nurse, as well as her finding herself alone and pregnant, and her refusal to submit to this situation, result in her dramatic suicide. Unable to eschew her past and the present, Phephelaphi chooses to end her life, and yet, this dramatic death belies a disturbing catharsis which is also present in The Stone Virgins. The act of setting herself alight is described as an “embracing [of] each part of herself with flame, deeply and specially” (BB 150), suggesting that Phephelaphi has at last reached a point where she has appropriated and accepted her body. Although, as Eva Hunter has pointed out, “when each [of Vera’s] protagonist[s] seizes agency most decisively, she becomes an agent of death” (Hunter 241),

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7. Interestingly, in The Stone Virgins, published after Hunter’s article, Nonceba, the main female protagonist, is able to seize agency without becoming “an agent of death.”
clear that Vera is pinpointing the limitations placed on women and highlighting attempts at overcoming “the fetters of fertility” (Hunter 240). Phephelaphi, in this respect, escapes her oppressive past and present, and the expectations placed on her both by Fumbatha and society, but her suicide precludes any possibility of real change.

Cephas Dube, the other main male protagonist of *The Stone Virgins*, is arguably the only character of Vera’s who manages to reconcile past and present harmoniously. Cephas, a former lover of Thenjiwe, convinces Nonceba to come and live with him in Bulawayo, where he feels he can protect her, but the past invades the present constantly:

> She carries the visible scars; he shields her from the invisible ones. [...] The nature of their friendship is in the elimination of detail, of the specific, in order to free her. They cannot yet discuss matters that concern the cause of their despair. Not yet. Not together. Such thoughts remain separate, lingering in the corners of their minds. [...] Their thoughts are completely absorbed by the full weight of the past. The mind is buried in its own despair, but they survive, day to day, in their friendship. The past is so much heavier for them than the present. (*SV* 172)

The repetition of the adverb “yet” in this passage leaves open the possibility that Nonceba will one day be in a position to confront her memories of the past, but the periphrasis “they cannot yet discuss matters that concern the cause of their despair” suggests that that day is still far off. For the moment, the resurgent memories of the past hinder communication and weigh down the present. The weight of the past closes them off from each other, preventing real sharing, as the short disjointed negative sentences highlight.

The promise of a cathartic reconstruction of memory is presented in a different way and on a larger scale through Cephas’s work as a historian piecing together archives in order to reconstruct the history of kwoBulawayo, the precolonial stronghold of the Ndebele people, with a view to inscribing it in the national history. Vera clearly wishes to take a stand on the necessity of including in official history all aspects of the past. Maurice Vambé has pointed out that Vera contributes to the construction of a new Ndebele historiography in this novel (*Mamber* 104), and Dorothy Driver and Meg Samuelson have emphasised that the phrase “a new nation needs to restore the past” on the final page of the novel (*SV* 184), interestingly in total contradiction with Fumbatha’s thoughts on the necessity of “destroy[ing] the past” in order “to build something new” (*BB* 26), contains no trace of irony (Driver and Samuelson 187). The positive aspect of Cephas’s work is highlighted in the novel’s final sentence:

> His task is to learn to re-create the manner in which the tenderest branches bend, meet and dry, the way the grass folds smoothly over this frame and weaves a nest, the way it protects the cool, livable places within—deliverance. (*SV* 184)
The final word is significant as it suggests the potential of this reconstruction, the implication being that the finality of this reconstruction will bring about “deliverance,” the importance of which is emphasised by the typographic separation. Moreover, the final sentences are dominated by a lexical field linked to well-being, hinting thereby at the promise of fulfilment contained in this new contribution to collective memory. A feeling of harmony therefore reigns at the end of this novel dominated by acts of gratuitous violence and usurpation of memory.

Perhaps the most commented upon aspect of Vera’s fiction is her lyrical style, which often seems at odds with the violent acts related. The use in these novels, in which memory and its resurgence are central, of what Ranka Primorac has dubbed “the main ingredients of a ‘poetic’ style: the use of elliptical sentences, repetition and present tense narration” (Primorac 102), serves to mirror on both a narrative and structural level the multiple layers of memory. The predominance of present tense narration in both novels creates an immediacy between the language and the event and reinforces the influence of the past on the present. By choosing to narrate past events in the present tense, Vera renders explicit the constant presence of the past. When Nonceba remembers Sibaso’s mutilation of her face, the present tense is used, just as when Sibaso remembers his wartime experiences. In this way, the power of memory and the influence it exerts on the present is highlighted. Abrupt shifts from preterite to present abound in *Butterfly Burning* where the chronology is also disrupted, the implied narrator obliquely revealing in chapter four the dramatic events of the end of the novel in the conditional mode (*BB* 35). Just as the passages in which Sibaso and Nonceba remember their harrowing experiences are in the present tense, so the hanging of Fumbatha’s father is also recounted in the present tense, thus emphasising the significance of this memory in terms of its influence on the present. Furthermore, the occasional shifts from third to first person narratives reinforce the immediacy created by the use of the synoptic present; in particular, Vera’s choice to have alternate chapters narrated by Nonceba and Sibaso in *The Stone Virgins*, apart from reinforcing radically different perspectives, also heightens the tension between different individual memories, thereby cautioning against the creation of a monolithic collective memory.

In conclusion, it becomes clear on reading these novels, as Muponde and Taruvinga have pointed out, that Vera is concerned to present “multi-layered portraits” of Zimbabwe. In placing the resurgence of repressed memory at the centre of her preoccupations, she enshrines “memories of the struggle,” both individual and collective. Vera’s characters carry their past as a burden which is sometimes beyond their comprehension. The disconcertingly lyrical nature of Vera’s prose moves between flights of imagination and brutal reality, and although the historical context is central to her works, the originality of Vera’s fiction lies not in “the historian’s emphasis on dates, facts and occurrences,” but in her
depiction of “imaginative and spiritual journeys of a colonised and oppressed people” (Muponde and Taruvinga xi). But more specifically, Vera’s elliptical, poetic prose ultimately focuses less on the past itself than on what is recoverable from it, and the exploration of fragmented memory in these and indeed all of her novels reveals the act of remembering to be both potentially empowering and destructive. Any comfortable conclusions are therefore rendered awkward, and yet Vera’s formal innovations undoubtedly offer new perspectives from which to interrogate the legacy of History.

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Works cited


