

‘Once upon a time there was and there was not...’



**Narrative Form and Historical Representation
in Four Novels by André Brink and John Maxwell Coetzee**

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to discuss the relationship between history and fiction in literature. More precisely, I propose to investigate, on the basis of a narrow selection of fictional literature, how two authors relate to the facts and the narratives of history in the context they write from. I have chosen André Brink and J.M. Coetzee, two contemporary novelists who in their fiction, as well as in their extensive critical writing, have revealed their prevalent concerns with the multi-faceted relationship between fact and fiction, truth and myth in the South Africa of past, present and future that always, in one way or another, make up the background and the themes of their stories.

The reasons for this choice of field of investigation, and for the choice of authors, are my own experiences of learning and awakening, and the feeling that reading these two authors has had a profound impact on this process. My instant infatuation with Brink's fiction many years ago was extended and challenged in the more recent meeting with the novels of Coetzee. The striking differences between them generated a re-reading of Brink and a questioning of these authors' approach to history in general and to their own historical context in particular. The idea of 'truth' in relation to history and fiction, and a growing awareness that truth is a many-sided and highly ambiguous concept, initiated further reading and questioning. My probings have resulted in this problem statement for my thesis on Brink, Coetzee and history: In what ways do André Brink and J.M. Coetzee, in the context of South Africa before and after the fall of apartheid, communicate their attitudes to the discourse of history and incorporate such discourse in their fiction? To what extent do they differ, or agree, in their application of history into fiction? How do they negotiate the complex interplay of the discourses of history and fiction in a colonial or postcolonial debate on personal and public aspects of identity and belonging?

In order to appreciate the differences and similarities between Brink and Coetzee, I want to give interpretations of selected, significant works of both authors. I will also be looking into their non-fictional literatures for references to their respective agendas.

Because my interest lies in the important connections and interaction between historical context and narrative presentation in literature, I need to consider the authors and their work in relation to the historical reality in which they live and write. Before presenting the theoretical foundation for my investigation and the methods I intend to use, I will

therefore give a brief presentation of the authors and relate their work to the situation in South Africa before and after the dismantling of apartheid.

Both André Brink and John Maxwell Coetzee were born and raised within the dominant Afrikaner culture, in 1935 and 1940 respectively. Both also came to oppose this culture. They were both linked to the reality of the colonial situation of apartheid South Africa and as literary scholars to the western literary tradition. Both continued to write from and to their native context after the political watershed of 1994 as well as addressing a wider, international audience. Whether their literary concerns have changed with the changes of their political and social context is part of what I will proceed to look into in this thesis.

André Brink

For Brink this mixed identity – African and European – dates back to 1960 when as a student of literature in Paris he gained the necessary mental and spatial distance to read with an open(ing) mind the text of apartheid written in Sharpeville that year. In his own words, he “was born on a bench in the Luxembourg Gardens”.¹ Back in South Africa he joined forces with other avant-garde Afrikaans writers such as Breyten Breytenbach and Etienne LeRoux in the literary movement known as ‘the Sestigers’, writing with the twofold aim of attacking oppressive apartheid politics and reviving Afrikaans literature with new European ideas inspired by writers like Beckett and Sartre. They were, however, regarded more as youthful rebels opposing the moral rigmaroles of a paternalistic, Calvinist society than serious, broad-spanning political writers, and Brink for one soon turned to more serious matters. In 1968 he was back in Paris, seriously contemplating permanent settlement there. Again, the clarifying distance from South Africa, and the student revolts of that year, “brought to [him] the sense of direction [he] had lacked before”.² Since then, Brink was uncompromisingly committed to the struggle against the apartheid system, seeing the main issue as “the relationship of the individual with his society, and his need to assume responsibility within that society”.³ As a professor of literature at the University of Cape Town, as a noted novelist and literary critic, and as a literary member of his society, he has contributed to the abolishment of apartheid rule. The majority of his seventeen novels to date are texts written for the “satisfaction in countering the tactics of secrecy with exposure”. The fact that “the dark fears nothing quite so

¹ André Brink, *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 29

² *Ibid*, 34

³ *Ibid*, 34

much as light” to him was “a justification for writing, and for continuing to write”.⁴ No wonder, perhaps, that his work was repeatedly banned by the authorities under apartheid. I have come to the understanding that each novel has its specific relationship to the history of South Africa (both to factual history and to the mythical history of the dominant culture), each of them links in a chain, mapping the journey of the country from the first encounters between the indigenous people and the European invaders, through times of violent oppression and systematic inscription of otherness by a dominant, white culture, into the openness of a future after apartheid.

My interest in his work relates to the tension between story and history: is Brink’s commitment to the cause overshadowing his literary qualities, or does he manage to merge fruitfully the urge for the ‘story-as-story’ with the ‘reality’ of history?

John Maxwell Coetzee.

Adamant that his fiction speak for itself when he eventually found its voice, Coetzee has been less overtly outspoken than Brink about his commitment to the history of South Africa. After studies of English and mathematics at the University of Cape Town, Coetzee left for Europe, working as a computer programmer in London from 1962 to -65, before he embarked on post-graduate studies in language and literature in the USA. Like Brink, Coetzee was born a writer as a result of the combined effect of a change of perspective on his own background and his experience of political events abroad. Working on his doctoral thesis on Samuel Beckett at the University of Texas, he came across literary sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries regarding the mapping and colonisation of South Africa, which opened his eyes to the complexity of his own culture. At the same time, the American war rhetoric and the student revolts, two important aspects of the cultural scene in the final stages of the Vietnam War, helped form an awareness in Coetzee of ‘the colonial’ as a general situation. This awareness came to inform his writing from the outset in 1969 when he started writing his first novel, based on the material found in the library in Austin. His application for permanent residency in the US having been turned down, he returned to South Africa in 1971. *Dusklands* appeared two years after. Working as a professor at the University of Cape Town from 1972 until 2000, he kept close ties, through writing and lecturing, to the western literary and scholarly world.

⁴ Ibid, 35

The reception of Coetzee's work in his own country was mixed. During the apartheid years, his fiction was regarded by many as too ambiguous, too literary and distanced from the struggle against the authorities. The fact that his work was never censored was but one 'proof' of his refusal to enter the history of his times. Coetzee hesitated to comply with the binary thinking within the culture of resistance that held 'story-as-story' and 'story-as-history' as mutually exclusive⁵: through his fictions he defended the role of literature as literature, as art, versus those who held his writings to be self-indulgence in the mere textuality of postmodernism.

More ambiguous, more convoluted, more concerned with language and form, with rewriting and subverting traditional form than Brink, there is still no doubt that Coetzee has been investigating his historical context in all his work, which, apart from his twelve novels, consists of extensive non-fictional writings and critical work. Critically acclaimed but not widely read in South Africa, he is regarded as less accessible than Brink, and more related to a European literary world than to a provincial African one. These have been mentioned as reasons why Coetzee's work was never censored in South Africa. He is the first to have received the Booker prize twice and in 2003 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. In 2002 Coetzee left South Africa to take up permanent residency in Australia.

Fact, myth and story – the writers in their historical context

The obvious fact that our access to the past is through language and narration, and that, by implication, we ourselves are made of language – identities formed by the stories we read, hear and live – negates the rigid connection traditionally made between truth and fact in historical discourse. In 1987 Coetzee defended this right of the author to write fiction 'in rivalry' to history, claiming

that history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a novel is a kind of discourse, too, but a different kind of discourse; that, inevitably, in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse, just as, inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other.⁶

Through such agreement within the Afrikaner 'tribe', the master-myths deliberately forged on the assumption of the pre-eminence of white culture succeeded in sustaining and legitimating a total political and social domination in South Africa. During the centuries of

⁵ André Brink, "Interrogating Silence: New Possibilities Faced by South African Literature", in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly, eds., *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16-17

⁶J.M. Coetzee, "The Novel Today", in *Upstream* 6.1, summer 1988, 4

colonialism, white fictional writing played a part in ascertaining the authenticity of white cultural and political hegemony. Writing 'in support of history', authors of fiction have contributed to the agreement on the power-holders' truth as the one valid.

Recognising that the human need to storify in order to find or create meaning has always informed and qualified fictional as well as factual narratives, I am wary of presenting South African history as a reality behind text and interpretation. Nevertheless, in need of a contextual background for my investigation, I will mention some major events in the story of this country and relate them to the writings of Brink and Coetzee. This may bring out a sense of what 'facts', myths and stories have written these two authors and what texts and contexts they have challenged through their own writing.

In their fictions, Brink and Coetzee revisit history as far back as the first encounters between the African and the white intruder, past the first settlement at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. The conflicts deriving from differences of view and problems of communication between the aborigines and the explorers and traders from Europe constitute the main theme of Brink's *The First Life of Adamastor* (1993). In this novel, he attempts to trace the origins of racism, viewed from the side of the colonised.

While initially intended as a mere trading post for the Dutch East India Company, the population of the Cape colony increased due to voluntary immigration from Europe and the import of slaves from Asia and East Africa. Increasing, and originally unwanted, incursion into the interior from around 1690 soon proved disastrous for the aboriginal population, especially the San-people and the Khoikhoi whose fragile social structures made them vulnerable. The Xhosa and the Zulu belonged to the Bantu-speaking people who had migrated from further north. Their stable social and political organization made them more resilient towards intrusion from white settlers than the hunter-gatherers and pastoralists were. The stories and history of these people were completely silenced by the dominant culture, in their myths of 'the empty land' intended to legitimise the colonisation of the area. Both Coetzee and Brink have lifted the original Africans back into history by imagining their presence in close relations to the land. Brink's *An Instant in the Wind* (1976) and Coetzee's *Dusklands* (1973) both investigate the processes of alienation in the colonising mind as well as imagining the other in terms of the self without making it an aspect of the self.

The Dutch kept government control of the colony until 1795 when it was conquered by the British as part of their imperialistic design to rule the world seas. From the first half of the nineteenth century, the impact of British capital, British immigrants and British culture on the economic, political and social development of the area increased. The original Dutch

settlers, or Boers, who were largely of a rural economy, reacted with withdrawal rather than adaptation to English economy, language and way of life. The Great Trek into the interior from 1836, away from what they saw as intolerable British domination and discrimination, became a key event in the forged myths of Boer nationalism and, subsequently, of vital importance to the development of South Africa as a nation. As Afrikaners, Brink and Coetzee have addressed these myths about God's chosen people and their natural right to the land. The Boers' suffering and heroic endeavours and their paternalistic explanations for the ensuing enslavement of indigenous peoples have been exposed as falsifications of history aimed at sustaining 'Afrikaner tribalism'. I will return to Brink's rewriting of these myths in the chapters on *An Instant in the Wind* and *Imaginings of Sand*, but Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* also draws a less flattering picture of Afrikaner rural life, particularly here in his writing against the marginalisation of women within the culture.

The findings of gold and diamonds in the interior in the late eighteenth century, in what were then Boer colonies, resulted in heightened tensions between the British and the Boers. The Natal, Transvaal and the Orange Free State were suddenly attractive to British capitalism, and conflicting interests culminated in the South African war at the turn of the century. The sufferings and eventual defeat of the Boer 'volk' in this war were added to their biblical interpretation of the Afrikaners' plight: like the Israelites they saw themselves as constantly tested and unjustly kept away from their 'chosen land' by rival peoples.

Parallel to this contention between the colonisers, the subjugation of the native peoples of the area was completed, so that when the war of political and cultural sovereignty in the South African colony was ended in 1902, the indigenous peoples of the whole of Southern Africa were under white rule.

From then on, common interests among the whites to keep control and to profit from the resources of the colony proved stronger than their internal differences. Whereas the Africans were unable to form alliances in efficient self defence, the white "farmers and businesspeople, traders and missionaries, and government officials had a common interest in subjecting the Africans, appropriating their land, harnessing their labor, dominating their markets, and winning their hearts and minds".⁷ They could legitimise this conquest of land and people by regarding themselves as belonging "to a superior, Christian, civilized race",⁸ whose ethical obligation it was to bring civilisation to the 'inferior races'. *A Chain of Voices*

⁷ Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*. Revised edition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 122

⁸ *Ibid*, 122

(1982) is one of Brink's imaginative contributions to the subversion of the morally superior masters' narrative: the forgotten story of Galant and the slave-rebellion in the Cape colony in 1825 is rescued from the darkness and silence of the archives and written back into history through the author's forceful imagination of their own voices.

Racism founded on the evolutionary theories of Social Darwinism was systematically developed and entrenched in the ideology of segregation in the decades following the war, and expressed in the legislation of the Republic of South Africa founded in 1910. The implementation of laws such as The Natives Land Act of 1913, Natives Urban Areas Act of 1923 and The Native Administration Act of 1927 enforced separation of the 'races' in all spheres of life, and effectively excluded non-whites from political power. When the Nationalist Party came to power in 1948, legislative discrimination was taken even further. The doctrines of Apartheid, implemented in the rigid schemas constructed on class and race, were expressed in a number of new laws which restricted interracial relations to a bare minimum and secured white economic and political hegemony.

The international political processes of decolonisation and democratisation which gained force after the Second World War, made it essential for the South African government to masquerade their apartheid politics, dependent as they were on international economic relations for their industry. Hendrik Verwoerd was the architect behind the legitimising theory which was worked out on the basis of nationality: the myth was forged on the idea that society comprised four racial groups, whites, Indians, blacks and coloureds. The whites made up the 'civilised' group and were therefore entitled to absolute state control and privileged rights. By splitting the African population into eight separate nations, each with its separate 'homeland', the white nation with its Afrikaans- and English-speaking population formed an artificial majority. 'Separate development' for each nation became the slogan. In reality, cheap, black labour was to support white industrial and agricultural development outside the Bantustans: "[...] the South African economy burgeoned in the 1950s and 1960s, [while] the Homelands remained economic backwaters".⁹

This is the time when Brink and Coetzee develop their awareness of the reality of life in South Africa. In *Mapmakers* (1983) Brink says: "One could spend a lifetime in South Africa in those years, as many still do, living so exclusively within one of the many totally segregated microcosms that exist side by side in the country, without ever having contact – except on the most superficial level – with others".¹⁰

⁹ Ibid, 191

¹⁰ Brink, *Mapmakers*, 30

The decades ahead saw the escalating conflicts between those who sought to keep in power, and the disempowered, who fought for a bare minimum of justice and basic democratic rights. In the 50s and the 60s, there was an increase in popular resistance, but ideological differences often made opposition all too vulnerable to repression from the state machinery.

The Sharpeville massacre in 1960 proved to be a political watershed: the initially peaceful march to oppose pass-regulations showed the inadequacy of non-violent resistance. It resulted in the banning of anti-apartheid organisations, detention of their leaders and a widespread call for sanctions from abroad. Prime Minister Verwoerd declared a state of emergency and the country faced increasing isolation from the rest of the world where the process of decolonisation was rapidly changing political relations.

From the late 1960s, the Black Consciousness movement became a key factor within resistance. Ideas conveyed from the American Civil Rights Movement, as well as from the student revolt in the western world, enhanced the belief in the moral justification of the fight against apartheid rule. For Brink and Coetzee the early meeting with the student movement abroad was of vital importance for their commitment at home: Brink changed his mind about settling in Europe because “not being [in South Africa] would be spiritual death”, seeing that “only by being not only in situation but, if it is at all possible, *sur place*, can one make sure that the system is exposed, countered and eventually shattered”.¹¹ *Kennis van die Aand* (1973, translated as *Looking on Darkness* 1974) offered ‘serious political challenge’ to the system, saying ‘no’ to racial persecution, injustice, police brutality and the banning of relationships across the colour line. The reaction was equally direct: it became the first Afrikaans novel to be banned.

The BC movement gained impetus from the increased participation of younger, frustrated members of the still growing urban population of the townships, and of student and teacher-organisations, who were increasingly willing to use violent action. The Soweto shootings in 1976 marked the beginning of a series of township revolts. Economic recession in the 70s and the intensified spiral of resistance and repression were interpreted as signs that apartheid was beginning to fail. The state under Prime Minister Botha tried to stem what they deemed a ‘total onslaught’ from internal and external revolutionary forces by implementing a series of new means of control. The new strategies under the collective term ‘Total Strategy’ were little other than rearrangements of the old mechanisms and structures of domination.

¹¹ Ibid, 35

More control, more violent suppression of protest, more freedom to the police and security forces, more restrictions on information and the mass media. South Africa was more and more an isolated anomaly in a decolonising and democratising world, under increasing pressure from the west to change course.

