

HISTORY AND THE “IMAGINATION OF MEN’S HEARTS” IN MIKE NICOL’S *HORSEMAN*

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Abstract

In light of the scattered nature of criticism regarding the work of South African author, Mike Nicol, this article surveys the transformation of Nicol’s novelistic style so as to better illuminate the representation and deployment of history in his third novel, *Horseman* (1994). South Africa’s political transformation not only offers a context for understanding the novel, but also provokes questions for the South African writer: how does the writer respond to the oppression of apartheid and the possibility of a new dispensation given the memory of such oppression? What forms best articulate that response? In the case of *Horseman*, how does one read the book’s pessimism against the backdrop of the first democratic elections? A consideration of Nicol’s greater body of work—his realist and more allegorical modes—points to a complicated relationship between the South African writer and the period of transition leading up to the 1994 elections.

Keywords: Mike Nicol, *Horseman*, South African literature, post-apartheid.

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“Men at these co-ordinates have only one intention.”

Horseman 176

I

Mike Nicol occupies an interesting position in recent South African writing; a prolific journalist, a biographer, a poet and a novelist, he appears adept at writing in a variety of literary forms. Like J. M. Coetzee, André Brink, and Nadine Gordimer he traverses the transitional period of South African political history from apartheid repression and the State of Emergency through post-election rainbow optimism to new millennium pragmatism. He is a restless stylist, experimenting with novelistic form like Brink and Ivan Vladislavić, though he is currently better known in the burgeoning field of South African crime fiction that includes authors such as Deon Meyer, Richard Kunzmann, Margie Orford, Diale Tlholwe and Roger Smith, and the non-fiction of Micki Pistorius and Jonny Steinberg.

In light of the scattered nature of criticism regarding Nicol's work, this article surveys the transformation of Nicol's novelistic style so as to better illuminate the representation and deployment of history in his third novel, *Horseman* (1994). I will contextualize it within the debates of a transforming South Africa: how to respond to the end of apartheid as a writer; what forms best articulate that response; and the challenges to materialist constructions of history in South African literature.

Nicol's novels can be divided into two quite distinct phases: a first phase that includes *The Powers that Be* (1989), *This Day and Age* (1992) *Horseman*, and *The Ibis Tapestry* (1998) and a second phase that has produced three novels so far, *Out to Score* (2006, with Joanne Hichens), *Payback* (2008), and *Killer Country* (2010) The obvious distinction between these two phases lies in genre inasmuch as the

three recent novels are popular crime stories, while the earlier four are more consciously literary, displaying a versatility of styles and subjects.

Nicol's first four novels are characterized not so much by a distinctiveness of style as the application of different styles to a South African context. There is a clear indebtedness to García-Márquez in the magic realism of *The Powers That Be* and *This Day and Age*, while Coetzee's influence (in the period from *Dusklands* to *Waiting for the Barbarians*) is evident in both. While *The Powers That Be* is brisk, poetic, and vivid in its evocation of an isolated fishing village terrorized by the interrogations and violence of Captain Sylvester Nunes, *This Day and Age* is an often startling, though unwieldy postmodern construction, incorporating metahistorical allusions to the Bulhoek massacre and Bondelswarts rebellion, and a continuation of Nicol's magical realist experimentation, conveyed through a variety of modes, including diary, military dispatch, lyric poem, and broad caricature.

The Ibis Tapestry, however, feels strained, a deliberate exercise rather than a narrative. Christo Mercer's Marlowe fascination seems more like the author's fascination at times, the *mise-en-abyme* recalling Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, perhaps, that hoists the narrative's circling histories onto a referential axis. Robert Poley, the narrator, is unsympathetic and vaguely sketched, tapping into a rich seam in recent South African writing of white male self-loathing, seen in his anti-"dyke" bitterness towards his ex-wife's new lesbian affair. Nicol has remarked that, "if I'd paid more attention to *The Ibis Tapestry* I may have seen that where I was heading was just a conventional thriller" (Rijsdijk, interview)¹; indeed the form of *The Ibis Tapestry* tends to that of a postmodern detective tale in the manner of Arturo Pérez-Reverte.

