

## ONE MUST SPEAK, ONE CANNOT SPEAK

*Fiction, memory and genre hybridity  
in transitional South Africa and Argentina*

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This paper is a preliminary report from a research project in progress on *Fiction's Truth*, that is, fiction as a means of investigation and as a vehicle for social change, with South Africa and Argentina as my chosen cases. There are many reasons for this particular choice of examples. South Africa and Latin America (Argentina especially) are two literary worlds to which I have a long-time relationship, as a fiction writer and as a journalist. They are both extraordinarily rich in literary imagination and moreover share a common experience of dealing with a traumatic near past; in South Africa the system of racial segregation known as Apartheid and the violent last years of liberation struggle; in Latin America the military dictatorships and the 'dirty war' on the militant left. The latter was most systematic and cruel in Argentina, where some 12.000 people were assassinated in clandestine detention centers. A transition period is especially interesting from the perspective of literary and cultural production, since the dialectic between culture and society comes in the open – literature's ability of looking back and looking forward simultaneously, reinterpreting the past and forecasting the future. Rewriting modernity, as David Attwell puts it, in the case of South Africa<sup>1</sup>. Or rewriting history – even writing history for the first time, exploring material that has never been narrated.

I have already evoked at least two problematic concepts that require a preliminary definition. *Transition* is in political and economic terms normally used to describe a process of systemic change, from authoritarian rule to (liberal) democracy

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<sup>1</sup> Attwell 2005

and from a state controlled (socialist) economy to free market capitalism. This is of course a limiting and strongly biased view that can be very clearly dated to the 1990s, the decade between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the attack on World Trade Centre. It is a definition that for example will leave out China's dramatic transformation. I prefer a broader notion of transition as any process of profound social and cultural change, be it economic liberalization or political radicalization, peaceful reform or violent revolution, or the more subtle transformational effects of migration and other transnational flows. The entire world could in fact be considered to be in a process of transition – this is the deeper meaning of *globalization*<sup>2</sup> – but some places are more than others focal points of these transformational processes.

South Africa is no doubt such a focal point, where globalization has happened to coincide with late decolonization and a (virtual) qualitative leap from racial supremacism to constitutional equity and democracy. South Africa's make-over in the 1990s and early 2000s is a period of radical transition not only in the political sense but also economically. The opening up of the formerly isolated South African economy – with its high percentage of state involvement - had certain similarities with the simultaneous restructuring of the former socialist states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In Argentina, the transition from military dictatorship to democracy in the 1980s was formally a reinstallation, since there existed a tradition of democracy, albeit weak and at the mercy of the powers that be - and subsequently interspersed by a parallel tradition of military coups. The example of Argentina moreover clearly demonstrates that a transitional process is neither unilinear nor irreversible. In the '90s, under the regime of Carlos Menem, democratization was interrupted and in some ways arguably even reversed. Apparently, Latin America as a whole has undergone dramatic change, from the brutal military dictatorships of the 1970s and '80s to the democracies of today, with the predominant rule of left-

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<sup>2</sup> Nederveen Pieterse 2001

wing and populist regimes. But in many parts of the continent the democratic process remains weak, due to persisting and even widening economic gaps and basically unaltered power structures.

*Truth* is an even more problematic concept, not least in connection with literature. I am neither a philosopher nor a scholar in comparative literature, and it is not my intent to contribute to the quite specialized discussion on fiction and truth in the field of literary aesthetics, bordering on both philosophy and literary studies<sup>3</sup>. My interest in truth here is precisely in relation to transition, as expressed in the proliferation of *truth commissions*. It may seem paradoxical that the philosophical angst about the pursuit of truth – after post-modern deconstruction – coincides with a renewed political confidence in the same process, as the panacea to break away from authoritarian and violent pasts<sup>4</sup>. ‘Truth’ in its political implementation is closely linked to the concept of Human Rights, which, in anthropologist Richard Wilson’s words, has become “the archetypal language of democratic transition”<sup>5</sup>. In the 1990s, nearly all transitions from authoritarian rule adopted the language of human rights and the political model of constitutionalism, in Latin America as well as in Eastern Europe and, most notably, in South Africa, whose Truth and Reconciliation Commission is arguably the to date most ambitious and transparent one.

### **Healing the national body**

Truth Commissions are essentially nation-building processes, aimed at constructing a revised national history and producing public memories in respect of landmark historical events and struggles.<sup>6</sup> ‘Truth’ is often explicitly defined in these

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Currie 1990 and 2004, Lamarque 1983 and 2009, and Lamarque and Olsen 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Posel & Simpson 2002, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson 2001, p. 1

<sup>6</sup> Posel & Simpson 2002, p. 2. The TRC’s nation-building mission is most adamantly expressed by Constitutional Court Judge Albie Sachs: “The Commission of Truth and Reconciliation. It is the creation of a nation.” (quoted in Wilson 2001, p. 13; original quote in Boraine 1995.)

instrumental terms, and the rhetoric of nationalism is widely and uncritically accepted in the literature on truth commissions and post-dictatorship truth-telling, with abundant references to tenuous concepts such as ‘collective memory’ or ‘national psyche’.<sup>7</sup> Normally, or even necessarily, the nationalist rhetoric needs an ‘other’ in opposition to which the imagined identity is constructed. In the New South Africa case, however, the other has not been other nations; it has been *itself*. As demonstrated by Wilson, the new identity is being forged in the opposition between the present self and the past other, or upon a discontinuous historicity, where the past is not a past of pride, but of abuse.<sup>8</sup> This adds to the explanation of History’s prominent yet problematic presence in contemporary South African fiction, and it also pinpoints the TRC’s major difference from preceding truth commissions, in Latin America and Eastern Europe: the intrinsic coupling of truth with reconciliation, which makes sense in the light of the historical failure to build a South African nation.

The real political impact of the TRC may have been exaggerated and transient, but the lasting imprint on cultural production and its shaping of a new national imaginary can hardly be over-estimated. It had, in Louise Bethlehem’s words, a “singularly influential role in the production of a sanctioned narrative of collective memory”<sup>9</sup>. In agreement with Wilson she argues that this memory crucially delineated the contours of the ‘imagined community’ of the post-apartheid state, whose paradigmatic citizen is the victim of the trauma of apartheid.<sup>10</sup>

In the proceedings of the TRC the imagined nation was not only equipped with ‘psyche’ and ‘memory’; it was very concretely conceived as a physical body –and a sick body at that, in urgent need of *healing*. The prescribed healing treatment was

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<sup>7</sup> Wilson 2001, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Bethlehem 2006, p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

truth-telling, forgiveness and reconciliation, by which the wounds in the national body were opened, cleansed and stopped from festering.<sup>11</sup> The philosophy of catharsis, as Bethlehem calls it<sup>12</sup>, stems from the Commission's strong Christian foundation and is closely linked to the charismatic chairperson himself. There were many different understandings of the term reconciliation in the constitutive process, but one came to dominate in the dozens of televised hearings: The religious-redemptive vision which stressed public confessions by victims.<sup>13</sup> Members of the Commission's Investigation Unit testify that their prime concern, at first, was with Truth, but they soon realized that to certain Commissioners, and most notably the Chairperson, reconciliation was a priority, even at the expense of the uncovering of truth, whereas the latter might imperil the goals of national unity and reconciliation.<sup>14</sup>

The broadcasting seven hours a day of the TRC hearings' compelling drama of exposé, confession and, occasionally, repentance was a powerful media spectacle in "South Africa's reconciliation enterprise".<sup>15</sup> The confessionals were telling individual stories, but with an overriding sense of their more global 'human' messages. This universalizing impulse became especially conspicuous in international media coverage, where historical context and particular circumstances were played down or absent altogether and the South African drama, like the previous Argentinean and

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<sup>11</sup> Wilson 2001, p. 15. He paraphrases Desmond Tutu's press release on his appointment as president of the TRC on 30 November 1995, in which Tutu describes the Commission's task with exactly these metaphors.

