The title of this paper can be read in two ways: as an assumption that the notion of ‘literary truth’ is undergoing transitional change, and/or as an investigation of literature as a truth-bearer in processes of (social) transition. Either way, I am evoking at least two problematic concepts that require a preliminary definition.

Let me start with the least problematic one: Transition. In political and economic terms ‘transition’ is normally used to describe a process of systemic change, from authoritarian rule to (liberal) democracy 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, between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the attack on World Trade Centre, the two symbolic landmarks of what may appear to be an interregnum. It is a definition that will leave out China’s dramatic transformation, and it will certainly have problems with the fate of the former federal republic of Yugoslavia, where transition to free market capitalism and multi-party democracy has meant severe degradation in both relative and absolute terms - with the possible exception of Slovenia.

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\(^1\) – but some places are more than others focal points of these transformational processes. South Africa is no doubt such a

\(^{1}\) Nederveen Pieterse 2001
focal point, where globalization has happened to coincide with late decolonization and a (virtual) qualitative leap from racist minority rule to formal 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 my other selected case, Argentina, the transition from military dictatorship to democracy in the 1980s had more character of reinstallation, since there existed a tradition of democracy, albeit weak and partial 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.

A transition hence does not necessarily imply a move from a closed society to an open one, but the transition period itself is usually a period of opening, and it is therefore especially interesting from the perspective of literary and cultural production, since the dialectic between culture and society comes in the open. Literature has, perhaps more than other forms of expression, an 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 Africa². Or rewriting history – even writing history for the first time, exploring material that has been left untouched, waiting to be narrated.

The other, even more problematic concept is of course ‘truth’. I am neither a philosopher nor a scholar in comparative literature, and I have no pretension to

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² Attwell 2005
contribute to the quite specialized discussion on fiction and truth in the field of literary aesthetics, bordering on both philosophy and literary studies\(^3\). 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\(^4\). ‘Truth’ in its political implementation is closely linked to the concept of Human Rights, which, in Richard Wilson’s words, has become “the archetypal language of democratic transition”\(^5\). 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 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.\(^6\) ‘Truth’ is often explicitly defined in these instrumental terms, and the rhetoric of nationalism is widely and uncritically accepted in the literature on truth commissions, with abundant references to concepts such as

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\(^5\) Wilson 2001, p. 1

‘collective memory’ or ‘national psyche’. 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. 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. 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 only 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. 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”. This 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

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7 Wilson 2001, p. 15.
8 Ibid., p. 16.
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. 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 confessed to having been a police informer while militating as a left-wing student leader in the 1970s. Like the repenting former Stasi agents of the GDR, he received little sympathy for his “showdown with himself” 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), his first novel after the democratic elections and certainly the most intriguing novel of the early post-Apartheid era.

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:

10 Nuttall 1998

11 The address was given on 4 July 1996 in the conference *Faultlines – Inquiries around Truth and Reconciliation*.

12 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.)
mind: “to reduce the number of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse”\textsuperscript{13}. 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”.\textsuperscript{14}

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 compelling narratives – narratives that literally embody the trope-of-truth\textsuperscript{15} 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.

\textsuperscript{13} Original quote in “Articles of Faith”, \textit{Index on Censorship}, 5/96. Ignatieff has repeated it in other wording in for example the introduction to photographer Jillian Edelstein’s remarkable documentation of the TRC, \textit{Truth & Lies} (2001), p. 20.

\textsuperscript{14} Pigou 2002, in Posel & Simpson, p. 60.

\textsuperscript{15} The term coined by Louise Bethlehem to describe the prevailing realist norm of literature under apartheid, assuming a mimetic realationship between literature and reality and seeing ‘truth’telling’ as a literary obligation. Bethlehem 2006, pp. 1-3.
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”.

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), is in fact a re-telling in semi-fictional form of the TRC procedure.

**A new genre**

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

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16 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 shortcoming is not clear. I wouldn’t.