There is a pronounced gap between *The Ibis Tapestry* and *Out to Score* during which Nicol published mostly in the field of journalism, as well as *Sea-Mountain, Fire City: Living in Cape Town* (2001), part commentary, part memoir. In his own words, this period is defined by profound debates over his identity as an author, a period of “where do you go to from here” (Rijdsdijk, interview). Crucial to his change in direction as an author is a spell spent in Berlin. Nicol recounts:

We were in a block of flats, and above us was a Swedish writer. On the stairs one day, we were just chatting and he said, ‘Do you read crime fiction?’ He said he reads it at night, ‘it’s like mainlining adrenalin.’ And I said to him, ‘You’ve got to be joking, I don’t read that nonsense. I only read erudite stuff.’ And he said, ‘No, no, you’re missing out.’ After that, I took out some crime books, and that’s how the crime thing started. (Rijdsdijk, interview)

A second epiphany occurs after his return to Cape Town. Grappling with the change he sees in Muizenberg, the small town he has lived in for many years, Nicol describes his decision to read to *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins to his wife during a period of illness.

The Moonstone was my first introduction to ‘genre’ fiction since adolescence when cowboys, detectives, thrillers, and spy stories were the staple of my reading. Then the earnestness of a writing life set me on the straight and narrow of serious literature and, being a good disciple, I never wavered. But a smoked-up Wilkie Collins expanded my mind... [H]e showed that my snobbish disdain for the crime novel wasn’t only misplaced, it was arrogant. The crime novel offered ways to describe a violent world that I’d ignored, it also imbues its setting—inevitably a city—with moods and secrets and ways of operating... More than any other fiction the crime novel developed the city as a protagonist which fitted into my way of seeing Cape Town. (*Sea-Mountain, Fire City* 52)

It is not my intention to discuss Nicol's crime novels here. However, their themes (government and corporate corruption and criminal violence in South Africa), and Nicol's growing status as a key figure in South African crime writing are important in discussing the directions South African writing has taken in the two decades after apartheid.² In a review of Nicol's latest novel, *Killer Country*, Leon De Kock asks: "has Nicol found the form (crime-thriller...) that allows the most astute social analysis possible in current conditions, or is he a formerly serious, literary writer who has deliberately dumbed down to play to the gallery, and to make better returns from his full-time writing?" (online) De Kock concludes that writers like Nicol compromise themselves because 'serious' writing does not sell, but that South African readers deserve better. The twin engines of disillusionment over crime and corruption, and the limited financial viability for literary fiction appear to have overwhelmed the optimism one might expect to read about in a new and energetic democracy.

I would suggest that a re-reading of the earlier works, but particularly *Horseman* points to a complicated relationship between the South African writer and the period of transition leading up to the 1994 elections. How does one read the book's pessimism against the backdrop of the first democratic elections? How can (or should) the writer respond to the oppression of apartheid and the possibility of a new dispensation given the memory of such oppression?

II

A graphically violent narrative, *Horseman* is a dread fable extending from the woods of middle Europe at an undetermined time, through to the latter half of the nineteenth century in South Africa. Relentlessly bleak, it follows the adventures of a youth, left to his own devices by the arrest of his father, who follows a career

as outlaw and petty criminal before being captured and sent to a monastery for rehabilitation. Instead he is abused and molested, set to complete the terrifying task of reconstructing an ossuary of plague victims, before escaping and eventually embarking south on a ship with a pimp, a prostitute and two girls bound into sexual slavery. After murdering a man on board ship—in one of the youth's few sympathetic acts, he kills the man as he tries to rape one of the girls—he and his companion, the hunchback Madach, are cast adrift close to a remote whaling community. Once at large in Southern Africa (there is a strong visual presence of Swakopmund in the brief scene with Schmidt, the slaver) the passage of depredations continues, the only significant transformation being the youth's disappearance and the appearance of the figure Daupus. After a final massacre, the novel ends with all dead, except Daupus who, surrounded by scavenging marabous and vultures, "rode through them and on" (196).

Horseman met with mixed reviews upon its publication in 1994. Giles Foden worried that it "read it like a moral fable" but did not "deliver a viable moral... appearing to imply that in a world without redemption history, particularly colonial history, follows the form of the unlegitimated action novel—tending towards the brutish, satisfying our worst instincts to no good end" (20). Robert Carver adopted a more journalistically sarcastic tone, describing Nicol's prose as "Bunyan for pessimists."