<sup>12</sup> She is referring to Wilson but also to Adam Sitze, who talks about a 'scatological historiography' in which the past is configured as "a waste product to be expunged from the system" (Sitze 2003, p. 15, quoted in Bethlehem 2006, p. 78).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xix.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the decision not to force Inkatha leader Chief Buthelezi to appear, in spite of the fact that more than half of the reports of killings which the TRC received concerned "the interregnum years" 1990-94 and that the Inkatha Freedom Party was 'undoubtedly responsible' for the greatest number of violations. *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Posel & Simpson 2002, p. 7.

the simultaneous Eastern European, turned into a globally comprehensible tale of wrong-doing, of 'man's inhumanity to man'.<sup>16</sup>

The drama of catharsis and rhetoric of forgiveness were to constitute a powerful matrix for all kinds of cultural production in the years following the Commission's hearings, from mainstream TV-series and films to investigative journalism and confessional literature. The most obvious example is perhaps Ian Gabriel's internationally renowned feature film *Forgiveness* (2004), which in a kind of pastiche of the American Wild West genre tells the story of an Afrikaner ex-cop who goes to a godforsaken town in the Western Cape to seek absolution from the family of one of his victims. His quest for closure brings old conflicts back to the surface and confronts all who meet him with morally ambiguous choices.

The immediate literary aftermath of the TRC was not as conspicuous. The abundance of autobiographies, by former prisoners and heroes of the struggle, had its first momentum already in the 1980s and a second culmination with the release of Nelson Mandela's own *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994). But after '94, the earlier mode of autobiographical writing, associated with the political 'cause' and with an impetus towards exile and even death, gradually gives way to another kind of conventional mode, concerned with offering stories of redemption and healing<sup>17</sup>. White writers allegedly excelled in "brow-beating" and confessionals in the late '90s; the most notable case being Mark Behr, who in the keynote address of a conference in Cape Town<sup>18</sup> confessed to having been a police informer while militating as a left-wing student leader in the 1970s. Like the former Stasi agents of the GDR who stepped forward after the German re-unification, he received little sympathy for his

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 7-8. It's worth noting that the Latin American military regimes' violations of human rights were usually not portrayed in that universalized manner.

<sup>17</sup> Nuttall 1998

<sup>18</sup> *Faultlines – Inquiries around Truth and Reconciliation*, 4 July 1996.

“showdown with himself”<sup>19</sup>, and in fact became a *persona non grata*. A somehow similar fate, but for completely different reasons, awaited Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee after his insidious critique of the TRC in *Disgrace* (1999), certainly the most intriguing novel of the early post-Apartheid era.

### **Theatricalization of power**

Not only did the TRC receive the world’s unprecedented attention; it was also vested with expectations that it impossibly could live up to. Michael Ignatieff’s oft-quoted statement of the possible achievement of a truth commission is worth keeping in mind: “to reduce the number of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse”<sup>20</sup>. That was certainly achieved. Those South Africans who claimed that they didn’t know about human-rights violations, or that they had no idea of the extent to which such violations occurred, can no longer remain in states of misinformation and self-deception. And, as Piers Pigou, one of the members of the TRC’s regional Investigation Unit in Johannesburg, put it, “the process of recovering the truth has only just begun”.<sup>21</sup> For writers and artists it ought to be a formidable challenge to pursue the truth-finding, but also to disclose the ideological motivations and prejudices of the process itself. One immediate reflection, in the face of the powerful mediation of the TRC, is how literature can ever compete with these

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<sup>19</sup> Speaking of his own novel *The Smell of Apples* (1995), Behr said that its creation represented “the beginnings of a showdown with myself for my own support of a system like apartheid”, and further stated that “[I]f the book’s publication has assisted white people in coming to terms with their own culpability for what is wrong in South Africa, then it has been worthwhile” (Heyns 2000, p. 42) As Heyns notes, the latter formulation reveals an interesting ambivalence, since ‘coming to terms’ with the culpability could be read as accommodating it. (Ibid.)

<sup>20</sup> Original quote in “Articles of Faith”, *Index on Censorship*, 5/96. Ignatieff has repeated in other wording in for example the introduction to photographer Jillian Edelstein’s remarkable documentation of the TRC, *Truth & Lies* (2001), p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> Pigou 2002, in Posel & Simpson, p. 60.

compelling narratives – narratives that literally embody the trope-of-truth<sup>22</sup> ideal of the anti-Apartheid struggle. Not only did the TRC provide real-life stories that apparently made literature redundant; it moreover seemed to serve the same imagining purpose that literature and other forms of fiction had done in the nation-building process of other countries, although the imagining of a nation is arguably a much more complex process now than in the years of post-colonial independence after World War II. Paraphrasing Bethlehem, one might assume that the trope-of-truth was complemented, or replaced, by an even more constraining trope-of-reconciliation, and that this new straight-jacket on cultural production might be further tightened by the presumed complacency among writers and intellectuals, of solidarity with the new regime.

Although such misgivings to a large extent may have turned out to be justified, they are not representing the whole picture. The TRC did also obviously serve as a catalyst for revitalization of South Africa's literary and intellectual production, and one reason for that may be found in the mixed and complex character of the Commission itself. Wilson gives an intriguing explanation to why democratizing governments prefer Truth Commissions to the existing legal system: They serve as a vehicle for “the theatricalization of power”, by compelling representatives of the old regime to confess, when they would rather have maintained their silence, and in so doing to (publicly) recognize the new government's power to admonish and to punish. Moreover, in the South African case, the TRC's transient, *liminal* status and position as a quasi-judicial institution,

“allowed it to *mix genres* [my italics] – of law, politics and religion – in particularly rich ways”.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The term coined by Louise Bethlehem to describe the prevailing realist norm of literature under apartheid, assuming a mimetic relationship between literature and reality and seeing 'truth'telling' as a literary obligation. Bethlehem 2006, pp. 1-3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20. The “peculiar mixing of genres” may also have undermined the TRC's ability to write the official history of apartheid, which was actually demanded in the mandate, but whether Wilson regards this as a short-coming is not clear. I wouldn't.