17 My references are to the English edition from 1999, which includes an epilogue written after the delivery of the TRC Report.
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 the account of her attempt at finding a form to look
Apartheid in the face – as opposed to the failure of German writers to look the
Holocaust in the face (with the result that it was taken over by Hollywood). Some,
understandably fed up with white soul-searching and guilt, might dismiss her whole
enterprise as just another – futile, if not false – effort by a tiny (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.18

“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 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 journales of it.”19

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 reconstruction20. Literature after apartheid hence becomes primarily a matter

19 Herwitz 2003, p. 11.
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.”

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. This is what exceeds the ‘mere memorial reconstruction’ and 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 - is her husband. But now she is travelling with the Commission, away 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

21 Ibid., p. 150.

22 Ibid., p. 149.

23 Krog 1999, p. 39
evicted. It, in fact, makes her experience the symptoms of the victims. 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. 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. 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.

**Writing the City and reinventing History**
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 Durban’s Cato Manor, the

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*24 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)*

*25 As she explains in my interview with her below, all the fictional elements of *Country of My Skull* are basically forms of protecting particular people.*
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 reinvention of history. This may imply a reassessment of the alleged parenthesis of Apartheid, but it may also go further back, to the early history of the Cape colony - sometimes by putting new wine in old bottles, so to speak.

In Agaat (2004, eng. Transl. 2006), Marlene Van Niekerk is shedding new light on the recent past by reinventing an existing, yet discredited and abandoned genre, the farm novel. The story of a modern African farm during and after Apartheid, with the political changes at national level mirrored in the parochial microcosm of the homestead and the somewhat inverted relationships between the household members, is surely one of the lasting South African novels of the this decade.

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. 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 the history of the Cape colony. 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.

The Griqua 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. David’s Story gives a fragmented reconstruction of the various Griqua migrations and settlements from the early 19th 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”.

In its general outlines, and details, the novel’s historical account is faithful to documented fact. But David and his narrator distort the picture by insinuating a connection between the Griqua genealogy and “the father of biology”, Georges Cuvier. The professor of animal anatomy at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris is in South Africa mostly known as the one who brought Saartje Baartman to Europe. Advertised as “the Hottentot Venus” and displayed in a cage, she toured Europe as an ethnological museum exhibit. After her early death, Saartje Baartman’s genitals, brain and skeleton were put on display at Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1974, when they were removed to a back room. One of Nelson Mandela’s first requests as the new president of South Africa was that France return the remains. The French National Assembly finally acceded to the request in 2002 (two years after the publishing of Wicomb’s novel).

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26 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.

27 Wicomb 1998

28 Madame Le Fleur, a protestant Huguenot escaping catholic persecution, actually arrived in South Africa already in 1688, but by erasing a century Wicomb makes her the housekeeper of Georges Cuvier and her son Eduard presumably Cuvier’s illegitimate son. Since David’s own grandmother is the illegitimate daughter of Andrew Le Fleur, David may himself be a Cuvier descendent.

29 Baartman’s case gained world-wide reputation after it was rediscovered by biologist Stephen Jay Gold in the essay collection *The Flamingo’s Smile : Reflections in natural history* (1985).
If the return of Saartje Baartman’s remains was “one of several initiatives towards reconstructing a national cultural past”30, Wicomb’s witty historical reinvention rather aims at deconstructing the national myths. Her quite deliberate purpose 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.31 The imaginative closure – South Africa’s self-image as a closed space and a place apart – has prevailed after Apartheid, in spite of the new openings. Although the anti-Apartheid struggle was marked by a non-racial ethos, it emphasized the very segregation as a means of generating support. And in the new nation of the transition, the complex configurations of hybridity and syncretism remain masked, now by the foregrounding of an over-simplified discourse of ‘rainbow nationalism’.32

Wicomb’s reinvention of history by means of fiction makes David’s Story a drama of ideas rather than a ‘historical novel’, but, fictional as it is, her reinterpretation is nonetheless also in accordance with recent rewritings of the early colonial history. 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.