Nelson Mandela may be president, apartheid may be finished, but South African novelists clearly will not relinquish their role as purveyors of superior hairshirts to the world. (39)

Consigning apartheid so neatly to the wastebin of history in August of 1994 seems, today, naïve, a comment in the service of a

good joke. It is also a lazy review,³ but revealing in its assessment from abroad of the concerns of South African novelists:

We get the evil of the brutalizing goldfields, followed by the evils of slavery. Anyone would think that white South Africans invented bad behaviour, so vehemently do they claim it all as their own work. (39)

Foden and Carver's comments are interesting in the light of Sandra Chait's argument (which will be investigated later) that *Horseman* absolves whites of the crimes of apartheid by generalizing evil and violence, and making the youth/Daupus an agent for God's wrath upon the earth, rather than directing its attack at the specific material history of apartheid. Carver's comment—that *Horseman*'s final massacre is "no doubt an expression of the fears that many whites have about their destiny" (39)—correctly identifies Nicol's interest in the violence of South African society, but too easily superimposes the novel's action onto the much publicized paranoia demonstrated by a minority of whites in South Africa before the 1994 elections.

The book's pessimistic mood and appalling violence perplexed and disappointed South African reviewers too. John Matshikiza wrote that it "deals at length with a theme, and delivers its author's analysis of this theme, but does not come to this analysis through a journey taken by its central character" (22). *Horseman*'s explicit contest between myth and history troubled Tony Morphet, who in a review essay argued that:

Taking the route that it does, the novel cannot solve the problem that it sets for itself. It cannot get behind the historical and bring us into direct knowledge of the meaning of violence. It cannot voice the protest that brought it into being. (4)

While celebrating the book, Gabriël Botma, in both his review and an earlier interview with Nicol in *Die Burger*, took pleasure in noting the discomfort it aroused in the United Kingdom. Says Nicol in the interview, “*Horseman* made my English publisher very uncomfortable. The British don’t understand violence of the kind we’ve come to know here” (4), while Botma observes in his review, “It is understandable that Nicol had to endure criticism for his graphic descriptions and portrayal of the one violent episode after another. Especially from readers from the “peaceful North” (6).⁴ Nicol even notes in *The Waiting Country* that publisher “David Philip in South Africa said he had never expected such a book to come out of this country” (103).

The complaints against the book are variations of a central concern: that *Horseman* has replaced a tradition of forceful humanist protest against the immorality of apartheid with an intervention of near nihilism, violence without origin, motivation or redemption. Indeed, at times, *Horseman* reads like a South African version of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* with its unnamed kid, scenes of extraordinary violence, and meta-historical form. Of that book, Susan Kollin writes:

The western landscape that is supposed to be a test of character, bringing out the best in the hero and the worst in the villain, is emptied of its sacred qualities, becoming instead a fully defiled, profaned space. (562)

Within a southern African context of centuries of colonial exploitation and, more recently, apartheid, the same could be said of *Horseman*. Of the book’s violence, Nicol himself says, “violence was a part of our history, it wasn’t just a factor of apartheid. It had its roots in the country’s colonial history. From the arrival of the Dutch

the history is made up of a series of conflicts. What I have tried to do in the novels is show how that violence works in us today" (qtd. in Brückner, 20). Thus Nicol proposes that the violence in *Horseman* was not born of civilized Europe's encounter with a savage continent, but was a shipmate of the settler.

I would suggest that these debates form part of a larger concern for South African writing during the transitional period: "If apartheid was the main theme of South African literature, what was it going to do when apartheid was gone?" (Attwell and Harlow 3).⁵ Attwell and Harlow relate Rob Nixon's concerns that "these epic shifts have cast doubt on the writer's social status, public role, motivation, and imaginative focus." However, they answer directly:

If these misgivings imply that South African writers were likely to fall silent before the uncertainties of the time, that prediction has not been fulfilled. Writers have been challenged, but they have not fallen silent. (3-4)

The authors echo Brink's terms when he writes that, under apartheid,

Certain territories of experience (gender relations, for one) and certain regions of the past (notably those less obviously connected to the realities of apartheid) remained unvisited, or were visited only rarely, in much of South African literature, specifically in fiction. In the spectrum of possibilities now opening up to the writer in post-apartheid South Africa, these silent places invite exploration, almost as a condition for future flowering. (Brink, 'Stories of History' 30)

Contemporaneously, Njabulo Ndebele, in considering the impact TRC on contemporary South African narratives, feels that "while some key elements of the intrigue" of apartheid's narrative are emerging, "I believe we have yet to find meaning" (20). The search

for meaning, he argues, will produce narratives that have “less and less to do with the facts themselves and with their recall than with the revelation of meaning through the imaginative combination of those facts” (21). South Africa’s transition to democracy facilitates liberation for the writer in two senses: it sanctions a genuine interrogation—as dialogue not power-play⁶—of the past to unearth Ndebele’s “elements of intrigue,” and it opens the way for a greater diversity of forms that such an interrogation might take. Morphet argues that

Whereas under apartheid, to separate the political and the aesthetic—to insist that the aesthetic had its own priorities and demands—was to risk political censure, that separation is now widely endorsed. The liberalism of the new order is more accommodating than a revolutionary culture could ever be, to the re-invention of tradition, to irony, to play (4).