It strikes me that the typical mixed-genre literature of the transition mirrors this inter-disciplinary complexity. It makes sense, since the arguably main inspirational spark for this proliferation of genre hybridity, Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (1998<sup>24</sup>), is in fact a re-telling in semi-fictional form of the TRC procedure.

### **Nunca Más**

The Argentinean military dictatorship, 1976-82, represented a qualitative rupture with previous military regimes in two fundamental respects. First of all, in its policy of systematic political *extermination*<sup>25</sup>. Secondly in its clandestine practice, refusing to assume any responsibility for the same policy, carried out by an informal apparatus of concentration camps in all the major urban centers. Both these aspects distinguished the Argentinean military regime from its allied dictatorships in neighboring Chile and Uruguay<sup>26</sup>. Yet it formed part of the long authoritarian and militarist tradition, with strong support in large sectors of Argentinean society, and it can only be understood in an historical context. The Argentinean horror was

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<sup>24</sup> My references are to the English edition from 1999, which includes an epilogue written after the delivery of the TRC Report.

<sup>25</sup> It was not *genocidal*, as the Nazi extermination of Jews and Gypsies, or the Serbian and Croatian "cleansing" of Bosnian Muslims, although there was a strong anti-Semitic tendency, and a disproportionately large number of Jews among the assassinated. The subversive could in principle be rescued and re-assimilated into society if he/she adopted the values of his/her captors. The few survivors of the infamous Mechanical School of the Navy, ESMA, are examples of such attempts at "rehabilitation", and the systematic adoption of children of the disappeared, to be properly raised within the established order of Western values and Christian faith, is in accordance with this belief (Crenzel 2008, p. 197).

<sup>26</sup> The strong international reactions to the coup in Chile were a main argument for the clandestine system, which would supposedly absolve the government from responsibility; the enemy could be eliminated without legal and political obstacles, and without traces: The abducted would have no public visibility, their detention would be denied and their assassinations carried out secretly. Another reason for not taking political prisoners was, according to Crenzel, the military's fresh memory of the amnesty in 1973, under the brief government of Héctor Cámpora, when the released revolutionaries immediately had resumed their militancy (Ibid., p. 33).

arguably not, as has been suggested, an inexplicable “*civilizational breakdown*”.<sup>27</sup> Nor was it a parenthesis between two stages of democracy, during which the (civic) political forces had been forced off the scene - to return only by the end of an exceptional war-like state of emergency. In fact there was an astonishing political continuity. Only a tenth of the mayors and local governors were recruited from the armed forces. This was in perfect accordance with Junta leader Jorge Videla’s explicit policy to have strong civic participation in *el Proceso*<sup>28</sup>. Many, if not most, of today’s active politicians hence have a compromised past as collaborators. And not only politicians. Complicity is a burning and complex issue in Argentina’s late revision of its recent history.

*La Comisión Nacional Sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (CONADEP), which in fact was one of the inspirational models for the TRC, had a similar momentary impact in the mid-1980s. The historical conditions were however radically different, not only due to local circumstances but also, and as importantly, the global context<sup>29</sup>. In Argentina, the military had lost political support and given up government after the defeat in the popularly supported war over the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas). But the same people that had committed the crimes against humanity to be investigated were still in the barracks, in their previous rank order, with the means to intervene again. Although such a threat was not imminent, there were good reasons to question, not only the stability of the restored democracy, given the turbulent political history, but also the willingness by a new government to really investigate the human rights violations, given the alleged complicity of the political class in the anti-subversive enterprise. After the elections and the installation of the

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<sup>27</sup> This term, inspired by Norbert Elias, is used by H. Vezzetti in *Pasado y Presente. Guerra, dictadura y sociedad en la Argentina* (2002). Crenzel objects to the idea, arguing that it “eclipses the characteristics that the institutional and political life of the country assumed” (Ibid., p. 198)

<sup>28</sup> *El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* was the Junta’s euphemism for the extermination policy. Videla also used the term “dirty war” (*guerra sucia*) to justify the kidnapping and disappearing of alleged terrorists and their supporters.

<sup>29</sup> The Cold War was still raging, with Central America as one of the hot spots of open confrontation.

democratic government, there was a strong demand, from human rights' organizations in Argentina and abroad, for a parliamentary commission. The elected president, Raúl Alfonsín opted, however, for a commission of "personalities" with little or no political affiliations<sup>30</sup>, and with a limited mandate.<sup>31</sup>The actual CONADEP was apparently a compromise solution, and it was at first met with suspicion or even hostility by the human rights' organizations. (The mothers of Plaza de Mayo were to remain reluctant to co-operate.) Given the difficulties and constraints, and the uncertain political stability, the actual accomplishments of the commission become quite astonishing. As Emilio Crenzel demonstrates in his political history of the commission, its investigation gained legitimacy in the process and it was to have profound political and judicial effect, by exposing a new public truth about the disappearances and becoming the new narrative bedrock for interpreting, judging and evoking the, at the time of reporting, immediate past.<sup>32</sup>

The commissions' report, *Nunca Más* (Never Again), presented in September 1984 and published as a comprehensive book two months later, was based on the testimonies of surviving detainees and relatives of the disappeared<sup>33</sup>, and a thorough inventory of the clandestine detention centers, some of which had been located in

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<sup>30</sup> Among them writer Ernesto Sábato, who was later to be elected president of the commission. Alfonsín's first choice for the presidency was Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, who turned down the offer. His condition for accepting, that the human rights violations be subject to federal and not military justice, was not granted at the time of the commission's inception (Ibid. p. 60).

<sup>31</sup> It should only investigate the specific issue of the disappearances, and only during the years of the military dictatorship – avoiding the delicate issue of Juan and Isabel Perón's involvement. Moreover, it would only have six months at its disposal.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>33</sup> Its perhaps most important contribution was to give voice to the survivors, whose testimonies had been met with both incredulity and suspicion, and to the families of the disappeared, who had been largely stigmatized. The first testimonies from inside the ESMA, by prisoners who had survived, were rejected by many relatives, human rights' organizations and exile groups, who accused the survivors of being collaborators. The common popular reaction to the detentions, "*por algo serrá*" – "they must have done something", was applied to those who escaped extermination: they must have done something to survive (Ibid., p.43). The guilt of survival is, as we shall see, a recurrent theme in the memories of former Montonera Susana Ramús (2000).

civilian surroundings, in garages or sports clubs, to the knowledge and warning of the neighbours<sup>34</sup>. The systematic mapping of the clandestine system, and the classification of disappearances by their location, proved to be an efficient working procedure. It disclosed many centers that had not been previously known, and thousands of new disappearances were denounced. Piece by piece, the incredible extent of the horror was hence laid bare, and the official military version of exceptional “excesses” in a legitimate war on terrorism was effectively repudiated by forensic evidence. Among the testifying witnesses were also some of the perpetrators, who had formed part of the infamous *grupos de tareas*. By confirming the veracity of the survivors’ and relatives’ versions, the perpetrator testimonies moreover made it politically impossible to leave the judicial consequences of the investigation to an internal military process.<sup>35</sup> The report was in fact to be used as key material in the historical trial of the Junta leaders in 1985.<sup>36</sup>

From a judicial point of view, the impact of the CONADEP was hence even more far-going than that of the TRC. And the publishing success of *Nunca Más* has neither precedents nor successors among truth commission reports. It was translated to Hebrew, English, German, Italian and Portuguese and its many subsequent editions had in November 2007 reached a sale of more than 500.000 copies.<sup>37</sup> Apart from inspiring the TRC, it has served as a model for to date nine

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<sup>34</sup> All in all, the commission identified around 340 detention centers, located in almost every part of the country (Crenzel 2008, p. 116).

