

Factual/Fictional Eye-Witnessing of the Political Transition in South Africa – Mike Nicol’s *The Waiting Country: A South African Witness*

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Abstract. This paper concerns Mike Nicol’s memoir *The Waiting Country*, in which the author positions himself as an eyewitness of dramatic and outstanding events going on in South Africa before and during the elections of 1994. The primary goal the author assumes is to interpret the time of the political transition, hence his insistence on the legitimization of storytelling. In the text one finds, as explained by Nicol “[s]tories [he] ha[s] taken in and made part of what it is to live here. Stories [he] use[s] to depict [...] what is happening and what [he] think[s] is happening” (Nicol 1995: 12). Through a mosaic of cross-racial and literary viewpoints his text takes on the guise of a sincere and serious attempt at understanding the troubled South African self, both in its individual and collective dimension, and explaining that self to others. Nicol’s factual/fictional version of the country’s historical moment depicts the mixed feelings of exhilaration and anxiety everyone seems to have felt on the threshold of this fundamental, systemic change.

Keywords: post-apartheid South Africa; democratic elections; memoir; referential writing; the past vs. the future; factual and fictional writing

Endorsing the momentous decisions made at the beginning of the 1990s, in 1994 South Africans received a chance to participate in the country’s first truly democratic elections. This time as evidently marked by confusion, uncertainty

and anxiety, concurrently signaled hope and boundless enthusiasm shared by illiterates and highbrows alike; hardly any took an indifferent stance on the contemporary state of affairs. Mike Nicol, a South African poet and novelist, was among those who wholeheartedly supported, albeit with serious reservations, the political agenda in result of which the Republic of South Africa was to throw off the shackles of apartheid. His individual contribution to the democratization of the country, apart from depositing a marked ballot, was writing a memoir. Nicol dubbed himself “a South African Witness” who – not claiming any universally valid viewpoint – sought his compatriots’ and other men of letters’ assistance in rendering most comprehensively the atmosphere of those exceptional months and days that preceded and followed the 1994 election.

Given the composite style of Nicol’s memoir,¹ the weight of his authorial account should be juxtaposed with a certain theoretical conceptualization of documentary writing. As Laura Marcus indicates in *Auto/biographical Discourses*, any texts of revelatory character, and memoirs undoubtedly undergo such categorization, must be evaluated in terms of their “sincerity” and seriousness (Marcus 1994: 2). Conditioned by these two factors, an author of [auto]biographies or memoirs is expected to endeavor “[...] to understand the self and to explain [most honestly] that self to others” (Marcus 1994: 2). Interestingly, in the case of Nicol’s narrative, the individual, personal dimension corresponds to or even gives way to the collective realm. In fact, it is the South African self at the moment of political transition which comes to the fore as construed, explained but also *imagined* by the author himself. Attentive to the postmodern dictum, however, Nicol decrees a neutral and objective rendering of the actual/real as less valid and in need of completion. In light of the above, it becomes apparent that he acknowledges the subjective/performative perspective governing all possible accounts which bear witness to important socio-political events. This narrative framework seems to be sanctioned by the fact that as often as not stories of a ‘documentary’ character, as maintained by Ryszard Nycz, combine factuality with “performativity” (Nycz 2006: 64). In other words, the fictional component is not so much extraordinary as acceptable, or even expected, as part of referential

¹ As shall be proven, Nicol’s memoir has a compound structure. It is a composite of elements drawn from different registers. There are observations made by common people, but also by some eminent figures of South African politics and culture, and there are a number of excerpts that come from other literary texts. Overall, Nicol has created a mosaic of voices which are to testify to the unprecedented character of the 1994 democratic watershed.

writing.² In this context, the question is to what extent Nicol has managed to bring us closer to the core of the South African mental state dominant at the time of the democratic elections; whether by references to a number of different voices, either fictional or non-fictional, we are able to recognize in his story the afore-mentioned seriousness and its character; and finally, given that *The Waiting Country* is based on intersecting narratives, whether a certain coherence within the story on democratizing South Africa is noticeable.³