Through the 80s the fronts hardened; economic and political stability was not achieved. Unemployment, inflation and poverty rose, as did black influx to the cities. Powerful trade unions were at the forefront of political struggle, and anti-apartheid guerrilla activity increased. The state answered with escalating violent repression: a nationwide state of emergency was declared in 1986, and the army and police force had practically unlimited powers. At the same time, heavy restrictions were placed on the mass-media to prevent the national and international public from knowing what was going on. “The government had resorted to legalized tyranny”,¹² and South Africa was practically in a state of civil war. This is the situation when the demand for literature to act as a tool in the struggle against apartheid is most avidly expressed and Coetzee laments that

In times of intense ideological pressure like the present, when the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding its own business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry.¹³

Brink answers the call for action in his *States of Emergency* (1988) and Coetzee discusses individual freedom versus communal responsibility in *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983). In *Age of Iron* (1990) death and rebirth, compassion and heroism are themes set in the violent dying stages of Afrikaner nationalism.

It was clear that ‘Total Strategy’ was a complete failure and that although “the state had lost the initiative, [...] no one else had the power to seize it”.¹⁴ Botha was eventually replaced by de Klerk in 1989, and in the hope of retaining a measure of power for the white minority and the Nationalist Party, the process of negotiating political, economic and social change was initiated. The release of political prisoners such as Nelson Mandela in 1990, and the unbanning of individuals and organisations like the UDF, the ANC and the Communist Party, in addition to a marked lessening of acts of repression, gave new hope of improvements. Nelson Mandela played a key role in the formal negotiations from 1991, and although violence, suspicion and mistrust seriously threatened to disrupt the peace process on several occasions, the first free democratic elections could be held in April 1994.

¹² Thompson, 235

¹³ J.M. Coetzee, “The Novel Today”, 3

¹⁴ Nigel Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Segregation and Apartheid* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 136

The inauguration of Mandela as president of 'new' South Africa represented the ending of systematised and legalised oppression, but the transition from apartheid to the democracy aimed for in the new constitution of 1995 has nevertheless been more difficult and violent than hoped for. The legacy of the past informed the practices of the present and the thoughts of the future. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in 1995 to bring testimony to the crimes committed in the apartheid era, by individuals as well as by the authorities, in order to build future peace and equality on the truth about the past. Authorities' need for myths to sustain their legitimacy was evident to many in the commission's mandate to grant amnesty to violators of human rights in their search for the 'truth' and 'common understanding' of the facts as a basis for reconciliation. Pent up feelings of anger and grief resulted in widespread violence and soaring crime rates. Frustrations with the slow changes in social conditions for the underprivileged masses surfaced as constant political unrest soon after the hilarities of the first moments of victory. Fiction's role in the processes of coming to terms with the past will be part of my discussion of the postapartheid works of Brink and Coetzee.

From this presentation of the authors and the context they write from and respond to, I now proceed to present the theoretical foundation for my project and the method I will use in my investigation.

Theoretical foundation

From my interest in the question of how the discourse of history relates to that of fiction in a specific time and place, such as colonial and postcolonial South Africa, it follows that my approach in this thesis will have to draw on various theoretical disciplines. When it comes to theory there is, first, the postcolonial aspect: having chosen to interrogate fiction as it relates to its historical context on either side of a political watershed such as the abolishment of apartheid, postcolonial theories will have to provide the general and basic questions to the texts, informing the more specific ones about history and narrative. Consequently, I will apply aspects of postcolonial theories in my own way as it suits the purposes of my investigation, while keeping the focus on the relationship between history and narration in fiction. For the exploration explicitly regarding this relationship, I will draw on the theories of historicism and new historicism on one hand and narrative theories on the other.

Postcolonial studies must be defined in relation to colonialism, “the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods”,¹⁵ and was inaugurated by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, published in 1978. In this monumental work, Said discusses ‘cultural imperialism’ as the mode of establishing a dominant Eurocentric discourse of the normal and superior ‘self’ versus the exotic and inferior ‘other’. These are terms I will constantly return to in my interrogation of the texts, and my way of using them will rest on a general interpretation linked to Said’s theories: the colonised subject is characterised as ‘other’ through colonial discourse “as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view”.¹⁶ Theorists like Jacques Lacan have complicated the matter: Lacan distinguishes between the ‘other’ and the ‘Great Other’, where the first designates the other who resembles the self while the second is a symbolic other, “in whose gaze the subject gains identity”. In my use, ‘other’ will refer to “the colonized others who are marginalized by imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the centre and, perhaps crucially, become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial ‘ego’” (the ‘self’).¹⁷

Since the 1980s, the postcolonial as a field of studies and practices has been expanding and forking out. Ideas and principles of various other theoretical concepts, such as Marxism, feminist criticism, deconstruction and postmodernism have contributed to its diversity, thus making a definition of the term increasingly difficult. In fact, situating the postcolonial is a major theme within postcolonial theory, and definitions vary according to where the emphasis is put, on spatial and temporal aspects or on the ideological or psychological ones. Postcolonialism may thus signify what comes after the colonial era in parts of the world which were colonised by the western empires, but neo-colonialism and contemporary imperialism certainly make it useful to broaden the understanding of the term to include all “contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism”.¹⁸ There is a danger that an increasing enlargement of the term to make it apply to all situations of subordination may flatten and disempower it, but the critical debate on definitions also serves to enhance the alertness to hidden or forgotten aspects of colonial history. For instance, feminist critics outside Europe have pointed to the failure of major contributors to postcolonial theory, like Homi Bhabha and Franz Fanon, to take the experience of the colonised woman into

¹⁵ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 8

¹⁶ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 169

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 170

¹⁸ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 16

consideration when describing the postcolonial. Attention has also been brought to the fact that studies of the postcolonial have had a western bias, that the scholarly traditions of the west are manifest in a continuing western domination (theoretical imperialism) of the theory-building, and that even the anti-colonial critics and scholars have helped maintain this bias by concentrating too much on the rereading of the western texts in opposition to the colonial, “although its declared intentions are to allow the voices of the once colonised peoples and their descendants to be heard”.¹⁹ Peter Hulme, for instance, has made the point that “post-colonial theory, if it is to develop, must produce ‘native’ terminology”²⁰ because, as Loomba puts it,

postcoloniality [...] is articulated alongside other economic, social, cultural and historical factors, and therefore, in practice, it works quite differently in various parts of the world. [...] Although the word ‘postcolonial’ is useful in indicating a general process with some shared features across the globe, if uprooted from specific locations, ‘postcoloniality’ cannot be meaningfully investigated, and, instead, the term begins to obscure the very relations of domination that it seeks to uncover.²¹

South Africa is a ‘site’ or a ‘text’ of the postcolonial on several levels. Dutch and (later) British colonisation, immigration of various European nationalities, the importation of labour (slaves and indentured labour), and the ensuing competition for political hegemony and access to resources, marginalised a many-faceted indigenous population. The foundation was laid for a split society which makes up the hybrid, postcolonial South Africa of today. It will be useful for my investigations into the literatures of this site to think of postcolonial studies in Ania Loomba’s terms as a merger of two contexts, where the first comprises the history of decolonisation and the struggle of the colonised to make their voices heard and count, and the second as the changes within western thinking about ‘the colonial’: the cultural, social, and political processes that have made the west realise that Aimé Césaire’s equation between colonialism and ‘thingification’ has implications for the coloniser also; colonialism exploits, dehumanises and objectifies both colonised and coloniser.²²

Although I have chosen to investigate the fiction of two white authors, I will have to pose and answer questions regarding both contexts, because both Brink and Coetzee inhabit a middle ground concerning the postcolonial: as Afrikaners they share in the tradition of the oppressor – the white, privileged, and ‘guilty’ writers of the dominant history – which has shaped their identities and the conditions for their lives and work. As Afrikaners they also share in the myth of “tribal salvation” from condescension and discrimination (from the

¹⁹ Ibid, 2

²⁰ Ibid, 74

²¹ Ibid, 22

²² Aimé Césaire quoted by Ania Loomba, 24.

British) for “the wandering Afrikaner tribes” to the pattern of the Israelites in search of their promised land.²³ They have both taken the stand of the dissenter within their national culture to challenge the colonial definitions of race, class, culture and language, and as such have been made to experience what it means to be ‘homeless’, or “no longer European, not yet African”.²⁴ As members of the international society, they have both been affected by “the revolution, within ‘Western’ intellectual traditions, in thinking about [...] language and how it articulates experience, how ideologies work, how human subjectivities are formed, and what we might mean by culture”.²⁵

Interesting questions to pose concerning the postcolonial aspect of these fictional texts, then, are those that have to do with identity: how are the identities of the coloniser and the colonised established within colonial South Africa and what characterises ‘the South African identity’ after the fall of apartheid? Is white, African identity in any way possible?

The popularity of the novel as a new genre in the nineteenth century led to a general suspicion of the narrative mode as viable in scientific historicism. The tradition within literature for regarding the ‘creative’ genres as less ‘reliable’ and ‘objective’ than the genres of fact, has resulted in the truth-function of factual history as ranked higher than that of historical fiction. The association of fiction with myth, ideology and the imaginary made storytelling as a form suspect in the conveyance of scientific truth about the past. With modernism’s and postmodernism’s emphasis on text as text and language, there has been a move towards a perception of history itself as text and narrative, instead of thinking about history as a series of factual events existing behind the text, in a factual realm of its own. What we have to relate to in literatures of fact, as well as in those of fiction, are stories with varying degrees of connections with real events of the real world, all basically inseparable from the real, founded as they are on the human experience of life lived.

Hayden White has taken a special interest in the potential divergence between narrative and history and attempted to approach the conflict between the ‘scientific’, truth-oriented historicism and a more traditional, story-based way of representing and explaining history. Far from viewing narrative discourse as neutral and therefore applicable in the conveyance of scientific research and results, he sees all narration as inherently ideological, “an expression in discourse of a distinct mode of experiencing and thinking about the world,

²³ J.M Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 2

²⁴ *Ibid*, 11

²⁵ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 23

its structures and its processes”.²⁶ According to Hayden White, it is precisely this lack of (pretence of) neutrality which makes the narrative mode suited to engage the reader in an experience of historic events. In this Hayden White refers to Georg Lukács’ claim that “only by a narrativistic apprehension of reality [can] the infinite variety, depth, and epic sweep of human life in history [...] be grasped in consciousness”.²⁷ A crucial question which follows is whether real life and narrated life (history) can be said to be ‘generically related’: do coherently structured plots and causality of events only exist in fiction, or can the formal attributes we find in narratives also be found as structures in real life? White draws on David Carr’s theories to argue for the lifelikeness of human life and plots of historic narratives:

Narrative representations of historical reality can be considered realistic and veracious to the extent that human agents inhabit a sociocultural world that is structured narrativistically and intend their actions in such a way as effectively to make of them the kinds of actions about which ‘true’ stories can be told.²⁸

For White, historical storytelling is neither purely ideological nor purely scientific, but “rather some third kind of discourse especially suited to the representation of that one animal which not only *tells* stories, but *lives* them as well”, and the task of the historian thus to find and truthfully retell “the ‘real’ story embedded within the welter of facts”.²⁹

Hayden White distinguishes between a historical discourse that narrates and a discourse that narrativises. While the first openly takes the view of a narrator reporting the events of the world, the second pretends that the events speak themselves, thus feigning objectivity where the truth is that real events can never tell themselves, they can only be and be represented.³⁰ He quotes Roland Barthes on the false reality of narratives: “‘What takes place’ in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally nothing; ‘what happens’ is language alone [...]”.³¹ Narratives, then, whether factual or fictional, are representational forms and must express, through deliberate or unconscious choices, the attitudes and ideologies of the narrator, and must be evaluated accordingly.

This is what Brink and Coetzee attempt to do: in their fictional as well as in their non-fictional writing, both have critically evaluated the history of the dominant culture of which they are members and yet from which they dissent. They have both applied the story as fictional form to contest the myths, the falsifications and the omissions in the history of the

²⁶ Hayden White, “Storytelling: Historical and ideological”, in Robert Newman ed., *Centuries’ Ends, Narrative Means* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 59

²⁷ Ibid, 61-62

²⁸ Ibid, 67

²⁹ Ibid, 68

³⁰ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 2

³¹ Ibid, 37

Afrikaner 'volk'. But how do they relate to the views on history and human lives as plotted? And do they believe in the historian's ability to find and truthfully retell 'the real story within the welter of facts'?

Anthropologist and writer Michael Jackson's investigations of the meaning of storytelling may serve as a bridge between the theories on history and narrative theory. In *The Politics of Storytelling* he writes about the relationship between story and power:

At the same time that the ancestral legacy of true narratives lays down the law, reinforces respect for received values, and draws attention to the foundational principles of the social order, fictional narratives persistently address quotidian problems of injustice, revealing the frailty of authority, mocking the foibles of men, and shaming all those who mask their greed and ambition with the language of ideology and the trappings of high office.³²

Fiction, then, may offer alternatives or elaborations to the history agreed upon and held as true by society or a dominant culture.

If for a moment we take the extreme view that individual as well as communal identity, history, story and literature consist of text, narrative theory, as "a tool for analysis and interpretation [...] through close reading",³³ seems highly relevant to the study of authors and their fictions situated in history. The distinction within traditional historicism between history and fiction as binary, mutually extinguishable opposites becomes unproductive and artificial. Hayden White observes:

In general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.³⁴

Close attention to text as it relates to other texts, whether 'factual' or 'fictional', engages the active participation of the reader, thus encouraging comparative reading and ethical choice. My personal experience of complicity in a reading process made me realise the importance of opening up to the possible interrelatedness of textual and historical contexts, to enhance a broader understanding of our precarious situation between past and future. A context such as apartheid and postapartheid South Africa highlights the conflicts between the discourses and gives density to the processes of reading and interpretation.

Narrative theory, according to Lothe, "discusses central questions concerning human communication" and "investigates the conditions for, and form and content of, such

³² Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2002), 27-28

³³ Jakob Lothe, *Narrative in Fiction and Film: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9

³⁴ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 82

communication”.³⁵ Lothe traces narrative theory back to Russian formalism in the 1920s and to the contribution of French theorists such as Gérard Genette for the further development of the ‘tool’. Genette identified three fundamental aspects of narrative fiction – discourse, story and narration – distinguishing thus, between the different meanings of the word narrative (récit in French): the statement, the content of the statement, and the action performed when producing the statement. In my close readings of Brink and Coetzee I will be looking at these aspects of the narrative and relate them to the elements on the outside of the text in a communication model, that is the author and the reader in their contexts. This controversial issue in literary theory is associated with conflicts in views on relevance and importance between text and the elements of its context. Narrative theory has traditionally been text-oriented, but tends to take more interest now in both the addresser and the addressee aspects of the model: “As both are part of history and of one or more cultural communities, the recent (re)orientation towards history and context does not reduce the relevance of narrative theory”.³⁶

I will be particularly interested in the various aspects of the concept of narrator in my analysis. As “the one who narrates, as inscribed in the text”,³⁷ “while also helping the author to constitute and communicate it”³⁸ the choice of narrator, linked to choices of characterisation, voice, view-point, style and language is a key element in an investigation of a text’s relation to its context, a text as both of and in history.

Method

From the choices I have made so far relating to problem area and the theoretical foundation for my investigation, it follows that my method for writing this thesis will have to be a combination of close reading of the texts and a reading of the historical context surrounding them. I will apply narrative theory as a tool for interpretation and understanding, and to a great extent try to let the texts speak for themselves through extensive use of quotations. This focusing on the texts as verbal utterances in dialogue with history will also imply an awareness of the questions posed by the texts to me as a reader. My analysis will thus be a negotiation between the main questions I have outlined above and the questions emanating from the texts themselves. As the texts are different, my approach will to some extent have to differ, respecting the individuality of each text.

³⁵Jakob Lothe, *Narrative in Fiction and Film*, vii

³⁶ Ibid, 17

³⁷ Gerald Prince’s definition, *ibid*, 20

³⁸ Ibid, 20

Such focusing on the integrity of a text, as an individual entity coming alive in the process of reading, will also lead to a focus on its writing: not necessarily on the physical creation through a historical writer, but as an amalgam of text filtered through the mind of the writer, leaving traces of earlier text-lives. This question of referentiality concerns the other aspect of my thesis: the work's place in the world. Both Brink and Coetzee can be regarded as 'texts' written in a painful conflict of two worlds, attached as they are both to a western literary and cultural tradition and to the African past and present. Reading the context through the texts by going into these traces of the texts that have constituted them, will hopefully yield possible clues to their position in contemporary and future south Africa, but only to the extent that I as a historical reader am able to understand them.