<sup>35</sup> Their testimonies confirmed the ways in which the abductions were carried out, the looting of the victims’ homes and confiscation of their property; the forms of torture applied; the functioning of the clandestine centers as transit stations for thousands of disappeared; the existence of collective executions with the participation of high officials, and the assassination of those who refused to partake in such practices; the burial in anonymous mass graves or destruction of the dead bodies and the attempts to present certain assassinations as the fruit of armed clashes (Ibid., pp. 121-122).

<sup>36</sup> It was the first time that the former dictators of a country were put on trial by their own people – not by a foreign vanquisher. It happened in Argentina, but not in Chile or Uruguay, primarily because the Argentinean military had lost all political legitimacy after the failed attempt to reclaim *Las Malvinas*, but certainly also as a result of the horrific disclosures of the CONADEP report.

<sup>37</sup> The exact number is 503.830. Of these, the translated versions make up some 45.000 (Crenzel 2008, p. 18).

subsequent truth commissions all over Latin America, from Chile to Guatemala; most of them have also adopted the brand *Nunca Más*.<sup>38</sup>

### A Wall of Silence

Notwithstanding their merits and impact, CONADEP and Nunca Más have been criticized for cementing what has later been labeled “the theory of the two demons”. Already in the first sentence of the foreword, Sábato states that

“[d]urante la década del 70 la Argentina fue convulsionada por un terror que provenía tanto desde la extrema derecha como de la extrema izquierda.”<sup>39</sup>

The terrorism of the military regime is condemned as “infinitely worse” than the terrorism of the guerrilla groups, but yet explained as a response, albeit disproportionate, to the first evil. This double demonization, which acquitted the general public of any guilt or complicity, has remained the predominant interpretation of a troubled and shameful near-past. It has sometimes been accredited Sábato himself, but the theory of the two demons was explicitly part of the premises, and one might in fact say that the Commission’s report shades off and even revises the theory, by emphatically demonstrating that the two evils were incommensurable.<sup>40</sup> But, more importantly, this “exorcism”, in conjunction with the rising Human Rights discourse of the 1980s, did serve to turn the disappeared into (innocent) victims, with idealistic, if any, political motivations, and depriving the state terrorism of both historical context and antecedents. The commission confronts the crime of disappearance by restoring the *humanity* of the disappeared; giving

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Argentina 1984, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> In the latest edition of *Nunca Más*, for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the military coup in 2006, a second foreword was added, which cancels the theory of the two demons altogether: “Es preciso dejar claramente establecido, porque lo requiere la construcción del futuro sobre bases firmes, que es inaceptable pretender justificar el terrorismo de Estado como una suerte de juego de violencias contrapuestas como si fuera posible buscar una simetría justificatoria en la acción de particulares frente al apartamiento de los fines propios de la Nación y del Estado, que son irrenunciables” This revision provoked furor among some of the members of the commission. Magdalena Ruiz Guiñazú called it an insult to Sábato and a falsification of history to insinuate that *Nunca Más* constituted an apology for the theory of the two demons (article in *La Nación*, 19 May 2006).

them name, sex, age and profession.<sup>41</sup> But it is, as Crenzel notes, an *abstract humanization*, which presents their lives in solely generic terms and eclipses their condition of concrete historical beings; that, precisely, which recalls the confrontations that divided the Argentinean society. The report hence performs a double operation. It *repoliticizes* the identity of the disappeared with regard to the dictatorial perspective, by giving them status as legal subjects, while simultaneously *depoliticizing* it by representing them as innocent victims, excluding their political militancy or engagement. The decisive division-line in the interpretation of the immediate past is clearly drawn between ‘dictatorship’ and ‘democracy’, and the insistently repeated *Nunca Más!* attains the tone of an incantation - that this be the definite closure of the evil historical circle.<sup>42</sup>

*Nunca Más* did not affect cultural production in Argentina in any way that even faintly resembles the TRC’s impact in South Africa. It had a momentary strong influence, though, in the sense that the books and films that were made in the immediate aftermath adopted its arguments and narrative style. There were especially two internationally acclaimed and awarded films that have come to be associated with the transition: The Academy Award winning *La Historia Oficial* (1985), directed by Luis Puenzo, on a script by Puenzo and Aida Bortnik, and Héctor Olivera’s *La Noche de los Lápices* (The Night of The Pencils, 1986), based on the “true” story of the abduction of ten secondary school students in the city of La Plata.<sup>43</sup> Together, these two feature films could be seen as incisively expressing the new

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<sup>41</sup> Almost a third of the disappeared were between 21 and 25 at the time of abduction and another 12 percent even younger. Almost 85 percent were under 35. Men made up 70 percent of the total number, and every tenth woman was pregnant. About 30 percent were “workers” and 20 percent “students”. Almost 6 percent were “teachers” and 1,6 percent “journalists” (Argentina 1984, pp. 294-297).

<sup>42</sup> If *Nunca Más* in 1985 did represent hope for democracy, ten years later the present was rather proposed as a result of the horrific past and as a real or possible scenario for its recurrence. Twenty years later, in the new understanding of the past as it is expressed in the additional foreword to the 2006 edition, the decisive division is not between democracy and dictatorship, but between the present government’s view of the crimes of the military dictatorship and that of preceding administrations (Ibid, pp. 165, 174-175).

<sup>43</sup> The incident was highlighted during the trial against the Junta, when one of the four surviving youngsters gave his testimony. He also assisted in the writing of the script.

understanding of the immediate past: The disappeared were innocent victims – adolescents engaging in harmless school politics – and the great majority of Argentineans was either completely ignorant of what was going, or, in any case, unable to imagine the horror of it. Thus, rather than opening up for discussion, these and other mainstream cultural products sealed the new official history. Hardly any films were made on the subject in the following decade, with one singular exception: *Un muro de silencio* (A Wall of Silence, 1993), an international co-production, directed by Lita Stantic and with Vanessa Redgrave as one of the leading characters. A wall of silence was indeed an apposite metaphor for the Menem era's stunning disinterest in the dictatorship years, which Stantic's film unsuccessfully tried to break.