Taking into account all the different 'tales-of-hearsay' in Nicol's memoir, the [hi]story he is telling oscillates between two predominant emotional states, namely hope and fear/unease. These general sentiments are echoed by different individual voices, and it is exactly the anxiety and optimism which give coherence to Nicol's narrative on the contemporary South African self. As if to concur with Cornelius Castoriadis's concept of "social imaginary significations," Nicol diagnoses the contemporary South African disposition as unified and cohesive due to the aforementioned "web of [dual] meanings that permeate, orient, and direct the life of the society, as well as the concrete individuals that [...] constitute it" (Castoriadis 1997: 7).⁴ The euphoric character of the events happening before and after the voting of 1994 did not erase from South African collective memory the omnipresent violence and injustice of the past which begot suffering and uncertainty at that juncture. On the other hand, the public at that point, either because or in spite of the past traumas, wanted to believe in a better future, and subsequently put a lot of effort into trying to find in themselves the ability "to do good" (Nicol 1995: 147). Overall, if the national landscape Nicol comments on could be personified, we would have a doppelganger character whose two different phases appear as both sinister and comforting at the same time.

² According to Małgorzata Czermińska, a factor symptomatic of memoir writing is blurring of the boundary lines between the factual and literary (Czermińska 2000: 15). Such texts tend to contain a combination of elements of documentary value and personal commentary. The former make memoirs a part of writing labeled as non-fictional, aimed at objectivization of the real. The latter gives prominence to individual and subjective observations designating memoirs as fictional. This theoretical presupposition is relevant insofar as it underscores the meaning of individual perspective to be found in various [hi]stories which take the key moment of the South African political transition as theme. With the benefit of hindsight it is clear that the evaluation of that transitional stage is more complete with the historical and personal narratives interwoven. Such was also André Brink's reasoning when he called on writers "to keep a diary of that day and send it to the publisher as soon as possible after the event [...] here was an opportunity for writers to test their word against, arguably, the most remarkable moment in their history" (Brink quoted in O'Brien 2001: 10).

³ Marcus underlines the fact that "coherence" in such texts is of utmost importance as it constitutes "the criterion of truth" (Marcus 1994: 152). At the same time, the truth is perceived as subjective.

⁴ As Cornelius Castoriadis underlines, it is legitimate to construe a given society in terms of its inherent cohesiveness as long as it "struggles over the same, or common, objects" (Castoriadis 1997: 7). The South African context indicates that all constituents of the society do contend with the legacy of apartheid.

The point of departure for Nicol's narrative is of course the time of the elections. People he encounters on his way are of different ethnic descent and represent different social strata. Interviewed on how they feel about celebrating their democratic rights, people like Philip, "a petrol-pump attendant," give the most prosaic response: "This is good. This is very good" (Nicol 1995: 24-25). In Nicol's eyes, Philip's answer, although laconic, matters significantly: "What he meant, *I think*, was a feeling that cannot be articulated [...]. It contained in it a moment that was like a stone but also was tender: a moment that was good" [emphasis mine - R.B.] (Nicol 1995: 25). This uncertainty as to the ultimate meaning of this individual experience, and to the ambiguity of his authorial interpretation is important inasmuch as it makes Nicol refer to other people's private stories and opinions in order to compose a mosaic of senses defining the implication of the democratic change. Thinking of the South African mental landscape and its multifarious character, the author puts stock in story-telling as it enables him to "explain and interpret what is happening or what [he] think[s] is happening" (Nicol 1995: 12). This multidimensional character of selected [hi]stories has a bearing on the profundity of Nicol's personal observations. His objective was to "arrange these fragments into a form" that constitutes "footnotes to a history of these days" (Nicol 1995: 12). In the light of Pierre Bourdieu's belief that "each writer sees himself accorded a determinate set of legitimate possibles [...] offered at a given moment in time" (Bourdieu 1996: 260), Nicol - to avoid the threat of overconfidence - applies the formula of the miscellany of voices to his text. So, as indicated above, within this narrative framework, the first thing to be recognized is a general air of jubilation. The ecstasy of freedom, experienced by individual South Africans, seems to have created favorable conditions for a sense of concord and cooperation to arise. As one of Nicol's friends recounts, after the vote she "felt so good [that] on the way back home [she] drove past a woman walking" and although she never stops, this time she did. She "thought, No, not today. So [she] turned around and went back and picked her up and drove her home" (Nicol 1995: 29). Neighbors, previously caught in a circle of distrust, begin to see the future as promising. Mutual animosity has a chance to sink into oblivion.