This brings me back to my problem statement: what I am interested to find out is in what ways these two South African authors relate to the historical, political, cultural and social contexts they are part of and contribute to. I see their texts as traces of the history that has 'written' them as authors and attempt to see how these texts in their present negotiate the past and the future of their world. The main questions I will be posing, then, are the following: how are the texts affected by history and how do they contribute to the making of history? How are strategic and attitudinal differences or similarities reflected in the ways Brink and Coetzee write back to their history? In what ways has the historical watershed of 1994 (the negotiated abolishment of apartheid) affected the communication the authors have engaged in? Do they, as texts, written by 'the text of apartheid' and writing back to – in opposition to or in agreement with other texts – the open-ended present, manage to negotiate a South African identity for a new future? How are the facts and the myths of history used to bridge the gaps between a colonial identity of the past and the postcolonial silence after?

Since what I am after is the tracing of how the world these writers write from, and of, is represented in their fictions, I have found it useful to choose one novel of each, written and published on either side of the political and temporal divide of 1994. They are Brink's *An Instant in the Wind* from 1976 and *Imaginings of Sand* from 1996 and Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* from 1983 and *Disgrace* from 1999.

Brief outline of the following chapters

I have divided my analysis into four main chapters, one for each of the novels. Within each chapter I will try to establish the individuality of the particular text in its context. This interpretation will be at the basis of my investigation of change and development relating

issues of identity and future in each author. Placing the two texts by Brink first reflects my own history as a reader and my growing awareness of the ambiguity of truth. Coetzee's two novels come last as they challenge both Brink's and my own perception of history, fiction and reality.

To go a little more in detail, the first chapter will be on Brink's *An Instant in the Wind* and I will be investigating into the author's attitudes to and expressions of the interrelatedness of history and story. Can a love-story, wrought on a motif lifted from the factual history of Australia, contribute to the understanding of the situation in South Africa in the violent final stages of the apartheid regime?

The second chapter will be dealing with the postapartheid era and Brink's imagining of a common South African future in the 'Rainbow Nation'. *Imaginings of Sand* was published only two years after the official abolishment of apartheid, at a time when both the new authorities and the ordinary south African were in much of a limbo, striving to come to terms with their divided past for the making of a common future for 'new' South Africa. I am curious to know what role Brink sees for the author of fiction in this situation.

In the third chapter I turn to Coetzee's fourth novel, *Life & Times of Michael K*, asking how an author so occupied with the aesthetics of literature relates to the political and social situation in the late 80s, when an apocalyptic termination of the old order seemed a logical consequence of the near civil-war-situation wrecking society at this time. How does an ambiguous author such as Coetzee write into these times when simple dichotomies of good and bad, black and white seem to dictate both the political and the artistic discourses?

Finally there is *Disgrace*. In the last chapter I ask what became of the future hinted at in *Life & Times of Michael K*. Is the white author still trying to come to terms with the colonial past or are there signs of his entering into a postcolonial future? And if so, what are his main concerns for the writing of the common South African future identity?

The concluding chapter attempts to sum up the main points regarding each novel's relations to historical context and questions of identity. Furthermore, I will elaborate on the questions of each novel as they relate to the change and development in the authors and their approach to their contexts. Finally, accounting for varying views on the role of the author, I sum up my perception of the similarities and differences between these two major writers.

CHAPTER 2: *AN INSTANT IN THE WIND*

Considering the political situation in South Africa at the end of the 1970s when *An Instant in the Wind* was published, it is easy to imagine the shocking effect it must have had on the audience at home. The apartheid ideology concretised in the laws of the nation (the Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act, of 1950 and 1949 respectively) and internalised in people's minds and thinking, was rebelled against from within the very ranks of the dominant culture itself. At the heart of this provocation we find Brink's questioning of the origins and the legitimacy of the present political and social situation. His concerns are with the dualism of identity imposed on all South Africans by the policy of apartheid. With a view to my problem statement, the most important question to ask here concerns Brink's fictional approach to the master-myths of history: How can a simple, imaginary love-story of a black man and a white woman in the interior of South Africa in colonial times work against the segregated realities of the present? In other words, how can the imagination of story purport to oppose the 'truths' of history?

I will proceed to analyse the text from a postcolonial point of view as a narrative drawing on the interplay of history and story: Brink goes to the far past and uses fictional imagination in search for alternatives to the contemporary reality of the apartheid regime. Positioning himself within the colonial other, as black man and white woman, he rewrites the myths at the basis of the South African colonial situation. The text portrays the development of a postcolonial mind both on the discursive level of the narrator and on the story-level of the protagonists. In the following I will attempt to investigate the novel, in Brink's own terms as "a quest for truth, through an imagining of the real".³⁹

A short summary will make it clear what we are up against:

Adam and Elisabeth represent the opposite ends of race and class divisions of South African society in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Through an irony of fate, the run-away slave and the young, white upper-class woman of the Cape Colony are left to themselves, and to each other, in the 'wild' interior of South Africa. Elisabeth's only hope of surviving the dangers of the 'uncivilized interior', and return to the Cape, is through Adam's knowledge of the country. On the other hand, his yearning to escape the loneliness of life on the outside of society makes him willing to accept the uncomfortable situation of taking responsibility for her, hoping that by bringing her back safely he can buy his own freedom and earn his place in society. Thus, they depend upon each other for their lives. Their journey through the interior back to the colony is a dramatic tale involving much agony, fear and suffering. It is

³⁹ André Brink, *Mapmakers*, 221

also the story of development and learning, of growing awareness and ability to live peacefully and harmoniously in spite of differences of culture and colour. By the time they reach the sea they have become lovers, and for a while returning to the Cape Colony seems unimportant. They enjoy the happy, playful and undemanding life in the seclusion of their beach, but a growing awareness of the negative impact of isolation from civilisation outside, makes them complete the journey and return to the Cape. To become more than Edenic dream, their freedom must be tested in the real world of other people. From their garden-like life of plenty at the sea, the march through the infertile inland back to civilisation becomes a struggle of life and death where their determination to survive and save each other for a common future remains the sole motivation. What was possible outside society however, proves to be hopeless within. Having reached their destiny, he is captured and executed; she is forced to remarry to save the remnants of respectability.

This synopsis will suffice to cover the main events of this rather emotional and dramatic provocation of decency. On a first reading, the love-story of Adam and Elisabeth dominates, but beneath the romanticised surface of simplified binary oppositions in characters and themes there is more. The theme of travel as the mental journey towards learning and understanding enhances a deeper understanding of the love theme. It also suggests that a contextual reading of the story in relation to history will yield more general answers to the questions of how travel, life and learning are connected here.

Let me investigate the first by looking at the structure of the text. There is a circular movement describing a physical journey from the civilisation of the Cape Colony, into the wilderness and back, which is reflected in the development of the protagonists. As the wife of a scientist explorer (Larsson), and as a white woman, Elisabeth brings civilisation with her into the unknown hinterland, in her way of living and in her attitudes – in all the ways she has been brought up to think about herself and the world around. Once spatially removed from the Cape, the support of this ordered life fails and the world as she knows it disintegrates: the expedition gets lost for lack of knowledge about the land and its conditions. The white guide shoots himself and their maps do not correspond to the topographical realities of the country. The white man's scientific approach in mapping and naming is fatally insufficient as a means to read the land in relation to survival, and Larsson's theoretical, bookish superiority is exposed as a sham. The vulnerability and dependency of the explorers on those who know the country are only realised when the land and its inhabitants both turn against them. Abandoned by their Hottentot crew, alone, with all the useless equipment of culture and science as proofs of the efforts to expand white civilisation, Elisabeth, the only survivor of the expedition, is hopelessly lost. Then Adam decides to come forward, but he refuses to act the slave she sees. Her world shattered, Elisabeth must journey her mental topography to write herself anew and fit her maps to the 'landscape' as it really is: the fact that her life now depends on the goodwill and skills of a black slave, forces Elisabeth gradually to accept that there are other realities than the ones she has known and believed in, and that the white truth is a limited one.

Adam, on the other hand, must deal with the image of himself as the inferior black other and his preconceptions of women and white masters in order to establish himself as a free man both in his own eyes and in hers. The hatred and plans of revenge that sustained him during his captivity now keep him from knowledge of the white, woman other: “How can you understand?” he [asks]. ‘You’re white. I’m only a slave, aren’t I? I’m two hands and two legs, I’m like an ox or a mule. You’re the head, you’re the one who is allowed to think. I’m just a body’”.⁴⁰

The reader is invited to see the similarities between their social positions: while he a slave of white masters, she one of men and male-made conventions. Brink makes her express their common problem, “No matter what *you* want, your whole life is determined by someone else” (150). In this context there is serious irony in Elisabeth’s utterance that “to be a girl like me is the worst that can happen to one” (150). They both rebel against the ideology that keeps them down, but do not yet recognise their common position as victims. To each other they are the unfamiliar other. Elisabeth desperately resists Adam’s natural inclination to take control of the situation, because the parallels emerging between her own situation and that of the runaway slave contradicts everything she has learnt to believe in. She is struck by panic at having to face herself as an entity disconnected from a supportive environ: “the daughter of the Company’s keeper of stores; [with a] mother [...] from Batavia [...] and on their journey: the wife of the white explorer. Now quite suddenly, there is no one in terms of whom she can be recognised. No one, only herself”(49). During the long journey, however, the two manage to shed the identities imposed upon them by society and face their own selves and their solitude in the other.

The sense of mental development and change is supported by the author’s use of questions which are repeated throughout the text, posed by the protagonists and by voices of their past, echoing the narrator’s initial ‘who were they?’. These questions are gradually answered in the discourse rendering the exploration of identity. In spoken as well as in the many instances of silent dialogue, Adam and Elisabeth dig deeper and deeper into the layers of self: the simple “Who are you?” (18) of the first encounter soon becomes a more insisting “who am I?” or “Is that me?[...] And if it’s me – who am I?” (49). Simple answers betray their preconceptions: “You: the ultimate *thou-shalt-not*, the most untouchable of all, you: white, woman” (22), but are gradually replaced by the more uncertain “What do you really know about me? What do I know about myself?” (100).

⁴⁰ André Brink, *An Instant in the Wind* (London: Vintage, 2000), 78-79. Further references to the novel will be given in parentheses in the text.

Through constant confrontations, between as well as within themselves, they try to reach deeper into their selves behind their given roles and dare to face each other as individuals. What they gain is the possibility of life, and the freedom which comes with the acceptance that betrayal and death is always part of the bargain. Adam expresses the pain involved in breaking free from the mental captivity of his self-defensive isolation:

Yes. Somewhere, somehow, it should be possible to touch someone and never to let go again. To hold someone, not for a moment but forever, in a world where everything is fleeting and painful and treacherous. And for the sake of that small possibility you must be willing to risk everything, to break through, to walk into the night naked. (101)

On this level there is not so much the sense of their losing the game in the tragic ending of their lives: having established the possibilities for cross-cultural coexistence by transgressing the boundaries that kept them both down, they have in one way become untouchable. They have tasted death and betrayal as conditions of life on the margins of existence. Through bonding with a fellow human being and with life itself they have escaped the spiritual decay of seclusion. In their independent exploring and mapping of their identities as those of the colonial self and other, they have exposed the deceptions and misinterpretations of colonial civilisation and deliberately chosen a truer state of being. Elisabeth's journal entry "This no one can take away from us, not even ourselves" (12) forms the simple conclusion of their struggle. The words also reflect an increasing awareness of betrayal and death as possibilities.

The theme of travel as the mental journey towards learning and understanding is also central in what I see as Brink's rewriting of colonial literature describing and legitimising the appropriation of the African 'wilderness'. Using the familiar tropes of exploration and mapping, scientific registering and naming, he deliberately sets out to oppose the colonial myth of racial segregation as given and natural. Travellers' and scientists' reports gathered from early on by colonial authorities describe the inaccessibility and barrenness of the African landscape and the sloth and idleness of its scarce, 'barbaric' population, thus sustaining the moral justification for the intrusion of the civilised, morally superior white man. At the time of colonisation, economic and scientific advancement generated an attitude of pre-eminence in the west: ideas on cultural evolution and on a division of mankind into distinct races were held to be self-evident, undeniable and naturally given. The black man, descendant of Ham, was at the bottom end of the evolutionary scale and a mixture of races was seen as inevitably leading to degeneration. In this novel Brink isolates two 'racially opposite' individuals from within the colonial context – the superior, civilised self and the barbaric, violent and inferior other – and 'deconstructs' their colonial separate selves before letting them redevelop their identities as a natural adaptation to the circumstances of their present. Neither the physical nor

the mental maps of civilisation apply in the African hinterland: they are revealed as false or inadequate images of the real. Only by learning to read the topography of the land around them and the inner landscape of self and other are they able to understand, develop and live. As they journey through the deserts and hills and mountains they establish their common African identity and map the true African land. The scientific mapping and naming in languages foreign to the country and its people is exposed as contrary to life in it: Larsson and van Zyl perish as a direct consequence of failing to adapt to the reality of nature. They are stuck in the mental grids imposed upon them by civilisation, slaves of their scientific minds.

In the physical and mental journey of Elisabeth and Adam, there is also an echo of the biblical myth of the Israelites through which the Afrikaner 'volk' interpreted their rights to 'the promised land'. Here the themes of suffering, opposition and obedience, and the land as reward for endurance are played on, to question and oppose these myths: the land is there to live in for those who accept its terms. The San and the Khoikhoi, the blacks – in religious myth descendants of the outcast, forever destined to serve the master races – are present in the novel as story, history, culture, knowledge and understanding, where in the master myths they are silent absences. They are written into the story as part of the land, where the colonisers through their violent imperialistic ways of thinking and acting write themselves out of it: Larsson's failure to name and possess is a rewriting of the colonial master-myths of heroic frontier-men and the progress of science and culture. Western, theoretical science is in fact rendered as rather ridiculous, contrasting the ancient wisdom of the natives which is born out of their one-ness with nature.

Both race-relations and gender-relations are questioned in the course of the journey. The fact that the two manage to reach beyond their given selves and establish a relationship of mutual dependency negates the authenticity of the theories of racial hierarchies and segregation. However, what is established as natural and good in the development of their friendship is not recognized as such in the dominant, 'morally superior' society. This reveals the failures of civilisation to recognise the destructive effect of colonisation on the coloniser: mentally both parties are captives of the system. Adam's grandmother, Seli, expresses this mutual dependency: "Whose Baas is he? Slave of his slaves, is what he is. What can he do without them?" (139), and Elisabeth describes white people's fear of the subdued other, in her comments on life in town: "You see, being white at the Cape means to live in constant fear. There are so many enemies" (150). This fear is part of her 'whiteness' which comes out in her self-defensive bullying of Adam. Ordering him about is a way of keeping him in place and controlling her anxiety. As she recognises her own fears in the other, she also realises that

what she is really scared about is not rape, but “..this space forcing us inward to one another” (89). She abandons her supremacy, confronts her fear, asking “Can one survive it? For how long can a snail exist outside its shell? Why should one try to reach across the flames, into that other darkness, fearing it?” the answer she finally gives is “one must be able to walk into the night. Not a question of imagination, but of faith” (108). Only by risking the loss can freedom be gained.

The point made here is that ‘civilisation’ in the shape of apartheid South Africa is the distressing result of a misguided reading of western, scientific maps which do not fit the reality of the land. The order of things as they are is not a matter of having adapted to factual circumstances, as the historic myths will have it, but of forcefully imposing ones own understanding on others through colonisation of mind and body. The divides along lines of colour and gender are exposed as limiting, artificial constructs which serve to uphold colonial power. Hence the feeling of alienation and barrenness in the relation of the coloniser to the land results in the incessant questioning of a white, African identity.