The negligible *literary* reverberations of *Nunca Más* had several reasons. One is the literary structure and quality of the report itself. It was deliberately produced as one comprehensive paperback volume, in contrast to the five volumes of the TRC report, and it was indeed widely spread and read. The fact that a renowned writer was heading the commission most probably also impacted on the reception.<sup>44</sup> And it could in a sense be regarded as an epilogue to Sábato's last novel *Abaddon – el ángel exterminador* (1974), which in retrospect may appear as a premonition of the coming disaster<sup>45</sup>.

Another explanation was the severe repression of the arts by the military government. Although there had been no formal censorship authority, artists, like journalists, were in the focus of the death squads' attention and prominent writers, like Haroldo Conti and Rodolfo Walsh, counted among the disappeared. Walsh had a few days before his abduction and death written an open letter to the Junta<sup>46</sup>. The

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<sup>44</sup> Part of the great international interest was clearly linked to Sábato's name. Publishing houses in for example Denmark and Sweden inquired to solicit publishing rights for "Nunca Más by Ernesto Sábato", obviously believing that it was his long-awaited new novel (Ibid.).

<sup>45</sup> One of the main protagonists, Marcelo, is abducted and tortured to death in the novel. His agony is juxtaposed to the final days of Che Guevara in Bolivia.

<sup>46</sup> *Carta de un escritor a la Junta Militar*, 1977. Walsh was injured to death when shooting back at his capturers. His dead body was seen by surviving witnesses at the ESMA.

letter, dated 24 March 1977, on the anniversary of the military coup, was one of the first explicit allegations of the systematic state terror. Other targeted writers, like Tomás Eloy Martínez and Osvaldo Soriano, had escaped into exile. Exile in itself was not an extraordinary condition. Julio Cortázar and Juan José Saer, the two arguably foremost Argentinean writers at the time, besides Borges, were both long since living in Paris. But the turmoil and terror of the '70s created a rupture in the literary continuum, and a vacuum in the normally immensely imaginative environment of Buenos Aires. It is even pertinent to talk about a lost generation, although the rupture was political, rather than generational. Many, if not most, writers from the '60s and '70s had been socially and politically engaged and some, like Walsh, even gave up literature for militancy, in Montoneros and other revolutionary organizations. The new writers who appeared with the transition were of the same generation as the majority of the disappeared, but they had not been part of any struggle, and felt the urge to distance themselves from "the failed utopias and grand fetishes of former generations", as Juan Forn put it when I interviewed him in 1992.<sup>47</sup> The literary and intellectual climate in the era of Menem – when the peso was artificially at par with the dollar, and Buenos Aires bragged of being one of the most expensive capitals in the world - had a quite striking resemblance with the postmodern '80s in Europe<sup>48</sup>. The grand illusion lasted over a decade, until it suddenly evaporated in the financial melt-down of November 2001, known as *el corralito*.

But the wall of silence had already been broken, as it happened more or less simultaneously with the TRC, and with a quite astonishing turn.

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<sup>47</sup> Hemer 1993, pp. 82-83.

<sup>48</sup> One of the most celebrated books from this period, Rodrigo Fresán's *Historia Argentina* (1992), is an ironic and distanced showdown with an alleged national culture of complaint and nostalgia. Fresán declared at the time his intention to write a novel on the theme of the disappeared, disclosing that they never existed; that they had just been hiding in the homes of their parents (Andrew Graham-Yooll 2008, interviewed by the author).



### **Finding a form to look Apartheid in the face**

Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* is, no doubt, *the* book about the TRC. Krog was primarily known as an acclaimed poet in Afrikaans, when she was asked by the South African Broadcasting Cooperation to cover the Commission's hearings for radio. When reviewing her journalistic endeavor in retrospect, however, she realized that there was something missing, something that she had not been able to convey, and something which journalism alone could not disclose. Hence she went back to the records to tell the story all over again, this time in a more personal and semi-fictional way, which defies genre classification.

*Country of My Skull* is a personal account in the sense that it reflects her own process of truth and reconciliation, in confronting the most hideous parts of her heritage and history as an Afrikaner. It is not a question of 'coming to terms with' her own culpability, as in Mark Behr's case, but of understanding, in the most radical meaning of the word, not only the legacy of white supremacy, and complex colonial relations, but the premises for the emerging New South Africa which she proudly endorses. It is not a confession. She is even reluctant to speak at all. In one of the philosophical conversations at the end of the book, she suggests that writers in South Africa shut up for a while:

"[O]ne has no right to appropriate a story paid for with a lifetime of pain and destruction. Words come more easily for writers, perhaps. So let the domain rather belong to those who literally paid blood for every faltering word they utter before the Truth Commission."<sup>49</sup>

It is not entirely clear who her anonymous interlocutor is. He is an academic with expertise in German literature and philosophy, possibly fictional. The dialogue is preceded by references to its literary sources<sup>50</sup>, and has a certain resemblance with earlier inner debates with a disparaging voice in her head. The Germanist asks her if

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 360.

<sup>50</sup> *Het Loon van de Schuld*, by Ian Buruma; *Guilt and Shame*, ed. By Herbert Morris; *Imagination, Fiction, Myth*, by Johan Degenaar; and *After the Catastrophe*, by Carl Jung. (Ibid., p. 359)

she is saying this because she herself can't find a form for dealing with her past. No, she answers, and tells him of her meeting with Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman during his visit to South Africa. In Chile (as in Argentina) the Truth Commission worked behind closed doors, so the victims' stories were not told in public. Yet he writes these stories, and she asked him – and herself – if it's not *sacrilege* [my italics] to pretend that you know – to use someone else's story, a story that has cost him his life. Dorfman looked at her, and then replied: "Do you want the awful truth? How else would it get out? How else would the story be told?" And her Germanist friend agrees. The reluctance of German literature to look Auschwitz in the face was precisely this fear of sacrilege. German artists could not find a *form* in which to deal with the Holocaust. They refused to take the possession of their own history – and, as a consequence, Hollywood took it away from them.<sup>51</sup>

And, in the end she *does* speak, and *Country of My Skull* is the account of her attempt at finding a form to look Apartheid in the face. Some, understandably fed up with white soul-searching and guilt, might dismiss her whole enterprise as just another – futile, if not false – effort by the tiny (white intellectual) elite to still claim imaginative right of possession to a country that no longer is theirs. And/or, even worse: a kind of poetic aestheticization of violence. What acquits Krog of such accusations is, according to Daniel Herwitz, precisely the form, constituting a *new genre* [my italics] - referring to Jean-François Lyotard's suggestion that the liminal experiences of our time demand new genres adequate to their unspeakability.<sup>52</sup>

"It seems to me that the mixture of poetry and journalism, which cuts from reporting to witnessing to imagining to remembering and continually loops between these in an *opera furiosa*, breaks through the mould of mere subjectivity and the illusion of poetic ownership to address one deep reaction to among the most intense events of our time. [...] It is in the movement from poetry to reportage that, paradoxically, the enormity of the event is there, as is its dialectic of achieving the position of a witness, who must at once report and *imagine*. She does not seek to master the event, to present it as a seamless, aesthetic whole, but rather to describe the whirl of being part of it, the way

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 360-361.