Suggestive of the groundbreaking nature of these events is one of Nicol's textual references; interestingly, it is J. M. Coetzee's 1990 novel *Age of Iron*. Attempting to portray the current mindset, Nicol draws our attention to an excerpt from Coetzee's text wherein we find a contrasting picture of aversion

and revolt as something seething under the surface of the South African soil.⁵ Against this landscape of intense aversion and dislike, against this context of permanent unrest and anxiety, “where most of the stories that were told made up a narrative of violence,” Nicol announces the miraculous character of the peaceful revolution: “how else could such moments of good will be seen, if not as miracles? How else, indeed?” (Nicol 1995: 90). To underline how exhilarating the situation on the election day was, and yet how apprehensive of the consequences the people were a day after, he puts his narrative in yet another literary context. First, he shows how the great enthusiasm and ardent hopes of South Africans seem to blur the distinction between reality and dream: “We drank endless cups of coffee. [...] And we felt [...] that we were fighting a pressure that would tear us away into oblivion if we missed the slightest news. And yet I cannot remember much more than insignificant details. They were days out of time” (Nicol 1995: 30). Second, the comment on being as if suspended in time is a counterpoint to the pro-democratic fervor elsewhere in the text. Looking forward to the long-awaited moment of democratic resolution and the shared enthusiasm of the final results, people simultaneously feel anxious and uncertain. In order to highlight this particular emotion Nicol decides to draw on Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* in which the unbearable atmosphere of anticipation, felt in a void of time and space, is marked by a promise of change, and a murky change at that one could add.⁶

The matter of concern is why this tension and uncertainty would come to the fore even after hearing out Nelson Mandela’s address to the nation wherein he utters the unforgettable words: “Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world. Let freedom reign” (quoted in Nicol 1995: 69). The answer to the posed question is deeply rooted in the history of apartheid. The South African world, as remembered by Nicol and his like, had always been perceived as atrocious. Unlike the future disposition, the contemporary mindset resonates with past memories, bearing the imprint of apartheid horrors and constraints. Therefore, any reservations concerning that which was to come could not take one by surprise.

⁵ The fragment Nicol alludes to reads as follows: “Let me tell you, when I walk upon this land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon Black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, waiting for my feet to pass, waiting for me to go, waiting to be raised up again” (Coetzee 1990: 125).

⁶ The change as underpinned by uncertainty and postponement Nicol illustrates through a chosen dialogue of Vladimir and Estragon: “Vladimir: Let’s wait and see what he says. / Estragon: Who? / Vladimir: Godot. / Estragon: Good idea. / Vladimir: Let’s wait till we know exactly how we stand. / Estragon: On the other hand it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes. / Vladimir: I’m curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we’ll take it or leave it” (Beckett 1965: 18).