Then there is the aspect of history. I have suggested that a close reading of the narrative and an exploration of the author’s attitude to history may prove useful. My reason for including *An Instant in the Wind* in my investigations is not only the insurgency of the Afrikaner writer in imagining the possibility of a mixed- race love relationship. Nor is it the counter-discursive nature of his writing on issues of master/slave relationships or on notions of ‘civilisation’ and ‘savagery’. Although Brink’s rewriting of the colonial discourse is substantial in itself, there is much more to it in the ways the novel demonstrates the capacity of fiction to oppose history and establish its own truths. I will suggest that Brink in his consciously deconstructive rewriting of the myths of South African history aims to bare the constructions of white hegemony and expose them to scrutiny. By confusing fact and fiction, he gets to the core of the issue, forcing the reader to participate in his questioning of what is true and what is imagination, finally asking whether indeed this is the important question. In my opinion Brink aims to dissolve our notions of a solid linkage between truth and fact on one hand and untruth and imagination on the other, to activate a creative force for the future, freed from the restrictions of a rigid image of the past.

Again the narrative methods are closely linked to the themes of the fiction: Brink goes to history asking whether what we have now, our present, really is the only possibility, suggesting that the questions not asked, and the ones not allowed to be posed, resulted in the silencing of the other, through the myths of the imperial self, to legitimise the abuse of power. In his questions and in his attempts to find answers through re-imagining back into memory

the silenced stories, he brings out a perception of history as construction. History cannot be *found* in the events of the past, but is made by the tellers of story, by their selections and omissions, their interpretations and their deliberate falsifications. I will now proceed to show how Brink in this narrative presents us with these processes and constructions in a scenario where the choices are made openly, pointing at the uncertainty and ambiguity of history as made. Situated in an undefined middle ground between fact and fiction, the narrative of *An Instant in the Wind* powerfully manipulates the reader into believing in both. I will begin by looking at the structure of the narrative discourse from the perspective of history, asking how the organisation of the text contributes to our understanding of history as made, not found.

The narrative is organised in four chapters, unnumbered and without any headings. There is a sharp contrast between the short first chapter and the three longer ones that follow. This contrast appears to be achieved by opposing historic events and characters of factual history to the imagined, fictional story built on these historic facts. If this were the case, the novel would have been the perfect illustration of the classic conflict within historicism between the scientifically grounded, objective and factual rendering of history as fact and the detailed historical narrative, whose value consists in its ability to illustrate and give life to the factual and true. Brink would have been writing in support of history, the second, fictional part an illustration of the factual first. At a first meeting with the novel, the first chapter works as an introduction to the ‘real story’ which comes after. The rendering of bare facts gives us the story as it has been found, excavated from various sources “with much trouble and some luck” (9), by the narrator, the historian:

We know that in 1749, the last year of the rule of Governor Swellengrebel, Elisabeth accompanied her husband, the Swedish traveller Erik Alexis Larsson, on a journey into the interior of the Cape of Good Hope where he died some time after; that she was eventually discovered by the runaway slave, Adam; and that they reached Cape Town together towards the end of February 1751. (9)

The accuracy of the scientist comes out in the details of the information found. The scientific attitude curbing the historian in his search for the objective truth is reflected in the style and language of this part, where he refers to what he has found in official documents:

Forty years later Afrika’s grandson, Adam, also fell foul of the law by disobeying the instructions of his master, the aforementioned Willem Louwrens Rieckert, and by assaulting the latter with a piece of wood. For this crime he was sentenced, after a fair trial, to flogging and branding, followed by banishment to Robben Island. In 1744 his escape was recorded without any further particulars, and for seven years no more was seen of him in the colony. Finally, in March 1751, he was flogged (three rixdollars) and strangled (six rixdollars). (10)

However, this historian seems to be frustrated by the bareness of the story he finds, puzzled by the discrepancies between the sources, and bothered by the sheer impossibility of finding

out who these people really were behind the written traces of their existence. The repetitions of the opening line “Who were they?” hint at the insufficiency of the answers found in the archives. Names and dates revealing the connection between slave and white woman do not fit with the regular pattern of race-relations. Thus, what seems a “trifle, a mere footnote adding nothing to ones knowledge of the land or the course of history”(9), prompts him to search behind the facts: “It is to this end that the crust of history must be scraped off. Not simply to retell it, but to utterly expose it and set it in motion again” (15). Hence, where history of fact fails to open up the past to the understanding of its implications for the present, an engagement of the senses is required. In order to obtain the truth, scientific objectivity must be abandoned as a hindrance blocking the view to the human aspect at the centre.

In the fictional section this ‘insignificant’, but still intriguing story of the scientist and his young wife, their failed expedition and her rescue from the wilderness by the run-away slave is ‘set in motion’ and run like a film with constantly shifting perspectives. It starts with the meeting of Adam Mantoor and Elisabeth Larsson in the camp “somewhere along the tributaries of the Great Fish River”(12), where the expedition has come to a halt. In flashbacks we are familiarised with their backgrounds, but the focus is on the here and now of their experience of being given over to each other by circumstance. Trapped together in the physical interior of Africa, they are forced to confront their mental interiors and reread their pasts – and their old interpretations of their pasts – in order to understand what happens in the present. Their journey towards ‘salvation’ is as much the inner exploration of themselves and each other as it is the dramatic struggle to survive and escape the harsh conditions of life in the desert.

The first of these chapters describes the first lap of the journey, from the interior to the coast. Simultaneously it charts the shedding of old, given identities and the development towards their natural, unconditioned selves. The second describes the innocence of life in love and harmonious co-existence. When the past is worked through, and what can be shared and what separates is identified, the fear of the different other is relinquished and future becomes an issue. The presence of violence and death reminds the two that paradise is more a temporary condition than a lasting reality. They leave their garden, admitting that “one can’t go on pretending” (145) and that no matter what they want, “[they’ve] got to complete the circle, [...] whatever happens” (145). The last chapter depicts the physical journey from the sea, through mountain and desert, back to the Cape colony. It is also the story of mental strains and physical suffering that bring questions about the generally human into the field of vision, consigning the differences of class and colour to the shadows: “[T]his landscape which

conceals nothing” (182) enforces unconditional honesty: “Happiness and suffering is what remains now. To this journey we have been doomed, each of us vast as a desert landscape, pure infinity; interiority. Particulars are for those who are content with facts and faults” (182). What the explicitly human consists in, and what crossing the boundaries may imply, is questioned in poetic sequences of inner dialogue, but also posed as direct, provocative query: “‘Are we no more than animals then?’ she asks, without looking up. ‘How can you survive if you’re not prepared to be an animal?’” (154), he answers.

When the layers of civilisation are stripped off, what remains? Is it possible to retain a sense of dignity and meaning when the reality of life in the present pushes you to the brink of existence? Through the voice of the woman, Brink expresses the freedom intrinsic to the act of choosing: suffering can be made meaningful through its capacity to cleanse and disclose the bone-bare human:

Didn't I say: the circle must be completed? In me everything becomes meaningful or futile. It is up to me to decide. This is the freedom you allow me. You want me to explore suffering, not be destroyed by it.
Suffering: it's like the sky through which a bird is flying. And only occasionally, very rarely – an instant in the wind – it is allowed to alight on branch or burning stone to rest: but not for long. [...] Just for an instant, never more than an instant. Perhaps we can't bear more than an instant at a time.
(197-198)

As I see it, this is a direct reference to the South African reality under apartheid and the inhumanity wrought on people by the system. There is in this passage a view on suffering as a purging quality, verified in the deliberate choice of the individual to see it as such.

The circular structure of this fictional part underlines the notion of development and learning, and underscores the didactic function of Brink's fiction. The author embodies the role of the story-teller in oral traditions, who, through stories, may encourage a process of transcendence and transformation in the listener. The analogy rests on the power of imagination which serves to bring the open-minded listener to foreign countries of the mind where his views on the homely are challenged, thus inducing development through comparative reading of the natural and the unfamiliar, or self and other.

The structure is also aligned with a circular understanding of history associated with more 'primitive' cultures that live closer to the seasonal shifts in nature than industrialised, western cultures do. The idea of history as linear, moving from a beginning to a future ending, is opposed, as is the notion of civilisation as development from the primitive to the complicated and advanced.

The structure within each of the three main chapters rests on the use of contrast: The situation here and now, rendered in the present tense, is contrasted to memories of the past,

and the constantly shifting perspective brings out opposing views of past and present. The story shuttles back and forth between now and before, often without discursive signals to guide the reader. The voices of the white woman and the black man address each other both in spoken dialogue and as “wordless conversation” (85). Both also engage in dialogue with themselves and with people of their past, who contributed to the formation of their identities. Sensorial memories of details, snapshots from earlier life and momentous episodes significant to their development into whom they were when they met, are mixed with the reality of the present and worked through, tested, acknowledged as vital and true or discarded as useless.

The sun is down, the sky still glowing. It is impossibly quiet. [...] He is aware of her watching him. He need only look up to see her. But what would there be to say if he did? I know you? I don't know you? Who are you? What are you doing here? You don't belong here. We don't want to know about the Cape here. It's not true. For five years I've never been able to banish the memory of that Mountain and the bay. The best view by far is the one from Robben Island. They bury you in the sand up to your neck and urinate in your mouth. Through their widespread legs you can see the Mountain. Mother is singing in the vineyard: *Rock of ages, cleft for me...* And grandmother, huddled in her crocheted blanket, mumbles about Padang and about the red and green of hibiscus and shivering touch-me-not leaves. She has her food on the wagon; he stays beside the fire.[...]
 'Bring me some water for washing', she orders. [...]
 'Fetch your own water.'
 Even in the light of the fire he can see how pale she has become.
 'I won't let a slave talk to me like that!' she says angrily. (21)

Elisabeth and Adam/Aob re-read their separate histories from their common viewpoint in the present. The development of their truer, ‘bone-bare’ characters conveys the notion that history is made through the interpretation of events, not by the events in themselves. Truth becomes less a matter of fact than of possibility. Feelings of sadness, frustration, anger and bitterness come out in the dialogue and in the images of past, and blend in the difficult process of finding out who they really are.

As a direct result of the fear she feels at being left alone with Adam, and provoked by his disbelief in the ability of the white scientist to survive and return to save her, Elisabeth addresses the memory of her father as another representative of the male world she has been defined within, testing her belief in the authority of men:

'He'll [Larsson] know how to get us out of here. After all he's a man.' Resenting herself for saying so. Hearing again the cry of the new-born baby behind the door as her father came out with hunched shoulders, stopping as he saw her. 'Where have you been?' she asked in quiet accusation. 'Why do you want to know?' he replied. She could feel her face burning: 'Is that another of your bastards? And what's going to happen to him?' 'Mind your tongue, Elisabeth,' he said. 'It's none of your business.' She snapped at him in rage: 'You think a slave is nothing but a woman!' Thinking: and a woman no more than a slave. The impotent anger in his tired eyes. 'Go up to your room, Elisabeth, and stay there till tonight.'
 'We have to stay here,' she insists. 'In case he comes back. Afterwards, all right.' Oh God, the sea. (26)

In the effective interplay of dialogue and narrative comment, we glimpse Elisabeth's process of coming to terms with her idea of men. Parallel to the disclosures of the shams of white,

scientific, objective historical truth, the history of the colonisation of women as the inferior, nameless and empty other is reread in Elisabeth's revolt against a male-made reality. Both her husband and her father have failed to live up to her expectations: there is a gap between their dominant position in society and their moral integrity. She addresses her dead husband in words which links her experience to the stories of slaves and oppressed, inferior people of the margins:

Never to be able to do what you really want, because you're a woman; never to be allowed to become what you desire, because you're a woman. [...]

This once I'll trek into my own wilderness.

So in the end I really was nothing but a curious little mammal to be noted in your diary. You must have had some satisfaction finding a name for me. Naming, you said, didn't you, was your way of possessing a part of the earth.

You thought I was a barrel or a wagon or a cow you could possess? Two wagons, five boxes, two frying pans, sixteen guns, nine Hottentots, one woman. [...]

Who possesses whom? You the earth, or the earth you? Phoenicopterus rubber, a species of grallae, if I remember well: I've never had – how did you put it? – a faculty for scientific understanding. (65-66)

Sudden turns from the memory to related conflicts of the present characterise the discourse. This point applies particularly to the first chapter of the 'fiction-part', where the struggle to obtain a measure of mutual understanding is at its fiercest. Each of these conversations reveal the ways history and culture have shaped the two into the unknown other of each other's conscience, but the discourse also presents us with a more general understanding of historiocity as science defined by a white, dominant culture. Elisabeth's white history of the colonial centre is pitted against Adam's sense of history as what happens here, in the wilderness, outside, and independent of, white civilisation.

'Strange to think,' she says impulsively, 'that I'm probably the first person ever to come here.' With a small laugh of surprise: 'I'm making history!'

'I'm here too,' he says with brooding rage. 'And many Hottentots come this way.' [...]

'You think you're taking history with you wherever you go,' he says with a sneer. 'I suppose history to you is what happens to the people of the Cape.'

'Well, it's from the Cape that this whole land is being civilised,' she retorts.

'And civilisation is history? The Cape with its churches and schools and gallows, is that all that matters to you? How do you civilise a land? And how do you know when you've gone too far?'

'I wasn't referring to that at all.'

'No? Why else should you imagine that you're the first person to come here? History is what *you're* doing! It's everything that makes the Cape more prosperous and powerful. Isn't that civilisation? But don't you think history can happen here too, without you? – with every weak old Hottentot bundled into a porcupine hole, with every nameless wanderer crossing this river?' (84)

The land is gradually portrayed, almost as a live organism in its own right, as antagonistic or cooperative, barren or generous, as the African reality. Larsson as a representative of white, scientific colonisation attempts to map and name the land in the foreign terms of his Latin, acts of asserting control and ownership, but the land resists and finally claims his life. Being together in what Elisabeth terms "not a cruel land, just apathetic" (68), forces the woman and

the slave to shed the identity of other, to acknowledge the recognition of self in the other, and finally to establish a sense of 'same', although different and individual. It is the honesty inherent in, and demanded by, a landscape acutely aware of the presence of death, which breaks down the self-defensive illusions of the boundless authority of civilisation in Elisabeth: "It takes from you what is redundant: wagon and oxen, guide and husband and child, camp and shelter, conversation, help, imagined security, preparation and presumption, clothes. Whittling you down to yourself" (68). As her true self then, she acknowledges that "nothing [...] [is] quite so difficult as the obvious and the natural - [...] To transcend the thou-shalt-not of a lifetime, to discard an entire education, a way of life, as if it were irrelevant" (112). She can now define herself as part of a greater history than the limited and limiting one of the colonial centre. Through 'the barbarian other' she has got access to the African history as process:

We're living here, provisionally for ever, protected from the wind, in a cave high above the sea, the inner walls blackened by smoke and soot; not from yesterday's fire, but the fires of centuries, perhaps millennia. Here and there, through the sooty crust, one can make out patches of colour – a rusty brown, ochre, off-white, red. And if you look closely in the light of a piece of burning wood, you discover curious little figures of men with bows and pricks, a buffalo hunt, ostriches, elephants with raised trunks, running buck. This is our home: from here we set out on journeys to the edge of the impossible, along moist paths of moss and smooth pebbles, without footprints. Provisionally. (113)

The colonial consciousness has now been discarded, and the obvious and natural ways of free (postcolonial) existence proven to be valid. The exploring, mapping and naming from the 'civilised' centre is uncovered as the making of historical myth: the ultimate aim was the subjection of the 'empty' and 'nameless' country to colonial history. Journeying and constantly questioning their relations with each other and the land, these two *make* history.

The chaotic conversations the reader is engaged in between the others of past and present in this 'fictional' part of the novel hint at the possibilities in a present and a future for a greater sense of freedom for both coloniser and colonised. A struggle toward the truth of the core, of the "bone-being" of human life and relations, is visualised in the relationship of the white woman and the black man, who are to each other the doubly other – white and woman, black and slave – and to history, the inferior other who is denied the right to speak or name. Their own past histories are revealed to them as made up and put together, through interpretation, selection, lies and omissions, and through silence. Recreating identity and making choices for a joint history is liberating; continuing to believe in the old would hinder them to cope with the present and make the future unattainable. Read from the context of South Africa at the time it was imagined, the story is implausible, but the fact that Brink as a white Afrikaner gives his voice to the others of his stratified society, lends it the credibility of faith. Mapping the interiors of their own minds and breaking the patterns of the superior

culture, they come to the conclusion that “What lay behind them was of no importance, it was past. This space lay before them, all its possibilities enclosed in the future, on the border of reality. All they had to do, was to say: *I will*. For it was will that opened it, will that made it happen” (169).