<sup>52</sup> Lyotard & Thébaud 1979 (1985), quoted in Herwitz 2003, p. 11.

no one can quite take being in the rooms of the commission day after day, or take the intensity, the wear and tear on family and soul, the *journalese* of it.”<sup>53</sup>

Mark Sanders (2007) makes a similar analysis, focusing on the relation between Literature and Testimony. The crucial question for Krog, in his interpretation, is how she as a writer can be a host to the witnesses’ words, in a way that is not merely memorial reconstruction<sup>54</sup>. Literature after apartheid hence becomes primarily a matter of *advocacy* – to create conditions under which the formerly ‘silenced’ can speak and to help them do so – which was also one of the fundamental impulses of the TRC’s public hearings.

“*Country of My skull* demonstrates how the literary abides upon the same structures as the hearings, and thus how, in the final analysis, the report, as it writes what it terms ‘the South African story’, shares such structures, as conditions of possibility, not just with the hearings but also with literature. In so doing, it points out a way for literature after apartheid that preempts any accusations of ‘barbarism’ by showing how those elements that testimony shares with lyric poetry set to work an ethics of advocacy, the task of giving the domain of words over to the other.”<sup>55</sup>

Krog’s personal recollection can thus be read as a pendant to the TRC report, supplementing its - partly provisional and ill-thought - account of truth. It does so, not only by remarking and reflecting upon how truths are interlaced with acts of telling and questioning at the public hearings, but also by *miming* such elements in the author’s own attempts to find an interlocutor or addressee for whom her own story will cohere.<sup>56</sup> This is what exceeds the ‘mere memorial reconstruction’, that which turns her account into literature - the fictional surplus-value, if you will. Normally, her interlocutor – the “Beloved” whom she addresses in an early poetic paragraph<sup>57</sup> - is her husband. But now she is travelling with the Commission, away

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<sup>53</sup> Herwitz 2003, p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Sanders 2007, pp. 147-148.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>57</sup> Krog 1999, p. 39

from her family, staying in hotels and guest-houses. And she soon becomes a stranger in her own home. On her occasional visits, everything seems unconnected and unfamiliar. This estrangement is integral to her story, according to Sanders. It helps her to mime what takes place at the hearings, when the witnesses testify to police and soldiers invading their homes, or to being evicted. It, in fact, makes her experience the symptoms of the victims.<sup>58</sup> Displaced, without an interlocutor, she cannot speak or write. Halfway into the book she finds an addressee, who also appears to become her lover – literally replacing the Beloved.<sup>59</sup> Whether it is “true” or not is irrelevant for Sanders’ argument. It serves as a (necessary) narrative device. The figure of the lover (the beloved) is explicitly linked to storytelling and to how telling relates to truth, and it reveals the meta-narrativity at work in the construction of the book.

### Reinventing History

An opposite literary strategy vis-à-vis the TRC process is represented by J. M. Coetzee’s already mentioned first novel after Apartheid, *Disgrace*, which could be read – and indeed was read – as a quite explicit critique of “the public and Christianized ritual of redemption through confession”<sup>60</sup>. The novel’s main character, David Lurie, resigns from his position as a university teacher in Cape Town, after a sexual affair with a student who charges him with harassment. He is tried by a committee that scurrilously resembles the TRC amnesty committee, pleads guilty but refuses to abide to the demanded redemptive procedure. (He does repent in the end, in his solitary way, and the novel in fact proposes an alternative to the

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<sup>58</sup> The sharing of the victims’ feelings of helplessness and wordlessness was a phenomenon that many of those who worked with the Commission experienced, including the covering reporters (Sanders 2007, p. 158)

<sup>59</sup> In the American edition, all allusions to this love affair have been erased – certainly not to appease ‘the moral majority’, but possibly of consideration to Krog’s own family. When I interviewed her in 2007, she explained that all the fictional elements of *Country of My Skull* are basically forms of protecting particular people.

<sup>60</sup> Boehmer 2006, p. 137.

Christian redemption, according to Elleke Boehmer; namely “secular atonement”<sup>61</sup>.) Disgrace has been thoroughly analyzed elsewhere, and I discuss it at length in my project, but I will not go into that discussion here. Let me just note that its “bleak depiction of the new South Africa”<sup>62</sup> stirred an intense and serious debate; more than any other novel of the transition, and more – I dare state – than any contemporary non-fiction text, be it academic or journalistic.<sup>63</sup>

Apart from the direct and indirect responses to the Truth and Reconciliation process, there are two very obvious tendencies in post-apartheid literature that have a quite explicit truth-seeking character. One is the *reclaiming of the public sphere* in a number of novels that write the city (Johannesburg, and to a lesser extent Cape Town and Durban) in order to appropriate it, in fantasy if not in reality; mapping the territory, crossing the still visible demarcation lines of Apartheid, connecting and inhabiting the nightmarish no-zones and in-between-places, turning the still divided urban space into a dynamic place of movement and change. Zakes Mda’s first novel, *Ways of Dying* (1995), and Ivan Vladislavić’s and Phaswane Mpe’s respective novels on the inner-suburb of Hillbrow, *The Restless Supermarket* and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, published almost simultaneously in 2001, are prime examples of this new orientation. In subtle contrast to the nostalgic evocation of the urban modernity that was literally levelled to the ground by Apartheid – Johannesburg’s Sophiatown, Cape Town’s District Six and, more recently, Durban’s Cato Manor, the writing of the emerging new African metropolis is soberly prosaic. Affirmative at most, but hardly celebratory.

The other tendency, specific to South Africa, is the current *revision of history*. This may imply a reassessment of the alleged parenthesis of Apartheid, as in

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Attridge 2004, p. 164. First published as “Age of Bronze, State of Grace: Music and Dogs in Coetzee’s Disgrace”, in *Novel* 34, no. 1, 2000.

<sup>63</sup> See for example *J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace* (Attridge and McDonald 2002) and *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* (Poyner 2006).

Marlene van Niekerk's lucid reinvention of the farm novel, *Agaat* (2004), but it may also go further back, to the early history of the Cape colony. Zoë Wicomb reinvents history itself in her exploration of a core aspect of South African experience that has been negated and effectively repressed: *creolization* – or miscegenation, to speak in more blunt biological terms. *David's Story* (2000) is a multi-voiced novel which fearlessly deals with several sensitive or even tabooed topics, including the conditions in the ANC detention camps. The main protagonist, David, is a former freedom fighter from Cape Town, who is doing an exploration into his own Griqua ancestry and hence into a little known and dubiously documented part of South African history. The Griqua were originally descendents of the indigenous Khoi people – called Hottentots by early European travellers. Rather than becoming servants to the Dutch colonists, The Griqua travelled north to set up their own independent state. Their journey in search of the Promised Land bears a striking resemblance to the Boers' Great Trek in escape of British colonial rule, and the two migrant groups had more than myths and religion (Christianity) in common; they shared the creolized Dutch that would eventually develop into Afrikaans. But while the Boers – later Afrikaners – were more and more concerned to identify themselves as white, the Griqua embraced a variety of ethnicities, and racial mixture was an acknowledged part of Griquaness.<sup>64</sup> *David's Story* gives a fragmented reconstruction of the various Griqua migrations and settlements from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1930s, when the late leader Andrew Le Fleur struggles to establish a separate homeland for a separate Griqua race, thus following an ideological line that would later cohere with Apartheid policy and portend “the shameful vote of Cape coloureds for the National Party in the first democratic elections”<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. The myth of whiteness was largely maintained through the racial purity of white women's wombs, while white men's sexual activity across racial lines was accepted or ignored.