Nicol discovers the grounds for his personal anxiety immediately after Mandela's inauguration. Having read a review by R.W. Johnson,⁷ he underlines a dissonance between the rejoicings of the crowd on the day democracy won and the reviewer's 'beforehand' lack of enthusiasm concerning the upcoming change. What Nicol finds disturbing in Johnson's diagnosis is the fact that the latter shows no inclination to foresee a peaceful transition or an immediate crackdown on the policy of violence. According to Johnson, the ruthlessness of the former South African socio-political landscape is bound to resurface in the post-apartheid society. So too does Nicol begin to doubt the tactic of drawing a broad line and cutting off from the burden of the past since, as he writes, "we could not start history again: we were part of it and lived in it, and we had to deal with it every day of our lives" (Nicol 1995: 93). Both of them, in fact, realize there is no chance for a general consensus about 'dissecting' that which was. Moreover, against this background of historical reexamination, serious tensions in public opinion begin to emerge. Many a time one could hear how vital it is, of course for the sake of the 'beloved country,' to bring down the curtain on the pains of history. In a nutshell, a considerable number of people, representatives of the old regime in particular, claim that the problem of the South African past can be resolved on one condition that people would be capable of 'forgetting.' At odds with this controversial standpoint, Nicol quotes the views expressed by two eminent political figures, namely, Judge Richard Goldstone⁸ and Vaclav Havel. The former, analyzing the situation in post-apartheid South Africa, points to "a compelling temptation to forget the past" (Goldstone quoted in Nicol 1995: 182). At the same time, he defies that kind of symbolic order which endorses collective amnesia, in fact finding it "unacceptable [and] a recipe for national discontent" (Goldstone quoted in Nicol 1995: 182). Calling on the latter's opinion, the author underlines that "[w]hoever fears to look his own past in the face must necessarily fear what is to come" (Havel quoted in Nicol 1995: 182). Turning into the past, Nicol appears to be claiming, unavoidably means bringing to light the nasty and the horrible as remembered both on the collective and individual level. As Paul Ricoeur accentuates, "the past once experienced is indestructible" (Ricoeur 2006: 445). Therefore, any anxieties over the legacy of apartheid must be coped with openly, effectively, painfully and without delay in democratic South Africa.

Not to linger within this highly intellectual and politicized framework, Nicol considers the correlation between the past and present and inserts in his narrative the history of a mixed South African couple's predicament. Their life-

⁷ R.W. Johnson is a South African journalist and historian.

⁸ Richard Goldstone, as presented by Nicol, investigated political crimes committed during apartheid. More precisely, between 1991-1994 he chaired the Commission of Inquiry Regarding Public Violence and Intimidation, the so-called Goldstone Commission (see <<http://www.whoswhosa.co.za/richard-goldstone-942>>).

story proves that the new socio-political equilibrium cannot be derived from the widespread euphoric jubilation people feel during and just after the election, but rather that the traumatic experiences of the pre-democratic period are to resonate into the present. The nature of this particular relationship corresponds to the difficulties the post-apartheid nation encounters on its way to potential peace and stability. Emma and Howard are of different racial descent. She is white and he is colored. As Nicol relates, “[t]wo years after their marriage they were divorced and they have not remarried. They live together, and have two children, and Emma is pregnant again. [...] They have sometimes broken apart, swearing to go their separate ways, but their ways have always converged again” (Nicol 1995: 53). Analogous to this couple’s condition is the state of the South African nation, unchangeably divided and suffering from differences. Officially, however, people are being encouraged not to perceive diversity as fearsome, as potentially leading to new divides or further acts of hostility. The general policy is to make out of this disparity a cultural asset which can solidify ‘the rainbow nation.’⁹ Having studied the story of Emma and Howard, Nicol begins to sense that the guiding principle being promoted is too sanguine.

Before giving Emma and Howard an opportunity to tell their story, he lets us know that their voices should not be overlooked, not least because they indicate the detrimental effects recent history has had on the people of South Africa. After the election, Howard and Emma’s reaction to the democratic verdict appears rather halfhearted. Unlike many of their compatriots, they are alert to the predicament of living here and now after the political change. Theirs is a story of differences, divisions, even conflicts, echoing the past and so entrenched that they appear almost ineradicable. Whether divides are bridgeable in democratic South Africa may seem a rhetorical question, given what Howard and Emma have to say about socializing before 1994: “our friends have never mixed; either we go into my world or we go into Emma’s world. It’s as if they can’t mix because they are from such different worlds, they do different things, they even think differently. This puts a tremendous strain on a relationship” (Nicol 1995: 57). Neither of them sounds very enthusiastic as their mentality has been molded by the formula of separation. Howard is anxious about the future, fearing the difficulties in doing away with the legacy of apartheid: “It took four years to establish [it]; it’s going to take four thousand years to demolish it. What we’ve got to do is sort out our lives,