The ‘invitation to explore’, to ‘re-invention, irony and play’ suggest an optimism in post-apartheid writing that, for critics of *Horseman*, Nicol has failed to acknowledge. Worse, Nicol appears to have exploited it, much as De Kock feels he is exploiting the current fiction market, living comfortably off pulp instead of struggling for art. Do white South African writers (in this case, mostly men, it must be said) cast a wary eye to the future in anticipation of their disenfranchisement while those around them embrace their liberation and set off to explore their unfettered identities? Perhaps the question Nicol poses is; can there be an unfettered identity given the burden of the past?

Without doubt, one of the struggles for the South African writer has been reconciling the brutality of the myriad narratives of both victim and oppressor with experimental literary forms that challenge realist modes of narrative. Defending this postmodern perspective, Brink argues that:

However eccentric or idiosyncratic the new version of a given tract of history ... may appear—like the compacted and compounded War of Liberation in Mike Nicol's *This Day and Age* in which a wide assortment of historical clashes are superimposed on one another—it cannot be discounted as 'mere' eccentricity or idiosyncrasy, but has to be read in its complex interactions with a whole variety of other texts... In other words, the reader is prompted to compare, and to choose. ("Interrogating Silence" 22)

The variety of Nicol's writing, and his experimentation with form, places him firmly in this postmodern discourse, yet he wriggles continuously. His direct autobiographical engagement with the country over the past twenty years⁷ sees the journalist winning out over the writer of 'erudition', putting his literary experiments behind him, and the birth of the 'krimi' writer.⁸ It is this contest within the writer that makes *Horseman* so interesting, particularly as it relates the exploration of Brink's "silent places" of the past—evident in Nicol's deployment of history in the mythic framework of the narrative—to the contingencies of the post-apartheid writer.

III

Two recent critical analyses of novels by Mike Nicol are informed by the discourse of history, Moslund's *Making Use of History in New South African Fiction: Historical Perspectives in Three Post-Apartheid Novels*, and Jochen Petzold's *Re-imagining White Identity by Exploring the Past: History in South African Novels of the 1990s*. Both carry in their titles the tensions at the heart of South African historiography. While 're-imagining' and 'making use' imply a revision and perhaps a reconstitution of earlier expressions of South African history and white identity, and 'exploring the past' points to a more popularly perceived idea of history as a record of the past of the past in narrative form, both authors' subtitles situates their

study in the contemporary period. The titles also bring together the discourses of history and literature (in the form of the novel), immediately invoking a substantial and oft-contended debate around the relationship between them (for example the form, usefulness, even the very existence of ‘the historical novel’).⁹

Sandra Chait accuses Nicol (and Brink in *Cape of Storms*, 1993) of making *Horseman*’s violence the product of a vengeful God, thereby absolving white South Africans of their guilt in the construction and maintenance of apartheid. In her reading, the specific historical context of a particular regime is overwhelmed by the greater context of God’s wrath upon the earth, of which man is the instrument He wields to appalling effect. This ideological sleight of hand is effected through the critique of myth as, “a way out, a means of saving cultural face in spite of evidence of almost a half century of white discrimination, oppression, and atrocity carried out against the indigenous people” (17). Brandishing Barthes’s essay ‘Myth Today,’ she argues that:

In the process of exposing one evil, [the] writer succeeds also in offering inadvertently yet another— namely, the notion that essential human nature, that which the gods themselves have created, bears ultimate responsibility for the crimes of South Africa. Humans simply act out their “natural” destinies, unable to alter the “natural” order of their predetermined roles in the universe. As Barthes reminds us, “nothing prevents [myth] from being a perpetual alibi,” for it is a value, rather than a reality, and is not guaranteed by truth. (18)

Without digressing too far into Chait’s article, it is worth noting how her Barthesian reading of myth engages with the book’s historical intertextuality.