<sup>65</sup> Wicomb 1998. In the latest elections, in 2009, the Western Cape was the only province where the ANC did not win.

Wicomb's witty historical reinvention is in full accordance with Nuttall and Michael's attempt at rereading South African culture and history, by turning the focus from the all dominant configuration of separation and stratification, to other co-existing configurations that have been neglected or denied, such as cultural fusions, intimacies and creolizations.<sup>66</sup> In her second novel, *Playing in the Light* (2006) she pursues the theme of a suppressed alternative past, by exploring a curious and absurd consequence of South African racial politics: the *play-white* phenomenon, in other words coloureds who managed to pass as whites, thereby getting access to the privileges of the Apartheid system.<sup>67</sup>

### The subjective turn

In Argentina, a crucial event that is going to have enormous importance on cultural production is the foundation in 1995 of H.I.J.O.S<sup>68</sup>, the organization of the descendents of the disappeared. This virtual and symbolic generational shift also marks a decisive change of focus with regard to the distant 1970s. The children, who have now come of age, are eager to know who their murdered parents were and to understand their political motivations. The former innocent victims suddenly turn into conscientious and committed *guerrilleros*. And the surviving militants themselves are coming forth, giving their versions of what really happened, not only during the dictatorship, but in the political process that preceded it.

The singularly most important contribution to this revision of the '70s is the three-volume work *La Voluntad* (1997, 1998), by former militant and political prisoner

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<sup>66</sup> Nuttall and Michael 2000.

<sup>67</sup> Blacks, Asians and Coloureds were the three main categories of non-whites in the hierarchical Apartheid classification system. Asians (mostly Indian) and coloureds (mixed black and white) were middle categories with a higher status than blacks. Light-skin coloureds could even "pass for whites", in which case the doors to upward social mobility suddenly opened. Skin colour was the decisive factor, and the arbitrary racial division could cut through a family.

<sup>68</sup> H.I.J.O.S. is an acronym for *Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio* (English: *Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Forgetting and Silence*). Among its methods for receiving attention and raising awareness are so called *escraches*, the tracing and pointing out of former torturers and murderers by making demonstrations outside their homes.

Eduardo Anguita, and journalist and former exile Martín Caparrós. It is a meticulously detailed documentation of the revolutionary militancy in Argentina from 1966 to '78. The very title, *The Will*, is clearly marking a distance to the view of the defeated left as mere victims of repression. It recapitulates history<sup>69</sup> in the form of several parallel and intertwined stories, based on testimonies, news articles and other contemporary documents of all kinds, from music hit charts and fashion magazines to public literary feuds and philosophical discussions. It could be described as a large-scale variation of the oral history method used by Mexican writer and journalist Elena Poniatowska in her classical account of the massacre in Tlatelolco, Mexico City, prior to the Olympic Games in 1968<sup>70</sup>. Anguita and Caparrós are also clearly connecting to a specific tradition in Latin American literature, *la crónica*, a form of 'new journalism' or 'documentary novel' which Rodolfo Walsh developed to perfection in the minor classic *Operación Masacre* (1957), about an earlier example of Argentinean state terror, in the aftermath of the toppling of the first Peronist government. But while Poniatowska and Walsh limited their investigations to one singular event, and the process that preceded it, and gathered their testimonial material shortly after it actually happened, Anguita and Caparrós are trying to recapitulate the entire Argentinean history during more than a decade. It is a totalizing effort, which resembles that of Borges' and Bioy Casares' cartographer who makes a map of the Empire in the scale 1:1.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, twenty years or more have elapsed since the narrated occurrences, and the chroniclers do not only include the voices of their informants, but also of some of those who did not

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<sup>69</sup> The subtitle, "una historia de la militancia revolucionaria", suggests that this is *one* story, not necessarily *the* story, underscoring the subjective, testimonial character. The book is based on the authors' own experience, and that of some other twenty "protagonists", many of which are well-known names in the Argentinean public sphere.

<sup>70</sup> *La Noche de Tlatelolco* (1971), eng. *Massacre in Mexico* (2007).

<sup>71</sup> The witty reference is made in Oberti and Pittaluga 2006, p. 66. The short story, "Del rigor en la ciencia", appears in *Cuentos breves y extraordinarios*, by Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, first published in 1953 (Engl. Transl. *Extraordinary Tales*, 1973).



survive, in fictional reconstructions of quotidian conversations and events. The resulting mosaic is an immensely rich source of factual information<sup>72</sup>, and it does bring the tragic fate of a generation to life. The grand scale of this unfathomable project is, in my view, its main asset, although it's hard to imagine someone reading the almost 2000 pages from beginning to end; it's perfectly possible to follow the individual stories and/or to jump back and forth in time. But there is a fundamental problem with the seamless narrative structure, which fills in the gaps where facts or testimonies are scarce or absent. In contrast to Antjie Krog's deliberate crossing and juxtaposing of genres, there is no clue to any meta-narrativity in *La Voluntad*; there may not even be awareness of the problem. This becomes especially problematic with the distance in time. As Oberti and Pittaluga note, the authors' attempt to create the illusion that the story is actually told at the time of the events gives the narrative a nostalgic and highly romanticized character. By trying to erase the time distance, they are missing the great advantage and opportunity that this same distance represents, if the events were (also) analyzed from the perspective of the present.<sup>73</sup>

This is also a core element in Beatriz Sarlo's critique of "the memory culture and subjective turn", as she calls it in her sharp and influential essay *Tiempo Pasado* (2005). While the testimonial narratives were a prime source of knowledge about the crimes of the dictatorship – and served a crucial purpose as evidence in the judicial process - these testimonies are not more reliable than other sources when it comes to occurrences that preceded the dictatorship, or that were not related to the repression. Yet these late confessants appear with the pretensions, and credentials, of truth-bearers, when in fact memory recurs to simplified narrative forms that tend to replace analysis. It is, in Sarlo's words, "more important to understand than to remember, although remembrance is also a prerequisite for understanding".<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> I used it as an invaluable resource for my novel *Santiago – Historien om Gerardo K* (2007), in which I needed exactly that kind of detail in order to give credibility to the fictional memory of my protagonist.

<sup>73</sup> Oberti and Pittaluga 2006, pp. 71-73.

<sup>74</sup> Sarlo 2005, p. 26.

In seeming contrast to Mark Sanders, Sarlo makes a sharp distinction between the testimonial and the literary, although they may share some narrative structures. The difference lies precisely in the literary imagination's distancing from the subjective memory.