I will now look at the whole of the novel and the interaction between its separate parts. We know that the seemingly reliable facts of the first sequence are in fact as fictional as what is stated to be fiction in the three main chapters. Thus there appears an ambiguity of both fact and fiction: what we accept as reliable fact due to the style of factual history may be as ‘untrue’ as fiction and, more importantly, what is openly admitted to be fiction seems more reliable and more true than the facts, because it reveals the insufficiency of terse facts to get to the whole, living truth, to the feeling of suffering behind the numbers and facts given in the archives of the power-holders. An investigation of Brink’s use of narrator and characterisation as narrative means will support the view that the novel is a deliberate attempt to transcend the boundaries of an understanding of history as true or false and of the limiting antagonism between factual and fictional history. I suggest that Brink in his fiction goes against the notion of history as a series of events and characters that just occurs, claiming instead that by making choices we create history. He seems adamant that fiction has the power to reveal truth, because free from the restrictions of fact it can investigate the possibilities of imagination.

Thus, reading and rereading the novel, it becomes increasingly clear that what appeared to be the diametrical literary opposites of fact and fiction between the first chapter and the rest is in reality superficial and intended to shed light on truth as illusion. The historian as narrator binds the two sections of the novel together. His scientific proficiency, his professional curiosity and eye for details (‘luck’) have left him with the outlines of a story he cannot make heads and tails of: in the context of eighteenth century colonial South Africa, as well as in the context of “the modern historian” (11), it is unlikely and unexpected. Still, the voice of the woman in the verbal traces she has left in her journals and her memoir makes him abandon his strictly scientific attitude, admitting that “history as such is irrelevant” (14). In a sense, his failure to find a satisfactory truth in the historical sources makes him lose faith in the details of fact and turn inward to explore the possibilities of what might have happened. What is important is the personal experience he glimpses in the occasional outbursts of feeling in the historical sources: “*Such a long journey ahead for you and me. Oh God, oh God.*” (14).

The fictional character of the historian is drawn indirectly through his report on the history he has uncovered. His professional ability, and the fact that he admits to doubt and

uncertainty about the interpretation of his findings, renders him credible: words and clauses like “we know that...”, “one Adam”, “The mother was reported to be...”, “appears to have been”, “seems likely” (9) contribute to the formation of a character aware of the dangers of interpretation. Brink also takes care to place him well within the political and social system of modern South Africa: he is no dissenter; there is no disagreement with the establishment visible in his reports. The fact that he is a conscientious professional and not a rebel in search for evidence of the hidden story of the oppressed, lends credibility to what he proceeds to tell: reporting the facts on Adam he uses terms like “fell foul of the law”, “for this crime”, “after a fair trial”, which situate Adam on the opposite side of the law from the narrator. There are hints, though, at a slowly awakening consciousness about other possibilities than those that immediately meet the eye. The entries in the journals of Larsson’s “clinically accurate notes” (13) form a striking contrast to the personal and urgent tone in Elisabeth’s “distressingly cryptic” (14) messages. The question “who are they?” seems to open up to more differentiated and ambiguous answers than those based on historic fact in answer to the ‘what happened’ of critical historicism. Brink lets his awakening historian conclude that what matters is the belief in the possible existence of a different story. Fact is useful, not as a starting-point for fantasy and imagination (as in fiction), but as traces of the possible. “It is not a question of imagination, but of faith”. We believe that what follows is the result of sincere and sensible interpretation of the unwritten story read between the lines of fact, not the romantic fantasies of a dissenter writer of a counter story.

In the narrator we find Brink’s spokesperson, “the image of the author in the text”, presenting and representing the value system of the text.⁴¹ Within this short chapter Brink develops his narrator from the traditional historian, objectively and scientifically searching the facts for the truth about the past, to the ‘new historicism’ historian who examines the traces of history and asks questions about possibilities. The ‘narrator as historian’ is turned into the ‘historian as a teller of story’. Like the author behind, the narrator ends up attempting to fill in the gaps and absences between the acknowledged facts with stories of what may have been. The silences are filled with voices.

In the ‘fictional’ chapters, the historian-narrator continues his third-person narration, although in a more withdrawn position, letting the characters of his story speak for themselves as first person narrators. He applies a much more poetic language, appealing more to a sensory understanding in the reader, where the objective, intellectual historian of the first

⁴¹ Lothe, 19

chapter constantly referred to the facts of the matter. He appears to be the omniscient narrator of fiction – as when describing Elisabeth’s coming to the Hottentots’ camp: “to one side, isolated from the rest by a clump of trees, a few more huts reserved – which she won’t know, of course – for the sick...” (63), but reminds the reader on a few occasions that what he presents are the events, the descriptions or the thoughts of the historical characters as they may have been, thus retaining the illusion of realism: “[..] suddenly the river was below them, breathtaking, broader than any of the others they’d had to cross. That is the scene as she describes it in her journal. It is easy to presume the rest” (93). The result is an ambiguous blend of fact and fiction which leaves the reader uncertain about truth and fantasy. We are also made aware that the many voices he allows to speak for themselves are the imagined voices, as he hears them behind the insufficient facts, speaking of the events as they may have been experienced: “That is the way it may have been. That is how it probably was” (112) or “How would they, afterwards, remember the end of that warm season, what would they retain of it?” (138). Through these narrative clues the investigation as process is left open: the reader is reminded that this is the historian’s story of his encounter with the historical traces of people, a story of possibilities. He is not claiming to tell *the* truth, only *something true*.

Concluding, the characterisation of Adam and Elisabeth in relation to each other is the point on which everything hinges in the ‘fictional’ part as well as in the two parts seen together. Imagined through the developing postcolonial mind of the narrator, Brink makes the characters of Adam and Elisabeth rewrite themselves from their starting-points as mythical traces of history into purely human identities. The staggering opposites at the outset of the journey, between the white, ‘cultured’ female and the black slave are deconstructed in the scrutiny of the history that made them, and rebuilt in opposition to the myths that made both of them others. Through this act of deconstruction, Brink manages to reveal the myth as more unreal than the explorations of possibilities in a fictional text: left to themselves, the characters change from unrealistic, mythical constructs of clichés and prefigured images into human conglomerates of free thought, feeling and experience, of faith and doubt, with a ‘faculty for happiness’ (158), but also “[..] scared and petty and treacherous” (106). The question of the characters’ reliability, then, must be seen in relation to the themes of the whole: they are drawn as possibilities, connected to faith in the possible, not to the factual truth about what actually happened. Brink envisions the ultimate human polarities of his contemporary South Africa, places them in a temporary and spatial context which bares the roots of apartheid as a system and lets them sort things out between them. By the sheer logic of the process, he shows that keeping apart is the unnatural, not togetherness.

The act of provocation lies in the author's ability to reach back into the core of individual identity, behind the roles determined and internalised by society, to show the possibilities – and obligations – of choice. The obvious threat such personal freedom would pose to the colonial mind of the cultural centre is made clear in the reaction from society when the two attempt to bring their new understanding back to 'civilisation': they are forced into separate spheres again – subordination for women and subservience, violence and death the terms of reality for blacks, as much at the time of writing as at that of the story.

In this lies the richness of the novel: in its capacity for hope and in managing to bring across the plausibility of a different reality than that of South Africa in the late 70s. Both on the discourse level of the narrator and on the story-level of the protagonists, the author demonstrates the potential of fiction to oppose and contradict history. The ambiguity of story counters the certainties of historical myths, and the flexibility of free thought contests the rigid fixities of the colonial mind. In the story's dimension of fantasy lies its faculty for transgression of the boundaries of the known world: the listener can be provoked out of the ordinary, encouraged to reflect and reengage with the ordinary with new understanding of the possibilities.

In *An Instant in the Wind*, history as the possession of a dominant culture is pitted against the silenced, lived and endured histories of the dominated. The role of the narrator – and the author behind him – is to fill the gaps of official history with stories, thus provoking the reader to contemplate the historical causality behind the present and *make real* other possibilities. Change may then become a question of will and courage, like David's, "to risk everything, to break through, to walk into the night naked" (101).

CHAPTER 3: *IMAGININGS OF SAND*

What a blow struck at the core of humanity, to deprive people of signs when signs are what make them human. The need to say: *I am. I am here. I was here.* The need to exist beyond the limits of the I.⁴²

Turning now to Brink's literature of the postapartheid era, I will be considering how the author relates to seminal changes within the political context. I will explore his strategies for fiction in relation to the future opened up after the fall of 'the old order'. How has the abolishment of apartheid affected the communications Brink engages in? What use does Brink make of the myths and facts of history to bridge the gap between the colonial and the postcolonial identity of the Afrikaner? These are the aspects of the problem statement I will keep at the forefront in my reading when I embark upon *Imaginings of Sand*, which was published in 1996, two years after Mandela was elected president in the first free election in the history of the country.

The novel situates itself in a present between a colonial past and an uncertain, postcolonial future, posing existential questions about identity and belonging. In the following, I propose to analyse *Imaginings of Sand* as text at the crossroads between past and future, fact and fiction, history and story, thus tracing the efforts and achievements of an author relentlessly occupied with their interrelatedness. I take as my point of departure the essential question posed by the text itself: is it possible to counter the imposition of silences and reread the myths and lies of the past in order to build a shared future for the former selves and others of a longstanding segregated reality, or is the dualism of the apartheid era irreparably inscribed in both coloniser and colonised as victims of the imperialist mindset? This question informs the way I read Brink's fictional approach to history, attempting to answer the main questions of my thesis about the important relationship between historical context and narrative presentation in literature.

Here is first a brief synopsis of the story:

A few weeks before the elections in April 1994 Kristien returns to South Africa after eleven years of voluntary exile in London. The country is wrecked with violence and racial conflicts: tensions run high, physical and psychological chaos threatens to jeopardise the transition from white minority rule to desegregated, multicultural democracy. The event which sets the plot in motion by changing Kristien's decision never to return to her native country is a bomb-attack on the family farm, which

⁴² André Brink, "The Hour of the Idiots", in *Reinventing a Continent: Writing and Politics in South Africa* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Zoland Books, 1998), 28

leaves her grandmother fatally wounded and hospitalised. The strong ties between the two, and her Ouma Kristina's urgent message that they need to talk before she dies, compel Kristien to leave her present life as a teacher in London, to confront her own past and the Afrikaner identity she was determined to renounce. The narrative's main level relates Kristien's unenthusiastic reunion with the (living and dead) members of her old community in 'Outeniqua', a fictitious town in the Little Karoo, where she takes care of her dying grandmother. The process of coming to terms with her position is accomplished through the telling of stories: Ouma Kristina lets Kristien in on the secret lives of her forbears and makes her part of the chain of women's voices portraying the African experience from the first days of European colonisation up until the present, in what finally comes through as a coherent narrative of both personal and national dimensions. In the line of silenced stories, myths and facts of history are mixed, truth is merged with the imagined, and realism is blended with the magic feel of Africa. When Ouma dies on the night before election-day, Kristien has come to understand that the stories have left her both an obligation and a choice to take up her position in this history and contribute to its writing.

Both structurally and thematically, this is a many-layered story. A summary such as this only presents the main events on its more obvious, diegetic level, which in Brink's habitual use of dramatic realism captures the present between past and future. What it leaves out is what eventually gives meaning to this present and a view to the future: Ouma's prolific, imaginative stories make up the narrative level below, and contrasts the precarious now of the novel in a style informed by magical realism. The contents of these stories provide a bridge between the history of the past and the present political and social situation and will be dealt with in more detail further on.

As in *An Instant in the Wind*, the author positions himself within the other to question the construct of the self. Brink says: "the urge to reach out and touch the Other, will remain long after its political metaphor, apartheid, has disappeared"⁴³. Speaking in voices of the others, he continues, has to do with the essence of fiction: "the need to make strange the wholly familiar; the need to find in the wholly strange the spark that causes the flame of recognition to jump from the self" because "[t]he act of faith, the act of the imagination, is a paradoxical one: if it leads as deeply as possible into the self, it also probes as far as possible into the Other".⁴⁴ While in *An Instant in the Wind* Brink explored the origins of apartheid through the voices of the white woman and the black man, here he is more explicitly after the colonial and postcolonial mind of the 'white' Afrikaner, questioning his/her position in a postapartheid future. Here too there is a rewriting of historical myth of land and 'volk', of endurance and heroism, but there is also a re-inventing of a truer, more complex and ambiguous history of the Afrikaner through the writing *in* of the other's story. In the women's personal history, the alternative to the 'laager'-mentality is explored: a non-racial bonding

⁴³ André Brink, "Speaking in Voices", in *Reinventing a Continent*, 16

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 18

with the land is linked to the recognition of the mixed origins of the South African, which is gradually strained under the colonisation by male-made, public history.

As in *An Instant in the Wind*, history is bared as construction: Afrikaner colonial mentality, nationalism and apartheid are the results of choices *made* in the past to sustain and legitimise power-relations. History has always been written by the winners of war, and here, seen from an exclusively white perspective, “this canonised form of history was also the canonisation of phallocracy. It endorsed, and maintained, the hegemony of the few, of the elite, of the powerful, over the many, the ‘nameless’”.⁴⁵ Through a re-imagining of the nameless, their voices and stories, the history of the Afrikaner is re-negotiated to explore the possibilities of creating a new footing for the future.

Because of restrictions of space, I will in the following concentrate on two aspects of the narrative: the function and interplay of narrators in the novel, and the structural and thematic importance of narrative distance. Arguably these are significant elements in Brink’s text as an act of deconstructing and reconstituting Afrikaner identity. Aspects of time, space and attitude are central to this reversed legitimising strategy.

Imaginings of Sand is a story of stories, of the act of telling stories, and of the importance of story-telling to convey meaning and knowledge. Situated between the text and its writer, the narrators are of crucial importance for the validity of a re-imagining of the real such as this. Distance is a key word: the concept of narrative distance is, according to Edward Bullough, the quality that makes literary expression ‘aesthetically valid’.⁴⁶ Kristien and Ouma Kristina as female narrators provide Brink with the necessary narrative distance from his personal experience with Afrikaner history to make his text valid as an artistic utterance of general importance.

We may see both Kristien and Kristina as ‘texts’ written, erased and rewritten in the conflicting discourses of dominant, male white culture and a silenced perception of Africa beyond the colonial. The younger has disowned her Afrikaner heritage and gradually distanced herself from the African, experiencing that they could not be bridged. At the outset of the story, she is a prime example of the benevolent, white, liberal humanist distancing herself from the apartheid regime and mentally identifying with the cause of the oppressed blacks. Her potential for development lies in the crossing between opposition to and identification with what is Afrikaner, as the tension between distance and closeness inform

⁴⁵ André Brink, “Reflections on Literature and History”, in *Reinventing a Continent*, 143

⁴⁶ Lothe, 35

her perception of herself in history. Ouma Kristina as narrator on the extra-diegetic level holds the key to Kristien's re-negotiation of identity.

Presenting Kristien as the main character and the main voice on the narrative level of the present, Brink makes her reveal her identity indirectly through action and speech. The impression of her is also formed through other characters' opinions of her as they come out in both direct and indirect discourse. Kristien's memories of people and important episodes from her childhood up until the present, memories that have been forgotten or suppressed and which are now awakened, form parts of her narrative and give important clues to our impression of her as a reliable narrator. The general idea is that she is formed by the stories of her memories: those of a childhood in a family abiding by the moral and social standards of Afrikaner nationalist ideology are rivalled by the influence of Ouma Kristina's imaginative disagreement with this worldview. At one point the narrator steps out of her narrative to address the reader: "I can be nasty, prejudiced, petulant, vindictive, unreliable, you name it. My father undoubtedly thought of me as a witch".⁴⁷ At the start of the novel Kristien perceives her personality as imposed upon her by the historical development of apartheid: to her, being an Afrikaner has deprived her of the possibilities of choice. Perceiving herself as a dissenter she sees no other option but distance.

In the narrative Kristien also has the role of the writer: she inhabits the intermediate position as negotiator between the world of Ouma's stories and the troubled reality of present-day South Africa: the dying old woman tells Kristien "[...] we must start working [...]. You must write it all down before I go. [...]. [Time's] running out. And it's my testament" (71). The legacy of silenced life need to be preserved for the future and the teller of stories has a crucial position in furthering an understanding of connection. A point is made here about the role of the author of fiction in providing the links between past and future and the importance of story-telling in negotiating between private experience and public history. After one of the early sessions of storytelling, Kristien comments thus on her function as writer: "I cannot even be sure that what she says is what I write. And what I hear her whisper merges with what I remember, or seem to remember from earlier times when she told similar stories. [...] she articulates my writing hand" (97). For Kristien, rational answers and 'truth' are the main concern at first, but gradually imaginings of the *possible* becomes more important. There seems to be a notion of present and past running together, and of the two women sharing a common sense of time or timelessness.