Apartheid South Africa itself does not feature; it is an absence made present, a future already told in the Scriptures. In effect, *Horseman* merely sets the scene for this prophecy fulfillment, crossing continents and generations that bring the action only so far as the latter part of the nineteenth century. What is important in this build-up to Armageddon, however, is that everyone is implicated. No one escapes condemnation in the perpetuation of evil and violence that precipitates the heavenly showdown. Even the church stands accused. (22)

There are a number of aspects to this argument that, while not invalid, produce a limited reading of the text, one that through Revelations, allows for only a single eventual meaning: "the creators and perpetuators of apartheid, in reaping the wages of others' sins, acquire sacrificial status in that they transcend their victimhood, becoming noble and, like Jesus Christ, suffering for the sins of mankind" (23). Ultimately, "by turning to the gods... and enlisting their aid in their individual reworkings of the mythical texts, they [Nicol and Brink] have unwittingly undercut their own criticism, exposing one evil while concealing society's real evil by making it seem "natural" (26).

On one level, Chait's is a reasonable if monotonous charge, one that shoves aside history and intertextuality in favour of a fearful storm of Calvinism, Armageddon and revenge. However, in her logical extrapolations, there is little space for nuance, and she offers no apparent alternative for the white post-apartheid writer's imagination outside of the narrow materialist parameters of apartheid's "half century of white discrimination, oppression, and atrocity." In her desire to stitch together the novel with Revelations and a Barthesian needle, Chait contorts the text. For example, it is a stretch to claim—based on the text—that the country's indigenous inhabitants are "condemned in the perpetuation of evil and violence"

because of the depredations meted out by Daupus and others (like Schmidt and Harsent). Furthermore, why should the church not stand accused? Though the historical source for the missionary figure and his involvement in the massacre and slaving is the subject of heated dispute, Chait supplies no grounds for exoneration in this regard. Rather than a canny sanctioning of apartheid and white violence, does the book not confront Europe with its colonial legacy, and with the fact that apartheid was built upon generations of colonial expropriation, slavery and violence, underpinning the charge in Britain that the book was “violently pornographic”? (Breysse 200)

Most jarring in Chait’s critique is the frequent use of the term “unwitting”, so that it appears as if neither Nicol nor Brink really understood what they were writing. Chait overemphasizes the importance of a particular reading of *Horseman*, and so overlooks the book’s geographical and historical signifiers that indicate its engagement with literary forms (the adventure story and the epic); its bitter critique of colonialism (its exploiters, prospectors, and slavers); its engagement with the discourse of colonial writing; the constant struggle to represent South African landscape (and in particular its employment of, what Coetzee terms, “a geological, not a botanical gaze”);¹⁰ and the consequence of enforcing language and culture onto a pre-existing land.

Like Chait, Rita Barnard also sees a profound problem with myth in South African writing. Following Barthes, she argues that “myth, in the sense I have tried to use it here, is not merely a set of received ideas, but the erasure or masking of the historicity of our language and our images” (“The Final Safari’ 138). For Barnard, there is:

A need for affirmative cultural work in the new South Africa: a task of discovering a new ordinariness, a new set of ideas that will eventually be taken for granted—a new culture... with

a richness that has been unavailable to the 'poor' discourses of revolution. (ibid.)

Barnard's concern is not only with 'mythologizing' the past, but creating too swiftly myths for the present (for example, the 'Greatness of Mandela'). Even though she asks rhetorically whether in post-apartheid South Africa "it has not become problematic to classify texts in terms of their relation to the hegemony of myth," (ibid.) Barnard at least leaves open the possibility of new forms, something she examines further in her book *Apartheid and Beyond* (2007).

Horseman, it must be said, is not a historical novel in the sense of popular historical fiction. Neither is it historical in the manner of *Murder at Morija* by Tim Couzens (which explores the murder of Swiss missionary Edouard Jacottet within the context of southern African political history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century)¹¹ or Charles Van Onselen's *The Fox and the Flies* (which follows the trail of the notorious Joseph Lis/Joe Silver from Poland to South Africa via the United States and eventually, perhaps, back to the streets of Whitechapel in 1888).¹² While *Horseman* may evoke particular aspects of the past in South Africa in terms of time and place (the Witwatersrand gold rush, for example) Nicol gathers some of the bleached, forgotten bones of southern African history, and organizes them within the familiar scaffolding of colonial greed, missionary piety, and coercive violence.

Michael Green's formulation of the mutual suspicion of history and literature is a useful approach to understanding *Horseman*. Green develops a theory about the shifting nature of the relationship between history and literature, especially in South Africa whose writers "have good reason for displaying a strong awareness of how biased and fragmented authorized history writing and historiography can be" (16). To wit, he claims that, "the general neglect or

dismissal of historical fiction by historians, no less than the often cavalier deployment of historical material in fiction, suggests a clear demarcation between these two forms of discourse” (15).