“No hay equivalencia entre el derecho a recordar y la afirmación de una verdad del recuerdo; tampoco el deber de memoria obliga a aceptar esa equivalencia. Más bien, grandes líneas del pensamiento del siglo XX se han permitido desconfiar frente a un discurso de la memoria ejercido como construcción de verdad del sujeto. Y el arte, cuando no busca mimetizarse con los discursos sobre memoria que se elaboran en la academia, como sucede con algunas de las estéticas de la monumentalización y contramonumentalización del Holocausto, ha demostrado que la exploración no está encerrada sólo dentro de los límites de la memoria, sino que otras operaciones, de distanciamiento o de recuperación estética de la dimensión biográfica, son posibles.”<sup>75</sup>

One of Sarlo's examples, of a non-fictional form of such distancing, is former montonera Pilar Calveiro's dense and lucid analysis of the political implications of the concentration camps, *Poder y Desaparición* (1998). Calveiro was herself imprisoned in two of the detention centres, Mansión Serré and ESMA, but she never writes about her own experience. She tells the story of the concentration camps through the experience of others, in neutral third person and the discursive form of an academic dissertation; yet it is obvious that her own lived experience informs the text.

### **Literary estrangement**

The late '90s and early 2000s also saw the first fictional accounts by former militants and detainees. It is perhaps significant that accounts of disappearances or conditions in the concentration camps retain a documentary character and have claims on factual truth, with few exceptions. Julio Millares's novel *El Cielo No Puede Esperar* (*Heaven Can't Wait*, 1999) is fictional, but the main characters here are not the victims but the perpetrators, (who never testified to any Truth Commission); the junior officers at ESMA, the executors of banal evil, who obey orders, sometimes willingly

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., pp. 57-58.

but just as often in fear and confusion, and with gnawing pangs of conscience. Cristina Feijóo, who like Millares spent many years in exile in Sweden, is not telling the story of her time in prison, but of an episode from the revolutionary struggle preceding Perón's disastrous return; the meticulously planned attack on a high military commander in Rosario 1972. *La Casa Operativa* (The Operational House, 2006) is based on a real event, but has no documentary claims and, more importantly, does not simulate documentarism. The story of two men and two women who share a house in Rosario during the days of preparation for the operation is however realistic in every detail, from the maintenance of the firearms to the vernacular of the young protagonists. They don't know each other, and all kinds of communication that may disclose their identities, is strictly prohibited. One of the women has a child, a six-year old boy, and it is through the eyes of this boy that the story is recreated, in a narrative that integrates several layers. The boy, el Hilvan, after his nom de guerre Ivan Illich, traces Dardo, the one survivor, who tells his version without recognizing the interviewer. The distancing element is in this narrative construction, not in the story itself. There is no reflective doubt or questioning of the struggle – that would have been after-constructions – but a subtle observation of the psychological underpinnings; the suppressed emotions and sexual attractions, the conflict between revolutionary zeal and simple human needs, the secret intimacy between the two women, when they realize that they are actually sisters in law, etc.

Lately, in the last couple of years, we have also seen fictional narratives by writers who were not themselves implicated in the political events of the '70s. Martín Kohan was only nine in '76. His *Museo de la Revolución* (2006) is a fascinating attempt to, not only reconstruct but in a way also reinvigorate, the thinking and the sensibility of the '70s, by someone who is not in any way, emotionally or politically, committed or compromised. The narrator, Marcelo, is an editor at an Argentinean publishing house, visiting Mexico for business. One of his missions is to investigate a

tip about a notebook written by a disappeared Argentinean, now in the possession of an exiled Argentinean woman, Norma Rossi. Marcelo meets her at several occasions in different locations, street bars, the ruins of Teotihuacán, the house of Trotsky. She reads excerpts from the notebook for him, and notes from another book, an intimate diary, telling the story of one of his expeditions, when he travels to a small town in the province of Buenos Aires, to deliver a package to a comrade coming the other way, from Tucumán. On the bus he meets a woman, and deliberately breaks the militant's harsh code of conduct by courting her and even sharing a hotel room with her.

Museo de la Revolución is a novel of ideas. The quoted excerpts from the notebook form a fascinating essay on the revolution and its temporality – a philosophical reflection that seems somehow anachronistic and, as Marcelo comments to Norma, strangely distanced from the political reality of the time of its conception – 1975. Yet this estrangement is exactly what makes it astonishingly revealing – almost like reading the original sources – Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky – for the first time, or with new eyes: The questions of radical social change, of historical determinism, of seizing the moment to help history accomplish its necessary potential... The conceptions seem to belong to another age – to the Museum – but the questions that they are claiming to answer are as burning as ever.

In the novel, the erotic attraction between the disappeared Ruben and his casual acquaintance Fernanda Aguirre, is mirrored in the similar tension between Marcelo and Norma, and you may already guess the intrinsic way in which the two stories converge; I will not disclose it here.

### **By way of preliminary conclusion**

In South Africa, literature – and the arts in general – have played a proactive role in the transition process, mainly endorsing the new democratic government, but also taking a critical stand, deconstructing prevailing myths, rather than forging new identities.

In Argentina, I dare claim that until recently the role of literature has been reactive, at best. There are several reasons for this difference, some of which have to do with dissimilar historical contexts, others with diverse literary traditions. But the basic explanation is political. In South Africa, the former “terrorists” are now the ruling political force. The transition has implied a fundamental and irreversible change of power. In Argentina the situation is far more ambiguous. Even though the present government administration contains some former Montoneros, the armed struggle in Argentina did end in total defeat, whereas in South Africa the imminent threat of a violent revolution was a decisive factor in the negotiated agreement between the white minority government and the black majority organizations. It is certainly easier to stretch out a hand of forgiveness from a position of power, and in the conviction that this position was obtained through the struggle. In Argentina a quite common leftist view would be that the political struggle continues, and there has been little self-examination among surviving representatives of the guerrilla groups. Pilar Calveiro is the shining exception to the rule. The idea that the aged mothers and grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo – now in their eighties – or the children and grandchildren of the disappeared, who have often been politically radicalized from their infancy, would extend a hand of forgiveness to the torturers and murderers, who for the most part have never been convicted for their deeds, is almost unthinkable.

Moreover, the process of possible treatment of this national trauma, by way of a judicial process, was interrupted at an early stage, when Carlos Menem granted indemnity for the perpetrators in subordinate positions. When the legal process was reopened by the present government, the accused were old and mostly retired.

In a context where memories of the still unreconciled past are being heavily disputed, it may be crucial to make a very clear distinction between fiction and documentary and not fuse the genres. This is apparently an interesting difference between South Africa and Argentina. But from a literary point of view the distance in time may also be a necessary factor. In Argentina I believe that we may now see

the beginning of an interesting creative process, where literature and other forms of mediated fiction can play a decisive role in dismantling the still prevalent national mythologies. And that goes for South Africa as well, where the current transition remains an open process, with the whole spectrum of possible outcomes.

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