⁴⁷ André Brink, *Imaginings of Sand* (Reading, Berkshire: Cox and Wyman Ltd. 2000), 16. Further references to the novel will be given in the text.

Kristina is both a first-person narrator, relating the events of her own life to Kristien and to what is happening in the present, and a third-person narrator of the events on the level below, with a more purely communicative function. Thus, she too has a role in connecting the past and the future. Her extraordinary memory and her ability to listen, not only to people's stories, but to signs in nature and to unspoken and unspeakable utterances not easily perceived by those singularly attuned to the physical reality, make her a perfect story-teller. The first impression of her as a character is wrought by Kristien's memories of her: "Ouma Kristina is, has always been, different" (3). Episodes which work to portray her as a caring, responsible grown-up are balanced by those that show us a proud and headstrong woman, who refuses to act according to the mores of society, and who does not hesitate to go against any authority to make a point, especially if provoked by male stupidity or arrogance. The varying views on her drive home the message that characterisation is a matter of interpretation, and as such, depending on one's social position and (chosen) identity: your ability to choose is always conditioned by your mental horizon. From a mainstream Afrikaner point-of-view (in Anna's voice) she comes through as "...just plain childish" (26) and as one who "...went overboard with everything" (25). Other people's opinions do not seem to have mattered much to Kristina: the possibility Kristien had to run away from it all was not open to a woman of her generation, but the imaginative world of stories and the knowledge of past has given her the strength and personal integrity needed to oppose the stringencies of her present.

The most vital characterisation of Ouma is the one given indirectly, through her stories and her way of telling them, as storied history interspersed with aspects of playful fantasy, magic and legend. Ouma's matter-of-fact relations with her female ancestors, with the ghosts who roam the big house and with the multitudes of birds of all kinds which hover about her, situates her with the landscape of Africa in between the glaring reality of the present and the magical realms of a mythological past. In this ambiguity, we also find the reasons for the strong connection between the two narrators: on a realistic level they lend credibility to each other as wilful defenders of individual freedom, but Ouma's down-to-earth approach to the reality of the 'unreal' infuses in Kristien a sense of the 'unreal' aspects of 'reality' and opens up for a perception of life itself as ambiguous, with a multitude of answers and solutions. Her awareness makes her ever more capable of seeing what the older woman sees, physically and mentally.

Ouma and Kristien's nightly sessions of story-telling are excursions into the interiors of the past which leave Kristien bewildered and in need of explanation. Refusing to give straight answers, Ouma challenges her imagination, leaving it to Kristien to work through the

stories in the piercing light of the day and let the voices of the women surface in the present, filtered through her own capacity for imagination and belief. As the days pass and the stories emerge, more as parts of a whole than as separate, closed entities, the issue of learning and development in the main character becomes more pronounced.

Having established the two women as narrators, it must be made clear that both of them are also the listeners to stories. What makes Kristien a writer is her increasing alertness as a listener, not just to the stories in themselves, but to the importance of *telling* stories. The awareness of the capacity of storytelling to negotiate between personal and public experience is also what has made Ouma a good listener to the stories of life and death surrounding her. Telling stories has been a way of surviving as individuals: the making of signs to resist and contradict the silences of history. So, both women are links in a chain of voices, listeners and narrators. But how is Kristien's identity influenced by these stories? How do the stories manage to change the way she perceives herself, a dissenter of Afrikaner values, and make her decide to stay? Do the stories in themselves have the capacity to change her perception of history and make her able to participate in it? In order to find out, I will look more closely at the concepts of narrative time, space and distance in the author's rewriting of history and identity.

An important distinction in narrative theory is that between 'story space' and 'discourse space': while the first relates to the fictional world of the story, discourse space is the narrator's world. In a narrative where the narrator has a communicative function the difference may be downplayed, but here the distinction is of great importance, carrying, in my reading, the very essence of the story. We need to consider the distinction between story- and discourse space on both diegetic levels of the narrative: on the main level, we have the events and characters in a defined physical space, and we have the space of the narrator of these events, who is also the main participant in the story. On the level below, there are the events and the characters of the past, set in the same physical space as the level above, but distinguished through the temporal dimension. The narrator's space is inhabited by an ancient, dying woman who through the act of narrating brings the past closer to the present.

Within the narrative space of each level, the distinction between discourse space and story space is blurred: on the diegetic level, Kristien relates the events as they unfold, in the present tense, viewing them in relation to past events to understand their implications in the present. On the hypo-diegetic level the physical definition of the discourse space seems to separate it clearly from the story space: the narrative situation of Ouma, in her bed, seriously wounded and close to death, in certain ways makes it distinct from the world of her stories of

a distant past, but here too distance becomes hazy. Ouma relates her stories in the past tense, an indication of distance between the act of narration and the events that are related. The content and form of some of the stories and the mythic element present in many of them work to underline this distance. On the other hand, the order in which the stories are narrated, which negates chronology, tends to bring the most distant closer in time, and make the closest more distant. Is this pointing at the author's emphasis on the distant history as of greater relevance for Kristien's identity than the near past? In order to argue this point it is necessary to look ever so briefly at the stories, as separate entities and as episodes in a coherent, alternative history.

Each of these stories forms a separate, partly closed narrative with its own characters. The individuality of each story is emphasised by the seemingly haphazard order of Ouma's narration. She starts with the first version of her own story as the family rebel and presents to Kristien a romantic tale of a young woman who, refusing to marry for money and defending her need to set her own terms, eloped with her Jewish lover. Then there is Rachel, the family 'idiot' hidden in the cellar of the family mansion. Her story is a mystery: was she a retard, a result of inbreeding among the wealthy ostrich farmers in the Karoo in the late nineteenth century, or did her parents have other reasons to hide and silence her? The ineradicable murals on the walls of the cellar, depicting 'sinful' sexual motifs, are her writings against the hypocrisy of religion that determines her life. Petronella next, with her longing for the sea, her religious fervour and her ideas about chosen people and promised land, is situated in history at the time of 'the tribe' fighting English colonisation. Her 'sign' in history is the monstrous 'ostrich palace',⁴⁸ Sinai, stranded ark-like in the Karoo desert. After more fanciful versions of Rachel's and Ouma's stories, of women's plight and joy as bearers of life, of the possibilities of love and the reality of violence, rape and betrayal, we have Louisa's uncertain and conflicting story. Her personal life in the shadow of a man's political and professional ambitions mirrors the beginning of the end of Afrikaner nationalist supremacy: the only option available to a woman of creative, artistic aspirations is the secret life of her imagination and the fulfilment of life in stories. Kamma's story pictures the first meeting of Khoikhoi and Boers and the colonising mentality of the white. Kamma/Maria, a woman caught between rivaling men, bears the hybrid children of two cultures, a contrast to the inbreeding among the Boer settlers. Samuel cuts her long hair and dresses like a man to escape the constrained life of women. Wilhelmina, whose way of making history is at odds

⁴⁸ See André Brink, "The Hour of the Idiots", in *Reinventing a Continent*, 26-27

with men's ways, eventually dies of disillusionment in her own shit: knowledgeable about the land, on friendly terms with the bushmen and trusting in talks and negotiations to preserve peace, she believes in her own potential as a trek-boer. Her efforts and achievements are silenced by the official version of the legendary endeavour of the Great Trek, which leaves out the infighting, hypocrisy, cowardice and incompetence among the 'heroic' men. Lottie with the lost shadow comes last: saved from the 'barbarians', she grows up within white civilisation and is married to a Boer farmer who through her seeks to fulfil his covenant with God. While carrying out her obligations to bear Boer children, she is in constant search for her own lost shadow, her past identity and her origins. Carrying no weight of her own, but inscribing herself as signs in sand, she is alive in the stories of the land.

Considered separately, these stories explore women's creative struggle to assert themselves as individuals in a history colonised by men. Each story also subverts and deconstructs the myths of men's achievements. Through the stories, the author distances himself from the Afrikaner identity as it is constructed by men. His attitude comes out in Ouma's ironic portrayals of male stupidity, rigid self-righteousness and stubborn determination to assert the white man's rights at the cost of the others – women and non-whites. Determining the conditions of women's lives, their hypocrisy and chauvinism work against life itself and the very land they inhabit.

As the stories unfold, Kristien and the reader gradually perceive that these are the voices of a string of mothers and daughters telling their silenced version of South Africa's history from the first encounters of the African people and the white intruders up until the present: "The stories Ouma Kristina has told me: old ones, new versions of old ones, new ones; but what used to be stories has suddenly begun to coalesce into a history, hers, ours, mine" (126). Ouma connects their stories with the remote legends of Africa before Kamma/Maria becomes the first mediator between Afrikaners and Africans. In her answer to Kristien's initial request for chronology lies the thematics of the alternative, 'womanist' story:

'What have the Müllers got to do with it?' she asks, irritated. 'Let's keep the men out of this. They came with verse and chapter. Our story is different, it doesn't run in a straight line, as you should know by now. [...] it's us I'm talking about. The womenfolk. I told you it's my testament.'

'How far back do you know the story?'

'Far enough. In our family we have been fortunate in always having story-tellers around. You have me, I had Petronella, she had Wilhelmina, and so on, far back, all the way to the one who had two names, Kamma and Maria.[...]

'So Maria-Kamma was the first?'

'Of course not. Aren't you listening? No one knows where we began. We go back to the shadows. I think we've always been around. There are some old stories about a woman deep in the heart of Africa who came from a lake with a child on her back, driving a black cow before her. Or from a river, the snake-woman with the jewel on her forehead. Or from the sea. [...] (174)

From the beginning of the women's history there is a strong sense of connection. The legacy of the women, Ouma's testament, brought down through the generations as stories, holds the intuitive understanding of the tie between land and people, real and imaginary. Their understanding of common identity and origins subverts the doctrines of apartheid on white supremacy and racial segregation. The most distant stories of Kamma and Lottie are linked closely to Ouma's by their relations with birds, "the spirits of dead women", and trees. Myth and reality are blurred, the distant become real and the realism of the present revealed to be falsifications and constructed myth. They share in each other's identities and through story Kristien learns to understand that she too is rooted in the land, on women's own terms, beyond the history of colonisation:

A rough and tumbling landscape, ochre and burnt umber [...]; as if the earth heaved and tossed, and then froze in mid motion. And then the restlessness subsides, the landscape opens up, the plains unscroll around us to expose the still indecipherable hieroglyphics of scrub and stones, erosion ditches, clumps of brittle grass, clusters of blue-grey sisal plants or prickly pears, rows upon rows of blue hills in the distance. And we, too, become part of this ancient writing, a story whispered among the others in the wind. [...]. Configurations of rock. Patterns of earth and sand. Minimal and bare, the clear lines strip away whatever is mere ornament or fancy, challenging the imagination. A space in which mirage becomes a condition and a starting point. This has always been Ouma Kristina's landscape. If one looks hard, and for long enough, they will appear, I know: the woman who had her tongue torn out; the one who wrote – because no one would give her pen or paper – on the bark of trees, on rocks, on sand; the one who disappeared, whose footprints simply stopped; the one who tended sheep she turned to stones to prevent their wandering away; the ostrich woman; the tree woman; the child who bore a child; Ouma Kristina herself. [...] 'This is where you'll find out about what lasts and what the wind will blow away. Once upon a time – ' (20)

The women's appreciation of racial 'impurity' is rendered as life-affirming where the official history's lies and falsifications of these facts are seen to work towards its own termination. The alienation of the Afrikaner from the land is represented as the result of men's mythmaking, which is accomplished through the silencing of women's voices.⁴⁹ Ouma's understanding of a hybrid identity lies at the bottom of the complex reality of the women's history. This perception of a common African identity negates a white, national identity as an artificial construct, whose development is traceable from its beginning in Adam Oosthuizen, via Kristien's father and the heyday of Afrikaner nationalism to Anna's husband Casper and the tragic situation in the present, where the 'white' Afrikaner is a stranger in his own

⁴⁹ Here a brief introduction to the history of the name 'Afrikaner' seems appropriate: From the early eighteenth century it "simply referred to someone born on African soil", as opposed to officials coming to the colony from the colonial centre. Later it came to designate people of mixed blood, just as the language Afrikaans was a blend of Dutch and indigenous languages. In the late nineteenth century when differences in ideology and colonial practice threatened the relationship between the original settlers and British colonisers, a sense of national consciousness matured among the Boers. "From then onwards 'Afrikaner' acquired a more explicit political and religious connotation and Afrikaans was deliberately propagated as a 'white' language". See André Brink, "Afrikaners", in *Reinventing a Continent*, 76

country, desperately defending his 'rights' to it. This is the coloniser's identity which Kristien renounced, and from which she is now set free.

What I am trying to show is how the author through the application of attitudinal distance narrows the gap between the narrator and South Africa as land and people. In her relation to the political and social aspects of South Africa under apartheid, however, this variant of distance is extended as the narrative develops. When the individual stories of women emerge as a coherent whole, the history of South Africa is opened up to interpretation in the present as a set of contradicting facts and myths which makes it possible to choose how to enter the future. On the diegetic level of the narrative, Kristien explores the 'reality' of Ouma's stories in the light of her previous conceptions of history and in the ways this history determines the actions of people in the precarious situation of the present.

Through ironic reference to historical 'facts' and through the portrayal of various characters of past and present, not least in dialogue, we get numerous examples of the conflict between the opposing world-views of the narrator and the nationalistic, racist ideology of the white Afrikaner culture she was born into. First, there is the image of her father which is drawn both through direct presentation, and indirectly through memories of childhood episodes. On the very first page of the novel we are made aware of conflicts, distance and alienation by the narrator's ironic comments on her own name and the fact that she was born a woman:

Had I obliged my father and entered the world a boy [...] I would have been, in honour of an array of his ancestors, Ludwig Maximilian Joseph Heinrich Schwarzenau an der Glon; seeing me born, like my predecessor, without the distinguishing appendage of the right sex, he retreated in disgust and pretended I hadn't happened. (3)

Later we are given the narrator's ethical assessment of him as a father figure: the girl's pride in her father, the judge, "this man who can listen to all these people and then decide, just like that, what is right, what wrong" (40), is wiped out by his unwillingness to assist a beaten black man who has come to him for justice. Her father's failure to act up to his authority causes complete and lasting disillusionment in the narrator. Further on we are given a fuller biography of the father in connection with the story of his wife, Louisa. From the way his story is linked to the official and factual history of South Africa during his life-span, we are given the idea of a man and a system forged as parallels, both deeply rooted in nationalistic myths of 'the chosen people':

Ludwig Müller was a scion of an impoverished but furiously patriotic Afrikaner family [...] whose rhythms had been marked by the great events of the rebellion of Slagtersnek, the Great Trek, and two Anglo-Boer Wars, up to and including the reactionary movement of the Ossewa-brandwag that tried to sabotage the Smuts government during the Second World War. (119)

Irony is used to underscore the unreasonable disparity between the power of men within a political system and the powerlessness of the women who are on the outside of a history they do not make, but fight hard to survive:

If this were Ludwig Müller's biography, those would have been eventful years: it would have been revealing to trace the interlinking of his personal career with the larger history of the country. First, in the Fifties, the gradual unfolding of a new system of legislation and the manifestation of a growing passive resistance: through trials involving passes or protesting women disturbing the public peace Ludwig acquired quite a reputation. There must have been the heady discovery that he was making a personal contribution by handing down verdicts in terms of an elaborate system based on nuances of skin colour or the texture of a human hair or the crescent of a thumb nail. [...] Brother among brethren, rising to the position of chairman of his branch in the organization of *éminences grises* that controlled the power, onward Christian soldiers. (123-124)

This passage of sarcastic derision of the man and the system he represents is a lengthy one, covering the official history of South Africa from the rise of the nationalist party to power until the decline of apartheid politics in the 1980s, and the death of the father – who is the narrative personification of this system – in 1989. It clearly carries the ideology of the text in its illustration of attitudinal distance between the narrator and the characters and events of the male-made version of history.