An example would be Nicol’s reference to the Dithakong massacre of 1823 in the last three chapters of the novel and the broader context of revisionist studies of the Mfecane centred around the research of Julian Cobbing. Cobbing’s thesis—that the Mfecane was, in significant ways, a product of white historical writing in the service of colonial economics and the unequal division of land under apartheid—has generated an enormous amount of controversy.¹³ Nicol uses Cobbing’s disputed account of the Dithakong massacre (which for a non-historian at the time of writing must have seemed a stimulating redress to accepted accounts of the Mfecane) as the narrative climax, as Daupus and his men enact a terrible slaughter in the aid of a hypocritical and devious missionary, Thorne. The Cobbing account also adds fuel to Nicol’s notion of Christianity’s impoverished reputation in Southern Africa (expressed most explicitly in his interview with Botma). Thorne is based, controversially, on the figure of Robert Moffat, a missionary in Kuruman in the early 1820s (Brückner 28).

Reading Cobbing, it is not hard to understand the attraction to his account, probably because Cobbing’s writing is declarative and polemical, his assuredness extremely tempting to the interested reader trying to get a grip on complex history of the period. Moslund, in a discussion of *The Ibis Tapestry*, proposes that Nicol “seeks to redefine the conditions of value between history and literature... not to reduce the value of history, but to expand the scope and value of fiction” (65). In spite of this claim, Nicol’s use of the Cobbing thesis invokes the historian’s suspicion of literature’s ‘inventiveness’ when engaging with historical debate and the interpretation of evidence

However, a critique of *Horseman* along purely historiographic lines seems misguided. Nicol pieces together a version of South African history from what he finds scattered around him and just below the surface of the soil: it is an incomplete but fascinating artifact. Recondite historical details are woven into the wider scope of the narrative as seen, for example, in the character of Podumo:

Part of the *amaWashi*, Zulu men who went to Johannesburg to earn a living by doing the town's laundry. Over time they were deprived of this means of earning a living as "big business" established large laundry operations. So, the *amaWashi* lost their means of employment and some of them drifted into crime. Such was the process of industrialization. (qtd. in Brückner, 21)

After the massacre in *Horseman*, the men boil skulls which are subsequently worn on their belts (179), a scene whose provenance—the exploits of colonial militiaman Stephen Lakeman—one discovers in *The Waiting Country* (151) where Nicol ruminates on his colonial ancestors.¹⁴

Nicol's pastiche also includes genres of writing. Both Foden and Petzold initiate their analyses of *Horseman* by noting the book's similarity to the adventure story, particularly the colonial adventure stories of writers like H. Rider Haggard and John Buchan. However, while Foden finds that *Horseman* "takes place in a total void of introspection" (20) Petzold (in an admittedly more detailed analysis) argues that *Horseman* "subverts this analogy in a double movement that creates a text that is both distinctly different from the traditional adventure story and yet a commentary on the genre" (161-2). *Horseman* undermines the archetypal colonial adventures of Haggard and John Buchan, as well as the safari-kitsch of Wilbur Smith. The question, then, is whether the novel's historical revisionism is, as Chait proposes, voided by the universality of evil that underpins the narrative?

IV

Perhaps this is part of the problem with history for post-apartheid South African writers. Readers expect that the history in the novel is going to help them interpret, or even drive them toward its meaning. In this sense, Nicol's recourse to myth and contentious history is seen as, firstly, a disavowal of oppression and the sacrifices made for liberation, and secondly, a careless, perhaps even dangerous act of historical rewriting that undermines our attempts to understand more fully the "silent places" of our past. This is what prompts Matshikiza to protest of *Horseman* that "if we are ever to understand the horror of our past, that past has to begin to take on some kind of face" (22).

Matshikiza is right to feel disappointed, but only inasmuch as *Horseman* does not measure up to a particular interpretation of the novel's function as a way of making meaning out of the past. There is a risk in this context of assuming that the novelist should do the historian's work, confirming the material specificity of history as the primary source of meaning in the novel, a threat Coetzee noted in his frequently cited 1988 essay, 'The Novel Today':

A tendency, a powerful tendency, perhaps even a dominant tendency, to subsume the novel under history, to read novels as what I will loosely call imaginative investigations of real historical forces and real historical circumstances; and conversely to treat novels that do not perform this investigation of what are deemed to be real historical forces and circumstances as lacking in seriousness. (2)

It should not be Nicol's job as a novelist to make apologies, or to align his narrative with prevailing winds of change. And this is where I do encounter a problem in Nicol's work, one that is diametrically opposite to Morphet who finds that Nicol's personal account of

the 1994 elections, *The Waiting Country* (1995) succeeds where *Horseman* fails.