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32 Ibid.
Now, when I turn to Argentina, my observations are not as elaborate, since I have only recently started to work on this material. But I believe that some provisional conclusions can be made.

Argentina’s 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, when Argentina’s disastrous defeat in the Falklands War had brought the most brutal military dictatorship in the country’s history to an end and parliamentary democracy was restored. In the military Junta’s systematic campaign to wipe out left-wing “terrorism”, more than 12,000 were “disappeared”33, after passing through illegal detention centers, where they were interrogated and tortured before being killed and disposed of; many were sedated and dumped alive from airplanes into the South Atlantic. The commission, headed by writer Ernesto Sábato, presented its report Nunca Más (Never Again) in 1984, based on the testimonies of surviving detainees and relatives of the disappeared, and a thorough inventory of the clandestine detention centers, which were spread all over the country and often located in urban or suburban surroundings, to the knowledge and warning of the neighbours.

The report was used as key evidence in the trial of the military Junta leaders in 1985. It was translated to Hebrew, English, German, Italian and Portuguese and its many subsequent editions had in November 2007 reached a sale of incredible 500,000

33 The CONADEP report, Nunca Más, estimated the number of disappeared, at the time of its publication in 1984, to 8,960. Between 2,000 and 3,000 more disappearances from the 1976-1983 period have been reported after the completion of the commission’s work, bringing the reported number to nearly 12,000 cases, although there has been no official revision of the CONADEP report’s estimate. Many cases have however never been reported, and human rights organizations estimate the number of “disappeared” to be at least 15,000. In addition a significant number of people fell victim to para-military groups who operated with encouragement and support of the Army and Police prior to and during the military dictatorship. Moreover, many alleged terrorists were killed in “confrontations”, a euphemism widely used for the cases in which bodies were returned to the families. Adding these to the disappeared brings the total number of casualties in the Argentinean “dirty war” to estimates ranging from 20,000 to 30,000.
copies.\textsuperscript{34} It has served as a model for to date nine subsequent truth commissions all over Latin America, from Chile to Guatemala; most of them have also adopted the brand Nunca Más\textsuperscript{35}

**Double demonization**

However, the report allegedly also served to cement what has later been labeled “the theory of the two demons”. Already in the first sentence of the foreword, Sábato states that “Argentina in the ’70s has been seized by a terror that comes from both the extreme left and the extreme right”. 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 other evil.\textsuperscript{36} A parallel is made to Italy, where the government had refrained from extralegal methods in combating the Red Brigades, even when such measures might have saved the life of the kidnapped political leader Aldo Moro. Sábato quotes General Della Chiesa’s famous statement that “Italy can permit herself to lose Aldo Moro, but never to implement torture”.\textsuperscript{37} This double demonization, which acquitted the general public of any guilt or complicity, has later been harshly contested, but it has remained the predominant interpretation of a troubled and shameful near-past. In conjunction with the likewise prevailing Human Rights discourse of the 1980s, this “exorcism” also served to turn the disappeared into

\begin{footnotes}
\item[34] The translated versions constitute some 45.000 of these. Crenzel 2008, p. 18.
\item[35] Ibid.
\item[37] Ibid.
\item[38] In the latest edition of Nunca Más, for the 30\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the military coup, 2006, a second foreword was added, to the furor of some of the members of the commission. (see article in La Nacion, 19 May 2006)
\end{footnotes}
(innocent) victims, with idealistic, if any, political motivations, and depriving the military Junta’s extermination policy of both historical antecedents and context.