Casper, the husband of the narrator's sister, Anna, comes close to a caricature of the Afrikaner farmer. As the inheritor of the nationalistic myths, he is inscribed in the narrative as the live result of a system that not only colonised a country, its original inhabitants and history, but also made captives of the colonisers. He comes through as narrow-minded, self-centred, possessive and violent. The driving force behind his defensive attitude – the devastating fear of losing what he regards as his by rights – keeps him a captive of this very fear. His power as a father, a husband and a member of the community rests on the myths of 'the chosen people' and 'the promised land'. Failing to adapt to the changes in power-structures, with the fall of the apartheid system and the democratic elections drawing near, he is trapped. As a man and an Afrikaner nationalist he is doubly distanced from the narrator. This is forcefully illustrated in the narrative's numerous verbal clashes between the two, where Kristien as the unquestionable other of Casper's colonial self opposes his placing of her in the inferior position of the Afrikaner woman. Anna has forfeited her individuality for the safety of being written into the power-systems of this culture. Kristien sees through Casper's "noble rhetoric":

This is a bloody tough land to survive in. But we've managed, for over three centuries, even if it meant we had to be tough too. Not because we liked it, but because we were driven to it. And why? Because we love this bloody place, that's why. We've paid for it in blood and shit. It's the only place in the world we can call our own. Now they want to take it away from us. But we won't let them. We have nowhere else to go, Kristien, damn it!

My first thought is: Please, not again. How many times have I heard all this pious ranting before? But the strange thing [...] is that I know he means it; he really means it desperately. And I try to reason with him. 'Who wants to take it away from you, Casper?'
'The caf – – he checks himself, somewhat to my surprise – 'the blacks. The communists. They've failed everywhere else in the world, so now they've got to make it work for them here. But I tell you, we won't let them. And we're prepared to die for it if we have to [...] if living means sacrificing everything that matters to us'. (51)

From a postcolonial point of view, insight in the individuality of the colonised, be it woman or black man, would threaten the legitimacy of his superior position, and that, in its turn, would be admitting to the falsification of history by the white colonisers' myths.

Anna has an intermediate position in the narrative, linked both to the narrator and to the system Kristien and her narrative oppose. In my reading, the function of this character is to illustrate the consequences of failing to make choices on women's own terms. Trying to make room for herself by blindly adapting to life as it is defined for her, first by her parents and then by her husband, she suppresses her own self and becomes a parrot, frantically defending the role she is given by uncritically repeating the rhetoric of the authority. The distance between the sisters is diminished, though, as Anna's eyes are gradually opened through forced confrontations with Kristien's world views. When in the end she fully understands that she has been expressing the wishes, thoughts and fears of others, and that, consequently, she has lost her chances at being the maker and writer of her own history, she sees no option out but death. In a way the dramatic effacing of the Afrikaner family on the very day of the election that marks the end of the system they tried to uphold, comes to symbolise the erasing of 'the old order' and the beginning of a new. There is a sense in which history that fails to rewrite itself, and incorporate within itself a broader sense of truth, suffocates in its isolationism.

It is time to round off this thoroughly incomplete investigation into a few aspects of this extremely rich text. In this novel, as in his previous fictions, we certainly find the romanticised persecuted Africans, the good and bad types corresponding to those who resist oppression and those who embody the coloniser, and the stereotypes among the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Nevertheless, the novel has artistic qualities which in my reading redeems it and makes it much more than yet another 'political' novel seeking to explain the dire realities of South Africa from the white perspective.

In the context of the 'new' South Africa, Brink says, a writer may turn to history to "explore the kinship of story and history precisely by recognising the story nature of history itself".⁵⁰ In crossing 'a threshold of change' such as the present of the novel, a revisiting of

⁵⁰ André Brink, "Reinventing a Continent", in *Reinventing a Continent*, 236

the past is necessary, not to establish the ‘truth’, but to find a viable reading of the past for the recreation of the genuinely South African self in the amalgamation of the previous segregated identities. The important thing to recognise is that history is not only composed of texts “but strung together from silences” which may have “to be discovered below the clamor of ‘official versions’ and ‘dominant discourses’”.⁵¹ In his ‘imagining of the real’ in these silences, Brink attempts to evoke the past, “not as fact, but as metaphor”, so that the text “may be read as a dialectic between written history and oral tradition, producing a new form teeming with possibilities for future exploration”.⁵² In *Imaginings of Sand*, Kristien receives the silenced version of history in Ouma’s ‘testament’, where her personal history merges with the larger, public and national. Thus, she is allowed to recreate her Afrikaner identity through an imaginative understanding of history, linking the past with the present. What happens is that such inventive understanding opens up to ‘comparative reading’: “The new text has to be evaluated against the whole spectrum or palimpsest of available texts, and so a polylogue is opened through which versions of the past are drawn into the present, confronting the reader with the need – and above all with the responsibility – to choose”.⁵³ The imaginative, vivacious, life-affirming, perfectly unscientific and magic story-world Ouma presents her grandchild with is set against the dismal texts of apartheid South Africa, through which Kristien’s story was written and told for her. From a new reading of these contrasting texts, Kristien must write her own individual text: choosing from the multitudes of ambiguous and constantly changing stories that surround her, she must attempt to re-form her own identity.

Ouma’s stories are just stories: The old woman does not offer any absolute and final solutions and answers. But in her creative, mysterious and down to earth approach to what is South African, she reaches back to the original definition of the Afrikaner as one of mixed blood, speaking a hybrid language. Learning to appreciate the ambiguous reality of story and renouncing the rigid truths of official history, Kristien is allowed to reconnect spiritually with Africa. The power of the imagination opens up to the recreation of a common future story:

Father, I know, and Mother too would have been shocked by this; their stark Calvinism did not allow for such invention. But have they not denied, in the process, precisely this surge of the imagination which links us to Africa, these images from a space inside ourselves which once surfaced in ghost stories and the tales and jokes and imaginings of travellers and trekkers and itinerant traders beside their wagons at night, when the fantastic was never more than a stone’s throw or an outburst of sparks away? How sad – no, how dangerous – to have suppressed all this for so long. (97)

⁵¹ Ibid, 240

⁵² Ibid, 233

⁵³ Ibid, 244-245

In 1988 Brink lamented that

The enduring tragedy of the Afrikaner [...] is that he is a white African who refuses to come to terms with his own continent and its people. Most of them still wish to be here but apart, and after more than three centuries the sadness of 'the Afrikaner' is that he still has not come home.⁵⁴

In *Imaginings of Sand*, the author offers a strategy for a return: Recognising that we are stories – constantly writing and rewriting ourselves in dialogue with a multitude of others – we gain the freedom and the obligation to make ethical choices regarding identity and belonging. The mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was precisely to record the stories of the resurfacing 'idiots' of the dark cellars of apartheid, thus enabling the silenced voices to speak fragments of a greater truth. Brink contributes to the processes of reconciliation through his imaginative listening to the silences of the past and in his creative bridging of the gap between a colonial and a postcolonial identity.

⁵⁴ Brink quoting van Zyl Slabbert, in "Afrikaners", in *Reinventing a Continent*, 124

CHAPTER 4: *LIFE & TIMES OF MICHAEL K*

John Maxwell Coetzee's fourth novel, *Life and Times of Michael K* was published in 1983, at a time in history when apartheid South Africa was practically in a state of war. As mentioned in the introduction, P.W. Botha's 'Total Strategy' was resisted and opposed by an increasingly single-minded and united opposition. The escalating brutality was thus both the means and the result of the system, penetrating all layers of society throughout the eighties, a period defined by Nadine Gordimer as the 'Interregnum', the uncertain and ambiguous time between the final death of 'the old order' and a new struggling to be born.⁵⁵

The authorities' attempts at quelling the opposition through censorship and banning resulted in the almost complete silencing of a free press and other mass-media. The function of the journalist to report the events of the struggle in order to keep alive the history of the present was to a great extent taken over by the author, who, preoccupied with fiction more than fact, was less subjected to control. The result was a pressure on literature to conform to the standards of the art of letters as a weapon for liberation, an 'instrument in the struggle', and on the author to take on the role of reporter of fact and realism. A lot of the literatures produced during these years was strikingly characterised by Njabulo Ndebele as "an art of anticipated surfaces rather than one of process" establishing "a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge".⁵⁶ Quoting Nietzsche, Coetzee commented that "We have art so that we shall not die of the truth",⁵⁷ and that "resisting history may restore purpose to literature's own modes of thinking – to reveal truth".

In order to specify the questions of my problem statement with a view to this novel, I will ask: if refusing to accept literature as a tool in the struggle against apartheid, defending instead the right of literature to act on its own terms in opposition to the discourse of history, how can this novel be seen to enter its present and not simply avoiding it?

I want to examine how Coetzee applies the tools of his art to write into the nightmare of his present for a view of the future. The questions emanating from the text itself are the existential ones of identity in the span between communal responsibility and individual

⁵⁵ Nadine Gordimer, "Living in the Interregnum", in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places* (London, 1988), quoted in Michael Chapman, *South African Literatures* (London: Longman 1996), 386-387

⁵⁶ Ndebele quoted by André Brink, in *Reinventing a Continent*, 155

⁵⁷ J.M. Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech", in David Attwell, ed., *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 99

freedom: can one, in such times of “intense ideological pressure”,⁵⁸ balance the need to retain a measure of individuality and personal integrity and the need to bond with others and act in history? I will begin my exploration by taking a closer look at the title of the novel, incorporating into the discussion a short summary of the novel.

A heading such as this, ‘Life and times of..’, implies the promise of a biography. Through the author’s deft play on literary conventions, the reader prepares for a personal history in a particular political and social setting, a story where the narrated facts of characters and events are plotted as a potentially meaningful negotiation between the personal and the public experience. The promise, however, is immediately cancelled by the name of the subject: ‘Michael K’. We do not even have his full name. Is he a mixture of the author (who is often assigned the name Michael instead of Maxwell) and the subject of Kafka’s *The Process*, an author who has had great impact on Coetzee’s writing? In that case the negation rests on the association with the surreal in Kafka’s novel and the breaking up of the realism promised by the first part of the title.

The novel presents the life of Michael K, a non-descript, hare lipped gardener in his early 30s, who embarks on a journey from Cape Town to take his old and ailing mother back to the countryside and the farm of her childhood. K’s mother dies on the way, but he somehow reaches their destination on his own. On what may have been his mother’s farm, which is now abandoned, K experiences a new peaceful fulfilment in living off the land, planting and growing food. His awakening dreams of a future life on his own land are shattered though, when a descendant of the owners turns up. Instead of adapting to the old pattern of master and slave and accept his role as that of a serf, K leaves. After a short spell of hermit life in the mountains, he is taken to a ‘resettlement camp’ where he learns about the social conditions for the landless rural population, his own inferior position and the relationship between work and food. Confronted with the political reality, he considers the possibility of joining the guerrilla in their struggle against the power-holders, but deciding in the end that it is not his war, K runs away and heads back to the farm which is now once again deserted. Living off the land and adapting to the rhythm of the earth, secretly sowing and tending his plants, he abides the time, until his dreaming is interrupted one more time: He is found and taken away by soldiers fighting the local guerrilla, accused of being in alliance with the ‘men in the mountains’. Back in Cape Town, as a captive in a ‘rehabilitation camp’, K refuses to eat and will not tell his story, making the doctor who treats him increasingly puzzled and frustrated. After fleeing again, he roams the familiar areas of the city, observing people, sleeping and dreaming. When again he is made an object of charity, he escapes both the city and the story of his life in an image of a future on the farm. In the company of a friend and with new supplies of seeds and enough water he awaits better times.

Life and Times of Michael K is the invented story of life and living in a certain uncertain time of war, but it plays on the biography as a genre determined and characterised by the need to narrate as a means to find meaning: As in Michael Jackson’s theory of storytelling that I referred to earlier, the basic idea of the biography is the objective, conscious or unconscious, to relate personal and individual history to the greater, public one. This negotiation between the personal and the public may confirm consensus or denote opposition,

⁵⁸ J.M. Coetzee, “The Novel Today”, 3

but in either case it establishes the connection and dependency between the individual and his community. *Life & Times of Michael K* resists such inter-relatedness. In Michael K there is no conscious learning. There are no answers found, only questions asked. Individual development is practically absent: as the perfectly incoherent, illogical account of a lifetime, the novel subverts the form of biography, where the idea of learning and experience – of coherent, plotted meaning – is at the forefront. It is merely a series of events which do not come together as storied identity, a journey back and forth describing life as it happens to a protagonist who becomes increasingly unreal and illusive as the narrative progresses. Is this the only sort of personal history of the other that the public and official history of South Africa has made possible?

In order to answer this question, I will now proceed to investigate the novel as a post-modern disappointment of the expectations of biography on several levels, connected to the literary elements of any narrative, fictional as well as factual: character, event and plot. First, I will look at the discourse of the novel and see how the way it is structured and narrated establishes it as story in opposition to the discourse of history. Secondly, on the level of character, I will discuss the portrayal of K as the protagonist in “the story of the single vulnerable being in a time of the collective demand”⁵⁹ to see how the story of the individual is linked to that of society. What aspects of past, present or future history go into the identity of Michael K? What can the author’s use of characterisation tell us about his views on the role of the writer? Finally, I will discuss the concepts of time and space in connection with the event as a basic narrative element. I will argue that, in its post-modernist literariness, the novel evades the confinement of the dominant colonial culture as well as the limiting and limited realist scope of the ‘camp of opposition’, thus managing to present the possibility of alternative strategies between the binary opposites. Beginning with the structure of the narrative, my main question relates to Coetzee’s negotiation between story and history. How does the text, as writing and story, answer the demand for meaning?

The novel consists of three parts: In the first, and by far the most extensive, the circular structure of the journey from the city into the countryside and back is the most striking feature. As I hope to have demonstrated in my interpretation of *An Instant in the Wind*, the travel motif, because it brings together the experience of space and time, is well suited to connect, through association, the physical experience of the temporal and spatial context and the mental processes of development and learning. Coetzee plays on this much

⁵⁹ Michael Chapman, *South African Literatures*, 390

used motif on several levels. Both in the obvious links between this text and earlier Afrikaner literature and in the negation of the literary expectations of personal development and achievement in connection with travel, the novel represents a rewriting of both factual and literary history.

Let us first look at how it rewrites a literary tradition. The urge to legitimise and preserve Afrikaner culture in times of urbanisation and social change in the 1920s and 30s resulted in a proliferation of white writing on the romantic notions of a ‘return to the origins’ and ‘the good life’ in simple, honest work, farming the land one belonged to. The ‘plaasroman’, or farm novel, promoted traditional Christian values and Afrikaner right to, and love of, the land in opposition to the disintegrating forces of urban modernity. Nature’s healing influence is set against the destructive dangers of the city. The absence of blacks in this nostalgic, literary landscape is one of the silences Coetzee (and Brink) writes into. From her memories of childhood as “a time of warmth and plenty”(8), Anna K imagines the closure of her story set in the pastoral idyll of her origins. When she fails, the dream is revealed as an unattainable illusion: A strict regulation of movement implemented by the System, making it a crime for non-whites to move without a permit, makes a return ‘home’ hazardous. Her death in an overcrowded, dehumanised hospital represents a denial of the dream of blue skies for those on the margins of society. Thus failing to bring her ‘home’, K is also deprived of the meaning he glimpsed in the task he took on – the responsibility to care for an ailing parent.⁶⁰ As it is, the system has succeeded in implementing total, all-encompassing alienation: the natural connection between people and land is a lost dream, and man is disconnected from his meaning. From his mother’s death, K’s journey may be characterised as his intuitive return to the farm (-novel), his re-bonding with the earth and his writing himself in as a gardener between the fences of the white capitalist farmers.

When it comes to the rewriting of factual history, we need to trace K’s journey from the moment of his mother’s death. I will show how Coetzee supplies the *idea* of travel towards closure only to disappoint the expectations of development linked to the idea. At every turn of K’s journey, in every event he meets – or refuses to meet – the myths of history are laid open and the mythic basis of our understanding revealed. In this way Michael K’s journeying comes to represent a rewriting of white, colonial history, where Coetzee as “a coloniser who does not want to be a coloniser”⁶¹ recasts the historical play with a colonised

⁶⁰ J.M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 7

⁶¹ Stephen Watson’s definition, in “Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee”, in Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson, eds., *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee* (London: Houndmills, 1996), 22

other in the leading role. Through the subversion, he bares the act of colonisation of history and tears apart the Afrikaner myth of the promised land.