Nicol's goal seems to be to use the powers of fiction to go behind the surfaces of historical narrative and to embody the principle of violence itself. But he has to keep the historical world in place at the same time otherwise his core theme of South African violence dies. The result is that he finds himself forced to construct two sets of rules for the fiction—one for the myth and other for history (3).

In chapters six and seven of *The Waiting Country*, two atrocities—the AWB roadblock killings outside Ventersdorp and the PAC attack on the Heidelberg Tavern (both in December of 1993)—are examined, but really compared. Nicol's journalistic mode produces the following reasonable rhetoric: "But what they did, those men of both the AWB and the PAC, was write two more incidents into history which, even though they emphasized the opposites in society, created a common past." (147) In his discussion of the Heidelberg Tavern attack in December 1993, he wonders if the sentiments of Franz Fanon motivated the PAC attackers, citing the famous phrase from *The Wretched of the Earth*: "For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler." (qtd. in *The Waiting Country* 146-7). However, Nicol is unconvinced, retorting (in syntax similar to that of *Horseman*):

Nothing that can be called freedom grows out of Fanon's rotting corpses: over time the flesh perishes to leave dry skeletons, the bleached bones that we cannot ignore, and this may be called history. (147)

Nicol's journeys into South Africa's histories of colonial atrocity which punctuate *The Waiting Country* articulate a particular white

liberal viewpoint struggling to know what to feel during a period of great upheaval and uncertainty. Coetzee, in 1988, writes of the “weakness of the liberal-individualist tradition in South Africa, compromised by its association with get-rich-quick exploitation of the country’s resources and with the anomie of the boomtowns” (*White Writing* 6). In its immediate postapartheid form, this white liberal position becomes one of exasperation and vulnerability, fear and indignation, qualities that are found throughout Nicol’s text of Ken Oosterbroek’s biography, *The Invisible Line* (and, indeed, in many of Oosterbroek’s photographs too). Nicol writes towards the end of *The Waiting Country*: “Yet for all this, people said they were guardedly optimistic; nobody would admit to pessimism; but the qualifying adjectives were back, taking the brightness from our nouns” (195). In a much earlier interview, Coetzee makes a telling point, I think, about South African literature that resonates strongly in *Horseman*.

No one has really looked at the evil of the South African situation in the way in which evil is really to be looked at. The liberal tradition makes one look upon evil as an aberration, a fault of institutions. Look at American writing in the 19th century, which seems to me to draw its strength, for various historical reasons, from its capacity to confront and analyse metaphysical Evil—with a capital E—in man in America. Hawthorne, Melville, Mark Twain, for example.’ (qtd in Temple)

Central to Nicol’s work has been the violence “depicted without gloss” (*The Waiting Country* 103), without relativity. While the evil in *Horseman* is, in many ways, the “fault of institutions”—the monks, the missionary, the colonial authorities—at the heart of the book is declaration by a mysterious monk that “the imagination of man’s heart is evil and he will always be plagued” (45). Out of this grows the

"contract" (49) that Chait and others find so disturbing whereby the youth is sent out into the world as an instrument of wrath. For these critics, Nicol's refusal to take sides ironically produces a lopsided text that fails to acknowledge the violence of colonial power.

While Nicol might be guilty of despair in *Horseman*, I think the adjuncts to colonial exploration—slavery, missions, and scientific discovery—are all represented as being grounded in violence. After his release from the monastery, the youth returns to the village and to the house of the schoolteacher who proposes a journey of exploration:

He held a belljar up and towards the youth, turning it so that the brown and shrivelled foetus seemed to revolve in its own universe. It is from the south, he said, staring with admiration at the object, and then back at the youth. I met here, here in our own beerhouse, a man returning home, who had fought in the south to tame the barbarous hordes. He told me of the riches. He showed me the stones, the clots of amalgam streaked with gold. Of how it lies littered about the land. And of the opportunities for science. An incomplete nomenclature. (65)

The schoolteacher's scientific language is an index of colonial fascination and barbarism that represents the most sanguinary aspect of Enlightenment epistemology. Though the youth will make this journey, and see the wonders admired in their dead form by the schoolteacher, this "incomplete nomenclature" will instead hang as an ornament from his belt. Nicol does not overlook colonial atrocity; in fact, he depicts it in such savage terms that publishers shied away from the manuscript. Furthermore, he proposes that without history, we cannot uncover and understand the drive to commit violence. As he writes of the Heidelberg Tavern attack in *The Waiting Country*: "for a moment I thought history had cracked and the Maleficents had stepped into my present" (148).