⁹ Interestingly enough, a decade later this overoptimistic project began to crumble. The nation’s multicolored/multiracial configuration, initially perceived as working to its benefit, re-emerged as its handicap. In 2003 Melissa Steyn comes up with a reversed and rather gloomy image of the rainbow nation. According to her, this concept in fact “accentuates the extremes of disparity within the population and by implication the bizarreness of notions of current or potential unity. [...] The rainbow nation is an absurd nation. Disrepair and disintegration are everywhere evident” (Steyn 2003: 242).

make ourselves strong" (Nicol 1995: 58). Emma, on the other hand, feels anxious and uncertain about what comes next: "our relationship has lasted ten years and during those ten years we've moved from white to colored areas. We've tried this and tried that and there has always been some sort of trauma" (Nicol 1995: 63). Their two voices are then indicative of the more permanent character of the rifts among the population. Their reminiscences are to prove that former political/ethnic disagreements have left deep wounds that even time may not heal.¹⁰

Many South Africans would like to see the divides and violence of the apartheid era as the remote past. On this wave of enthusiasm a certain tendency to see the wrongs of the past as receding can be observed. Following the inauguration ceremony, even Nicol seems to have – at least temporarily – succumbed to the temptation to see the old order crushed. Politically speaking, apartheid as a system of power was finished. Given that, the author's excitement concerning the groundbreaking character of the election is understandable. On the wave of this collective elation, Nicol recalls the historic events of 1976¹¹ in order to suggest the inherent fallibility of the regime. Drawing on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and minding Conrad's words and phrases, Nicol argues that after the Soweto Uprising a number of white people realized that a system founded on fundamental injustice could not last. They did not tend to see other races as 'shadows,' as "'a swirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling'" (Conrad quoted in Nicol 1995: 71).¹² As if in conclusion, Nicol asserts that "after 1976 this narrative of separateness was shattered: it was suddenly very clear that the other world was not another world at all" (Nicol 1995: 71). However, as has been said before, throughout the whole text, hopes and high emotionalism begin to blend with, later to be overshadowed by, a more sound and in fact a more disturbing analysis of the situation in post-apartheid South Africa.

¹⁰ In the end the reader is left with a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, they claim they would have to leave the country. Howard explains: "I don't think we can bear living with this country as it goes through the changes. It might sound defeatist. But it's going to kill us" (Nicol 1995: 64). On the other hand, the very last words coming from Emma concern Mandela and their meaning might suggest that the finality of their decision is not so finite: "I trust Mandela. I believe in him. But I am very unsure about the party. They promised so much. [...] Mandela's an honest man" (Nicol 1995: 65).

¹¹ During that year, in June, the first serious uprising took place in Soweto. It is interesting to see how André Brink described the momentous character of those events in his book *Writing in a State of Siege*. According to him, the eruption of resistance took place as the system of "apartheid, conceived initially as an experiment in survival by a small group threatened from all sides, [finally] turn[ed] into a Frankenstein" (Brink 1983: 128).

¹² It seems vital to consider the Conradian picture of separateness as formulated in his novella: "But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the drop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy" (Conrad 1999: 63).

In a newspaper cutting, that Nicol quotes, we read about an atrocious act of violence committed upon the family of a building contractor. Both the wife and her husband were burnt alive. A mob of enraged people “hung three petrol-filled tires round her neck [and] doused him with [gasoline]” (Nicol 1995: 103) and eventually set them on fire. Nicol fears that a population nurtured on hostility and aggression have begun to regard violence as part and parcel of their everyday existence. “It permeates and perverts the way we think of one another. It destroys the social contract that binds us.” Further, he explains the need to include in his narrative such expressions as “killing, brutal, hate and revenge” (Nicol 1995: 103). South Africa after the systemic transformation is still perceived as one of those countries which are in “extreme turmoil and distress” (Nicol 1995: 103). Such circumstances compel Nicol to highlight the suffering of the nation. The disquieting words and phrases are to “show how violence has become so generalized that we do not understand it until it is rendered in detailed language” (Nicol 1995: 103). Elaborating on some gruesome details, the author comments on the policy of revenge to replace it with the policy of forgiveness. However, forgiveness still seems unworkable in South Africa, he claims, for conscious remembering has not yet become a serious alternative to the policy of escapist memory loss.