The immediate literary impact of Nunca Más was negligible. The comprehensive report in itself was of course widely read, in contrast to the five volumes of the TRC report, and could in a sense be regarded as an epilogue to Sábatо’s own last novel *Abbadon – el ángel exterminador* (1974), which in retrospect appears as a premonition of the coming disaster. But, although there was no formal censorship, repression of the arts had been far more severe in Argentina during the “dirty war” than in South Africa at any time, and many prominent writers, like Haroldo Conti and Rodolfo Walsh, were among the disappeared. Walsh, the author of a classic of political literature and a precedent of new journalism, *Operacion Masacre* (1957), had a few days before his death in 1977, for the anniversary of the military coup, written an open letter to the Junta which was one of the first explicit allegations of the systematic state terror. Other writers had escaped the turmoil and lived in exile. Manuel Puig, who was not a political writer at all, wrote *the* allegorical novel of the military dictatorship, *El Beso de la Mujer Araña* (*The Spider-Woman’s Kiss*, 1976), about a homosexual and a guerrilla warrior in prison. In Argentina, the single most important novel that was published during the dictatorship was undoubtedly *Respiración Artificial* (1980) by Ricardo Piglia, which courageously, although indirectly, alluded to the reign of terror. In addition to its literary qualities, its great merit was that it was written - and read - while the atrocities were happening.

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39 *Carta de un escritor a la Junta Militar*, 1977. Walsh was injured to death when captured by the action group. His dead body was seen by surviving witnesses at the infamous detention centre at ESMA (The Mechanical School of The Navy).
From victims to militants
After the restoration of democracy, however, writers seemed to take little interest in the recent history. A new generation even openly rejected the strongly politicized culture of the ‘70s which preceded and, in the view of many, produced the disaster. Rodrigo Fresán’s *Historia Argentina* (1992) is an ironic and distanced showdown with an alleged national culture of complaint and nostalgia. 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 defiant postmodernism of the ‘80s in Europe. It is only in the late part of the ‘90s that a revision of the ’70s is starting to emerge, now with the intent to reconstruct and understand the political positions. Former militant and political prisoner Eduardo Anguita, and journalist Martín Caparrós, who was in exile during the dictatorship, make a ground-breaking investigation of the history of the revolutionary militancy in Argentina from 1966 to ‘78 in an exceptional three-volume work, *La Voluntad* (1997, 1998). The very title, *The Will*, is clearly marking a distance to the view of the defeated left as mere victims of repression. It tells the story in meticulous detail, through testimonies, news articles and other contemporary documents of all kinds, from music hit charts and fashion magazines to literary feuds and philosophical discussions. It is a large-scale variation of the oral history method used by Mexican writer and journalist Elena Poniatowska in her classical account of the massacre of demonstrating students and workers in Mexico City, prior to the Olympic Games in 1968. The resulting mosaic of true stories brings the tragic fate of a generation to astonishing life. *La Voluntad* is more than mere documentation. It is a *crónica* in the tradition of Walsh, faithful to the real events, but structuring the stories in a narrative which sometimes fills in the gaps where facts or testimonies are scarce or absent.

Unlike South Africa, there was not an abundance of testimonies. Few had survived the horrors of the detention camps, and those who had were often too traumatized to write about their experience. But one remarkable testimony from the infamous ESMA appeared in 2000, by former Montonera Susana Ramús. She resisted the torture and the rapes by making herself insensitive, alienated from herself, “trapped in the pain” (atrapada en el dolor), as she puts it. Another survivor, Pilar Calveiro, writes her experience in third person, as one of the most lucid analyses of the political implications of the concentration camps, *Poder y Desaparición* (1998).

The late ‘90s also saw the first fictional accounts by former militants and detainees. Swedish resident Julio Millares's novel *El Cielo No Puede Esperar* (*Heaven Can’t Wait*, 1999), chooses to represent the dirty war from the perspective of the perpetrators (who never testified to any Truth Commission). It tells the horrific story of “the school” (ESMA) and it is not the generals but the junior officers who are at the centre of interest; the foot-soldiers, the executors of banal evil, those who obey orders, sometimes willingly but just as often in fear and confusion, and with gnawing pangs of conscience. The fragmentary format creates an almost claustrophobic feeling of presence, and the style is marked by restrained terseness. Millares speaks with the moral authority of one who has survived, and whether the characters are modelled on real people or not seems completely irrelevant. But 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 may in fact be an interesting

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41 Escuela Mecánica de la Armada, the Navy’s mechanical school, was the main detention centre, where up to 5,000 people were tortured and put to death. The ESMA is now being turned into a museum, *Museo de la Memoria*.