IV

In *Horseman*, the magic realism of *The Powers That Be* and the experimentation of *This Day and Age* has disappeared and Nicol realizes that a new mode is required to articulate his South African experience in the interim period before the 1994 elections. The open ending to the novel is a strong signifier of the uncertain present: far from being a denial of apartheid, or an “unwitting” absolution for the sins of its perpetrators, *Horseman* must be seen as a bid to understand the polarizing violence of South Africa’s ‘interim’ state between 1991 and 1994. *Horseman* also points to a tendency in the first ten years of democracy for white (particularly male) writing in South Africa to be characterized by disillusionment, that after years of either attacking apartheid directly, or in more consciously literary forms, liberation has produced a sobering recognition of white people’s alien and inalienable place in Africa.

Reflecting on the period spanning *Horseman* and *The Ibis Tapestry*, Nicol says: “I had begun to feel that magic realism had just expired and *The Ibis Tapestry* was an attempt to show why it had expired in fiction” (Rijsdijk, interview). *Horseman* challenges simplistic categories of historical time in which “post-apartheid” requires a direct engagement with the present in terms of the recent apartheid past by rejecting realist modes in favour of historical meta-fiction. And yet it is also a product of the historical moment of its creation. In an article devoted to science fiction writing, Fredric Jameson declared that:

The present—in this society, and in the physical and psychic dissociation of the human subjects who inhabit it—is inaccessible directly, is numb, habituated, empty of affect. Elaborate strategies of indirection are therefore necessary if we are somehow to break through our monadic insulation and to ‘experience’, for

some first and real time, this present, which is after all all we have. (151)

In many ways, this could apply to the 'interim' state in South Africa too. Nicol (and many others) relayed the quotidian violence of the time in great detail, and in a realist mode that recorded the country's terrible misery but also its elation when the elections went ahead and a new order was finally ushered into power. For Nicol, the journalist, this experience took shape in *The Waiting Country*, and later in *Sea-Mountain, Fire City*, but for Nicol the novelist, a "strategy of indirection" was required that produced *Horseman*, a book that warns us that the elections are not "the end" of anything, that we cannot consign our bitter experience of colonialism and apartheid to the past so quickly.

Notes

1. Poley, as an author of "airport fiction" dismissed by the academy (150), echoes the anti-academic sentiments of Mullet Mendez in *Out to Score* who comments, "Academics were Martians." (85).
2. A useful essay in this regard is the "Introduction" by Joanne Hichens to the collection of short crime fiction *Bad Company* (2008).
3. Carver notes that "the Youth murders the schoolmaster" when, in fact, the schoolmaster watches him leave (*Horseman* 68), but murder fits neatly into Carver's critique of the book's misanthropy.
4. Translations from the Afrikaans by Rijdsdijk.
5. See also Taylor (16), and Brink "Interrogating Silence" (19-27).
6. Brink, "Interrogating Silence", (14).
7. For example, *The Waiting Country* (1995) and *Sea-Mountain, Fire City*.
8. "Krimi" is a term of German origin referring to German film adaptations of crime novels by Edgar Wallace. It has become a popular term on the crime blog of the internet book forum, book.co.za, to which Nicol frequently contributes.

9. See, for example, Coetzee, “The Novel Today”, and Green (14-34).
10. Coetzee, *White Writing* (172). For example, Daupus’s gang “sifted through the sortings with long-abandoned sieves that yielded a refuse of quartz crystals, garnet and mica, and stranger artifacts: stone chippings, arrowheads, shell fragments, bits of bone. There were, too, the graves of prospectors, marked only by heaped rocks, the headstones unnamed, undated” (*Horseman* 140).
11. See Rijdsdijk, “Conversation with Tim Couzens”, on the book’s engagement with history.
12. Joe Silver appears prominently in *Horseman*. See Brückner (25).
13. Cobbing’s account, “The Mfecane as Alibi”. See Etherington (13) for a succinct overview of Cobbing, and Hartley for a critique of the thesis.
14. In Lakeman’s account, the skulls are procured for medical purposes, sold to universities in Europe. This story must also form the basis for the schoolteacher’s fascination with the “incomplete nomenclature of the south” (*Horseman* 65).

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