OSCAR HEMER

WRITING TRANSITION

FICTION AND TRUTH IN SOUTH AFRICA AND ARGENTINA
## Contents

Acknowledgements 5

### I. Premises

- Fiction and Truth in Transition 11
- Fiction(s) and Philosophy 18
- The Writer as Researcher 25
- Writing Ethnography 34

### II. South Africa (2007)

- Memories of a Modernity-to-be 51
- *The truth is mediated by the text; it’s not ‘out there’* 66
- Reclaiming the Public Space 74
- The Communal “We” 79
- Reinventing History 92
- *Indians and Africans were coming together* 112
- *Living here is like living on adrenaline* 118
- The Trope-of-Reconciliation 128
- *The question of race has reared its head again* 151
- Challenging the Heart of Whiteness 155
- *The truth will suggest a more meaningful reconciliation* 160
- Amazing Disgrace 171
- *Unless you can live here as a powerless minority you may just as well leave* 187

### III. Argentina (2008)

- Pillar of Salt 203
- The Fabric of Society 224
- *Literature postulates reality* 228
- Memories of a Failed Revolution 239
- *The Left ought to make a gesture of repentance* 253
- A Change of View 262
- *We were not Martians* 268
- *Narrating history is a space of combat and interchange between genres* 272
- Islands of Oblivion 276
Fiction to me is a life unlived
The Phenomenology of Disappearance
The Esma challenges our production of memory
Postmemory in Motion
Argentinean society is very self-complacent
We almost should not talk about fiction
Highway 70 Revisited
Literary fiction works the void of experience

IV By way of conclusion

Fiction and Social Change

References

The picture on the cover is from the Esma, Buenos Aires. Photo by the author
Writing Transition is the result of a four-year research project, which takes its point of departure in a simple, vast question: What can fiction tell us about the world that journalism and science cannot? The truth of fiction – if there is one – must obviously entail something other than factual truth. But how can it be assessed? This dilemma is tackled by exploring two specific cases, South Africa and Argentina, and the relationship between literary fiction and society’s dramatic transformation in the two countries over the past two or three decades.

South Africa and Argentina are both extraordinarily rich in literary production and moreover share a common experience of transition from a traumatic near past; in South Africa the system of racial segregation known as Apartheid and the culmination of violence in the “interregnum years”; in Argentina the latest military dictatorship and its “dirty war” on the militant left, which took the character of extermination.

Literature has been a means for differing attempts at looking the horrific past in the face and taking possession of history and memory. Both South Africa and Argentina abound with examples of interrogations of the present and the near past by means of fiction (or documentary forms with fictional elements) that arguably have played a proactive role in the transition process, by displaying public lies and self-deceptions, deconstructing prevailing myths rather than forging new identities.

One of the premises for the investigation has been to adopt the perspective of the author, rather than that of the academic researcher. Fifteen writers are interviewed extensively; more than “informants”, they are participants in a collaborative venture. But what does the writer’s perspective imply? Attempting, in praxis, to answer the question of fiction’s truth confronts the author with the dilemma of finding a single form that may, in some sense, be congenial with the content of the investigation. The solution to this presumably impossible dilemma is an experimental compromise: a basically discursive text that borders on both journalism and literature, incorporating reportage, essay and memoir.