Nicol argues that the South African collective and individual memory archive should reside in both glorious and disgraceful moments of the past. Within this context, forgiveness cannot be treated as “a way of dispensing with a horror which really cannot be buried” (Nicol 1995: 186). People must remember the facts that have constituted their mental landscape, even if there is no mention of forgiveness. On the other hand, their refusal to forgive cannot be tantamount to “seek[ing] revenge. Revenge is too simplistic and tends to encourage further violence” (Nicol 1995: 187). The country is to remain in turmoil for some time, yet this is the critical moment for South Africa. Either people will harbor injuries done to them, their relatives, and neighbors, thus condemning themselves to recurring acts of reprisal; or they will consciously remember to play the card of reconciliation eventually. With this in mind, Nicol brings us back to the time of the Spanish Civil War and its thematization by Wystan Hugh Auden. This intertext enables Nicol to highlight the significance of historical moments. The responsibility taken up by the Spanish people serves as analogy to the responsibility of contemporary South Africans. Burdened with freedom, they are to build a different nation on whose banners the just are to drive the evil out. Nicol, mindful of Auden’s words, wants this story to be a story of “the ritual of people reimagining themselves,” a story of “reinvention” but also of “continuity” (Nicol 1995: 202). Unfortunately,

this aim is hard to achieve.¹³ Therefore, in the end it is the author's skepticism, if not fear, that comes to the foreground. Nicol's gaze begins to widen, making the world of his compatriots and himself seem to be 'adrift.' In spite of a huge political success, in spite of the irreversible character of the democratic change, the future on the horizon is still gloomy and uncertain.

It seems that the uncertainty which shadowed Nicol could not be dispelled by the promise of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.¹⁴ Among its primary objectives was reconciliation understood – Archbishop Desmond Tutu *post factum* explains – as “[...] a way to transform individuals, and the whole of society; as [...] a way to look at perpetrators of human rights abuses and see brothers and sisters; finally, as [...] a way to look at the victim in oneself and see a survivor” (Tutu 2007: ix). Another way of construing reconciliation was to see it as “embody[ing] the possibility of transforming war into peace, [...] hatred into forgiveness; [...] human beings connect[ing] with one another, against all odds” (Daly and Sarkin 2007: 4). The performance of individuals of different status was supposed to be classified by such standards. South Africans, no doubt, could expect a comprehensive and shocking ‘report’ on the violence committed under the apartheid regime. However, as Nicol indicates, the moral conscience of the nation could be troubled by revelations of those who were standing before the commission as representatives of institutions supporting the regime but also by those who were fighting it.¹⁵ Would a political affiliation not diminish one's sins? Nicol leaves us here with a rhetorical question which clearly implies his worries.

¹³ As Auden indicated in “Spain 1937,” the initiation of change requires an effort of will on the part of every individual as there is no external force which could relegate them to a subsidiary role in reconstructing one's world: “‘O no, I am not the Mover; / Not today; not to you. To you I'm the / 'Yes-man, the bar-companion, the easily-duped: / I am whatever you do. / [...] / I'm your choice, your decision: yes, I'm Spain” (Auden 2007: 100).

¹⁴ Mike Nicol, we learn from his memoir, knew that the arrangements of the commission were under way. Its first actual meeting was held on 16 December 1995. As Maria Ericson points out, it was “the day on which the Afrikaners had celebrated the anniversary for the Battle of Blood River, but which after the 1994 election came to be called the Day of Reconciliation. Just over 20000 people made statements about gross human rights violation to the *Human Rights Violations Committee*. From April 1996 until the end of June 1997 such Human Rights Violations Hearings were conducted in public [...]. A number of Special Hearings were also held, either on specific incidents or on particular patterns of systematic human rights abuses. In addition there were a number of public hearings on the role of particular sectors and institutions of society” (Ericson 2001: 332-333).