42 Montoneros was the main left-wing Peronist organization, which in the course of the 1970s was radicalized and resorted to armed struggle, in alliance with revolutionary Marxist organizations such as FAR (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias) and ERP (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo).
difference between South Africa and Argentina. In any case this is a matter of very sensitive balancing.

**Second generation**

The change of perspective, from the passive (innocent) victim to the active (committed) militant, coincides with the foundation in 1995 of H.I.J.O.S\(^43\), the organization of the children of the “disappeared”, and many of the books and films, fiction and non-fiction, that have been made in the last decade, are written or directed by this second generation, in attempts to understand the motivations of their dead parents.

Lately, in the last couple of years, we have also seen fictional narratives by well-established writers who were not themselves implicated in the political events of the ’70s – at least not directly. Guillermo Saccomanno is old enough to have experienced the terror, and he manages in his novel 77 (2008) to evoke the nightmarish, suffocating, almost surreal sense of fear and suspicion, with the green Ford Falcon’s circling in the streets, searching for prey. Interestingly enough his main protagonist is a teacher in his fifties, belonging to the parent generation of the young militants\(^44\). He bears traumatic memories from his youth in the ‘50s, the time of the previous military coup, against populist Juan Perón’s first regime, and this juxtaposing of the generational experiences adds a interesting historical dimension to the multi-layered narrative. Another striking feature is the occult element in the novel’s apocalyptic atmosphere, which may be less far-fetched than it seems. The grey eminence of Isabel Perón’s gloomy cabinet, and the secret commander of the AAA\(^45\) death squads, José López Rega, was an astrologer. And,

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\(^{43}\) 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 the tracing and pointing out of former torturers and murderers by making demonstrations outside their homes.

\(^{44}\) The majority of the disappeared were in their twenties or early thirties.

\(^{45}\) Alianza Anticomunista Argentina, commonly known as ‘la triple A’, was the most famous of the para-military groups that operated before and during the military regime ...*.
as the narrator only half-jokingly states: “He who did not think magically at the time, may he throw the first amulet!”

Martín Kohan was only nine in 1976, the year of the military coup. His *Museo de la Revolución* (2006) is a fascinating attempt to, not only reconstruct but in a way also reivindicative, 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.

*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 conceptions of radical rupture, of historical determinism, of seizing the moment to help history accomplish its necessary potential, seem indeed to belong to another age – to the Museum of the Revolution – 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, 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 party. The transition has implied a fundamental and irreversible change of political 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 (class) struggle continues, and there has been little self-examination among surviving representatives of the guerrilla groups. 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.
This has also to do with the character and magnitude of the crimes against humanity. With the possible exception of the “ethnical cleansing” of Bosnian Muslims in the mid 1990s, Argentina’s extermination policy is the closest copy we have yet seen in the West to the Nazi Holocaust. Its nearest contemporary comparison was the Cambodia of the Khmer Rouge. (The neighbouring military dictatorships in Chile and Uruguay were humane in comparison. The only Latin American equivalent, in terms of murderous repression, would be Guatemala, where the systematic practice of disappearances was introduced already in the 1950s – but never as intensely and efficiently as by the Argentinean junta in the first two years of its regime, 1976–78.) 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.

But from a literary point of view this distance in time may also be a necessary factor. In Argentina I believe that we are now seeing the beginning of an interesting creative process, where literature and other forms of mediated fiction can play a decisive role in dismantling the 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.
References