¹⁵ As he tries to show, the world is not black and white. Not only the obvious perpetrators but also less expected ones would have to reveal their wrongdoings and face their sense of guilt. Nicol explains that apart from the major crime, namely “state violence conducted by the police, the security police and whatever other covert operatives were employed,” there was the question of the other ‘innocent and victimized’ side. He elaborates: “At issue here were probably the concentration camps the ANC had used, as they put it, to ‘discipline’ their cadres during what are rather grandly termed ‘the years of armed struggle.’ These camps had been the subject of an internal inquiry by the organization and although a report had been released no disciplinary action was ever taken. This despite evidence of victimization, torture and deaths” (Nicol 1995: 185).

Apart from this, his assumption is that coming forward in order to reveal the truth is one thing, but contrition and forgiveness is another thing. Once such individual/collective exposure takes place, the author emphasizes, one should be wary of forgetting and rather skeptical towards forgiveness. At the end of this road to truth and reconciliation, he believes, there might be a 'natural' inclination to seek forgiveness in order to forget, in other words, to put everything behind for the sake of unity, with "human beings connected with one another, against all odds" (Daly and Sarkin 2007: 4). Adopting a critical, yet constructive attitude towards the TRC, Nicol admits "it feels apposite, that we need a truth commission; but [he adds] I do not believe this should lead to forgetting nor, for that matter, to forgiving. [...] Perhaps we should remember that barbaric behavior is not aberrant at all" (Nicol 1995: 186). South Africans cannot fully count on the alleviation of their shame, guilt, their fears and anxieties through a mechanism which favors erasing collective memory. In hoping for erasing the past from the future, they might end up like a character from Elisabeth Reichart's *February Shadows*. As we learn from Nicol's text, that story was based on events which took place in 1945, in Nazi Austria: "Reichart's novella tells of the painful remembering of Hilde who, as a child, witnessed [the slaughter of hundreds of prisoners in the Mauthausen concentration camp] and then for the remainder of her life sought to forget it. But the trying to forget ruined her, destroyed her relationships with those she loved [...], brought in the shadows of the title" (Nicol 1995: 187). Indeed, South Africa crossed the threshold of democratic change, yet there is arduous work and troubled times ahead for everyone. The guilt, the horror, the shame – to use words from Nicol's memoir – cannot be buried. If that happens, and human nature prefers such solutions, then forgiveness turns into "a kind of amnesia. We believe that once there is forgiveness a horror can start to be forgotten or at least the matter can be put aside" (Nicol 1995: 188). What is it that Nicol proposes? Referring to a metaphor from the Elizabethan play *The White Devil*, he reminds himself and others that the human factor is unpredictable and remains untrustworthy; therefore, each and every one of us must remember that "the wolf remains at large and one day his nails will dig up the bodies. It is better, I think, to admit that the wolf is constantly with us, even when it cannot be seen and is inactive" (Nicol 1995: 189). This story of his – "our conversation with ourselves and the land" – shows a jubilant moment in South African history, but it is also marked by and resonates with a sense of insecurity. In his own conclusion he tries to comfort himself and others by hoping that by "telling and retelling [our narratives] we may come to know how we should live" (Nicol 1995: 205).

Overall, Mike Nicol's memoir provides us with a rather ambiguous, indeterminate picture of the South African self. In this patchwork of different stories, voices of differing ethnic and cultural descent, one sees the present being overshadowed by the past. His subjective account indicates an observable conviction that in the future forceful gestures in both public and private domains might take precedence over resilience and well-grounded compromise.¹⁶ Mike Nicol, a witness to the exhilarating events of 1994, has thus created then a dramatic and comprehensive account of this time. Authenticating his own voice by references to a number of other narratives, he becomes another writer who combines non-fiction with fiction to achieve the effect of complementarity in rendering a given *Zeitgeist*.

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¹⁶ Interestingly enough, a few years later Nicol wrote *Sea Mountain, Fire City: Living in Cape Town* in which he described his return to South Africa after a longer stay in Berlin. His words confirm how relevant his earlier reckoning of the future of his country was. On his arrival, the first thing he heard from his close friends, by no means radicals, was that he must stay on the alert: "things have changed a little. Basically, don't drive with the doors unlocked. Keep the windows wound up when you stop at traffic lights. Be attentive to what's happening around you. [...] there've been a series of Natural Born Killer-type killings. Awful stuff. [...] It's nice to have you back" (Nicol 2001: 34).

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