Michael K's reaction to being left on his own is one of total confusion; any expectation of a literary turning-point in a journey of learning is negated. At the hospital where his mother dies, he is read as the poor other in need of charity, while his feeling is that of bewilderment, not knowing what is expected of him. He finds it difficult to tear himself away and act. The time spent in limbo near the hospital (an 'interregnum'?) is rendered in unspecified terms such as 'once', 'sometimes', 'for a while'. The gaps in the narrative converge with the gaps of consciousness to support the impression of a story which does not cohere: "Sleep settled inside his head like a benign fog; he had no will to resist it. He did not dream of anyone or anything" (34). There is no sense of direction in his story.

When the story moves on, it is from coincidence, not determination: K is brought along passively, his sense of direction faltering. At a roadblock he is arrested for not carrying a travel permit and "like a beast at the shambles" with "no one [...] listening to him", he is "driven" and "herded" into captivity (40-41). He then passively "finds himself" doing things (42-43) and more or less accidentally ends up in Prince Albert, his town of maternal origins. At the farm he thinks might be the one of his mother's dreams, he expresses an uncertain feeling of having reached a destination: "Now I am here, he thought. Or at least I am somewhere" (52). Finding that "Here I can make any sound I like" (56), he starts 'writing' his own story by literally inscribing his signs in the earth, sowing and tending the shoots of his plants, starting "his life as a cultivator" (59). While he is now actively and consciously taking on responsibility, finding "his waking life bound tightly to the patch of earth he had begun to cultivate and the seeds he had planted there" (59), the sense of precariousness has not left him: "following upon the exultation would sometimes come a sense of pain that was obscurely connected with the future; and then it was only brisk work that could keep him from lapsing into gloominess" (59). The idea of a future and of possible meaning remains a vague thought, and again the idea of the travel toward some sort of closure is cancelled: history is interrupted when a grandson of the owners shows up, who reads K's story as that of the landless serf. K is forced back into the realism of history and reminded that his story of the present is determined by the past: "I let myself believe that this was one of those islands without an owner. Now I am learning the truth. Now I am learning my lesson" (61). Instead of confirming the presence of the black man in the real pastoral story by acting history out in a traditional relationship of master and serf, K leaves the land.

Unable to articulate his story in the master language, it is as if he were waiting for the right version to come to him, the one he could live: “The story of his life had never been an interesting one; there had usually been someone there to tell him what to do next; now there was no one, and the best thing seemed to be to wait” (67). When the tender sprouts of a future history on his maternal land are now severed, like the “cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam” (66), he seeks the solitude of the mountains, waiting, hibernating, feeding on worms and ants, viewing the society of other people from far above. However, the story of the hermit is not for him. Inches from starvation, he descends and continues his messianic journey among people. Picked up and misread as a vagrant and a drunk, devoid of story – even the barest scrap of history in a green card – he is given the identity of “Michael Visagie–CM–40–NFA–Unemployed ” (70). K becomes an inmate of a ‘resettlement camp’ where life reminds him of his childhood in Huis Norenius, another institution for the disabled, where he grew up and extended his ability to keep quiet: “It is like going back to childhood, he thought: it is like a nightmare” (77). Now he is “too old to bear it” (74), and he resists identification with the power-holders’ paternalistic story of the other as the needy of rescue: “A camp is for people without jobs. It is for all the people who go around from farm to farm begging for work because they haven’t got food, they haven’t got a roof over their heads. They put all the people like that together in a camp so that they won’t have to beg any more” (78). Having no story of his own to voice in opposition, his only option is withdrawal, as when he passively refuses to comply with the Calvinist work ethics that serve as legitimisation for the system’s exploitation of the inmates as cheap workforce: “When I need to eat, I’ll work” (85).

“The camp lived its life around him” (84), those within suffering the victimisation of charity and the brutal othering by guards and police on the outside, who identify the homeless as “criminals and saboteurs and idlers” and “ungrateful bastards”(91). K resists both the identity of the underprivileged needy, the ‘monkey’ and ‘rubbish’ farm-worker and the alternative identity of the actively fighting ‘man in the mountains’, the rebel that fellow inmates read in his silences. He leaves the camp having failed to make it his “home” (73). Coming back to the farm, the thought of a future re-enters his mind: “I want to live here, he thought: I want to live here forever, where my mother and my grandmother lived. It is as simple as that”, but he realises that under the circumstances the freedom to write his own story as he chooses, or to live it as it is written to him from within himself, is practically nonexistent. The world is fenced in, divided and arranged in historically determined areas of within and without: “What a pity that to live in times like these a man must be ready to live

like a beast” (99). Like a frog digging into the mud, or an insect sleeping – enduring, not living – K adapts to the circumstances: “A man must live so that he leaves no trace of his living. That is what it has come to” (99). In the middle of a war-zone, Michael K is forced to live his identity as a cultivator in hiding, increasingly naturalised to the shifting rhythm of the earth. Working by night and sleeping by day, like a mole, he distances himself from the life of people.

However, life out of camps is proven impossible as the reality of the warring world intrudes on his land, first in the shape of the guerrilla soldiers of the mountains coming for supplies and rest, then as the representatives of the others, the police and the regular army, who arrest K as an insurgent, reading in his life as a gardener the supplier of food-stuffs for the enemy. Failing to tell his story in the words of the others’ reality, he is misunderstood or perceived to be so empty-headed as to have none. His process of coming to grips with his own story, or creating his own history, is interrupted by these other stories in their competition for the truth or the right interpretation: “His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong” (110). Again he is dragged along into the battlefield of others’ history. The expected progression in a biographical story as a series of interrelated events ending in the realisation of personal integrity is replaced by the disintegrated, elliptical, and apparently coincidental experiences of alienation. If the journey is often the literary image of the writing of individual history, K’s history never comes into being.

I have related the first section of the novel to aspects of biography, showing how the structure reflects the conflict between individual story and communal history. Playing on the literary convention of travel as image for learning, Coetzee explores the act of colonisation – of story, identity and history. Michael K’s story is constantly interrupted in its creation; at every stage of the journey, and of the narrative, he meets with his story/history/ as it is understood and told by others in command of the (colonial) language. Unable to articulate his opposition verbally, K silently defends his need to stay on the outside of camps through the act of escape.

I now proceed to investigate the second, minor part. Here it seems natural, under the circumstances given by the text itself, to focus on narration in order to find the ways Coetzee orchestrates his characters to perform and enact his ideas. Why does the author shift from the authorial, third-person narrator of the first section to the first-person, unreliable one in the second? Why the change of viewpoint from that of the protagonist to a well-meaning but obviously unknowing doctor within the establishment of the system? Is Coetzee aiming for balance in the story? I will argue that instead of aiming for clarification, the author, through

the voice of the medical officer bares the disconnection between truth and public history and exemplifies the colonising powers of author and authority.

According to Michael Marais, the change of narrators in the novel ties in with the narrative strategies Coetzee applies to make the reader conscious of the political nature of reading and interpreting. Shifting the point of view from K to the medical officer, he says,

forces the reader to adopt the position of the medical officer in relation to K. He/she is no longer allowed to identify complacently with the victim, but is compelled instead to occupy the perspective of the interrogator. The identification thus achieved means that the medical officer's hermeneutic activity reflects that of the reader, thereby generating the analogy between literary interpretation and political interrogation [...].⁶²

Coetzee also elaborates on the conflicts between the urge to be part of history and the urge to stay out of it, the conflict between thought and action in relation to historical reality.

According to Stephen Watson,

all of Coetzee's novels contain passages which express a great longing for history. They are unending in their desire for a world of event, for a narrative in which there is direction and purpose, a story which has a beginning and end, [...]" but "this hunger is everywhere contradicted."⁶³

This ambivalence between action and inaction coincides with the conflict between what Sartre called 'Being-in-itself' and 'Being-for-itself'⁶⁴, which is acted out in the relationship between Michael K and the agents of the system in this passage.

To support my point I need to establish a location for the narrator which clarifies his relation to the author, the protagonist and the text itself. I will start by analysing what happens in this section of the story. After having been captured by the police and labelled as an insurgent, Michael K is brought back to Cape Town and kept in a 'rehabilitation camp'. The medical officer in charge – the 'I' of the text – is frustrated with K's unwillingness to eat and to communicate, bent as he seems on dying and leaving history without either verifying or contradicting the authorities' version of his life and identity. Even when under pressure by the police, who suspect K for participation in terrorist activities, the doctor is unable to make him yield and accept the authority's paternalistic protection. K – like a stone – impassively resists giving up his story, claiming that he is "not in the war" (138).

The drive of the chapter derives from the escalating frustrations of the doctor, culminating in a fictional letter to K where he urgently defends his own interpretation of him as story and pleads with him to take part in the doctor's world, in history, in the reality of

⁶² Michael Marais, "The Hermeneutics of Empire: Coetzee's Post-colonial Metafiction", in Huggan and Watson, eds., *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee* (London: Houndmills, 1996), 70

⁶³ Stephen Watson, "Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee", in Huggan and Watson, eds., *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, 33

⁶⁴ Sartre quoted by Watson, *ibid*, 33

past, present and future: “Tell us about your friends...”, “Tell us about your father” (139), “Where is your stake in the future? Do you want the story to end with you?” (140)). As a ‘being for itself’ trapped in the political realities of history, in active participation with the system, the narrator clearly longs for the freedom of the ‘being in itself’ that he recognises in Michael K:

I alone see you as [...] a human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history, a soul stirring its wings within that stiff sarcophagus, murmuring behind that clownish mask. You are precious, Michaels, in your way [...] We have all tumbled over the lip into the cauldron of history: only you, following your idiot light, biding your time [...] evading the peace and the war, skulking in the open where no one dreamed of looking, have managed to live in the old way, drifting through time, observing the seasons, no more trying to change the course of history than a grain of sand does. We ought to value and celebrate you...(152)

K responds by disappearing altogether, evading the doctor’s ever more urgent understanding annexation of his interior land, his mind.

Positioned as an officer in a rehabilitation camp, the doctor claims that his responsibility is to his patients, not the ‘programme’(131). He calls himself ‘soft’ (132) and comments ironically on the restraining politics of a system which bases its power on (thought)control of the other: “The music was to soothe your savage breast” he tells K (132). His own breast is soothed by his thoughts of himself as acting charitably, failing to see the fallacy of his humanism as theory. His ‘defence’ of Michael K is given the ironic twist to serve as critique of an inhuman system:

He needs a graduated diet, gentle exercise, and physiotherapy, so that one day soon he can rejoin camp life and have a chance to march back and forth across the racetrack and shout slogans and salute the flag and practice digging holes and filling them again. (133)

However, the doctor’s frustrations with K go deeper than his own self perception and reveal the affiliations between western liberalism and the colonial mind: when unable to make K tell the ‘truth’ or “what we want to know” (140), he falls back on fiction – some sort of truth if not *the* exact truth – to stall his superiors, “so that we can get on with our jobs” (141). The doctor’s interpretation of truth here comes very close to Colonel Joll’s in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, thus supporting the correlation between colonialism and liberal humanism.

What the medical officer wants is peace of mind through the confirmation of his own identity as the colonial self. K denies him his necessary mirror image by refusing to act the “poor helpless soul...on the battlefield of life” (141). Thus, the doctor is infused with doubt about his role in history, shaken out of his habitual mastering of the colonial situation. Participating in history the way he knows how – by theorising on it, ‘filling the room easily with words’ (140) – he benevolently attempts to annex the story and life of the inferior other

to sustain his own superior position. By not responding to him as master, and by meeting the dominant discourse with 'stony silence', Michael K preserves his other-ness, his being in himself, from appropriation.

Coetzee also resists his own author-itarian appropriation of truth by questioning the credibility of the narrator. If we identify with the doctor-narrator, it is because Coetzee through the identification with him makes it impossible for the reader to escape "the interrogation of the hypocritical pieties of Western liberal humanism"⁶⁵ personified in this character. In this section Coetzee, "eager to unmask the false universals of liberal ideology",⁶⁶ establishes communication between 'the one who writes'⁶⁷ (implied author) and the implied reader, above the head of the narrator: the fact that the reader has more knowledge about the protagonist than the narrator comes out in numerous misconceptions which are left uncorrected in the text. When, for instance, the narrator in his frustration over K's stony silence laments that "You should have crept away in the darkest reach of the deepest hole and possessed yourself in patience till the troubles were over" (151), the reader knows the narrator has the wrong story (or 'a story with holes in it' as K perceives it).

The medical officer is also rendered unreliable through his strong personal interest in making K's story fit into his own world views. Michael Marais explains: "Both reading subject and imperialist subject appropriate the threatening other and, thus, protect, fortify and confirm their own culturally-conferred identity".⁶⁸ In the role of the medical officer the reader and imperialist subject are merged. Through conventional identification with the first person narrator of a fictional text, and then through the converse operation of distancing oneself from an unreliable narrator, the author enmeshes the reader in a web of contradictions.

The character drawn by Coetzee is a medical man, the epitome of liberal humanism and of authority connected to learning, to analysing and to the capacity to heal. By choosing this narrator, Coetzee draws attention to the affiliations between understanding, charity and control. On one level the doctor's narrative is describing an attempt at legitimising the superior position of the coloniser through interpreting and alleviating the need of the inferior other. On another, the doctor allegorises the related power-conflicts associated with the role of the writer and teller of stories. This connection is verified through the doctor's quest for the story and 'truth' of K and in his insistence on writing it down for the future, as part of the

⁶⁵ Introduction to Huggan and Watson, eds., *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, 9

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 9

⁶⁷ J.M. Coetzee, "A Note on Writing", in *Doubling the Point*, 94

⁶⁸ Michael Marais, "The Hermeneutics of Empire", in Huggan and Watson, eds., *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, 71

official history. His doubts about the meaning of his work and his increasing obsession with his uncooperative patient render him ambiguous, though. As a half-hearted and critical representative of the colonial authorities, he comes to stand very close to the author as ‘the coloniser who refuses’, showing all the signs of agony characteristic of his position between action and contemplation. A member of the dominant culture in South Africa and as an intellectual dissenter writer, Coetzee, like the medical officer, questions his agency as a writer within the ‘camp’ of western, humanist, imperial tradition. Not only dissenter, but also accomplice, at once part of the system and in opposition to it.

Turning now to the second point of my reading of *Life & Times of Michael K* – that which regards characterisation – what I want to discuss is how Coetzee negotiates between his commitment to art as ‘a way to survive the truth’ and his obligation to take on responsibility in the historical reality that surrounds him. Is Michael K a credible being of his times, or does he remain a mere literary invention, set above and untouched by history like the medical officer claims? Does the author by giving voice to the underprivileged other within a colonial system distance himself from this system, or is Michael K’s loss of freedom and story only a pessimistic negation of historic future, an apocalypse devoid of an after?

I argue that Coetzee retains his artistic integrity and writes in opposition to the colonising discourse of history in South Africa precisely by portraying K as the open-ended possibilities of identity instead of making claims to a simplified truth about opposition. Instead of ‘giving a voice to’ the silenced other, he keeps his authorial control through a third person narrator who provides glimpses of incoherent thoughts and reports actions and inarticulate speech from K’s viewpoint. By taking the middle position between the authorial voice and that of the colonised subject, Coetzee signals his acknowledgement of the other as other and recognises the impossibility of complete identification. He refrains from literary and linguistic colonisation of his protagonist, and by so doing writes against the idea of colonisation itself.

From the very beginning of the novel, and of Michael K’s life, he is designated the role of the other, but not in terms of race or colour as would be expected in a South African colonial context. By the narrator’s direct description of the protagonist as hare-lipped and slow-minded the author sidesteps his historical context, where race, colour and gender are the more typical key determinants of difference. The reader is given a more general understanding of the reasons for his separateness and isolation, which relate directly to the equally important themes of language and communication. His mother “did not like the mouth that would not close” and “[b]ecause their smiles and whispers hurt her, she kept [him] away

from other children” (3). He is taken out of school, institutionalized and kept apart from the ordinary society. Michael K ‘learns to be quiet’ (4) as a way of enduring and keeping intact. The fact that he is coloured, and therefore belongs to the underprivileged classes, is given indirectly (the ‘CM’ in his identification papers) and played down, as if to ascertain that class- or race-related conflicts are not a main issue here.

On the whole, Michael K is described more often in terms of what he lacks than through his positive attributes: there seems to be little purpose and initiative in his life and his story is characterised more by gaps than by coherence. Coetzee portrays a character who acts by not acting: A being, complete in itself, present on the stage where a drama of oppression, violence and death is acted out around him, who by his unremitting withdrawal and undisturbed ‘stony-ness’ affects those around.

I have mentioned in connection with the travel-motif that there is no development in his character in the sense of learning. And yet there is a change in his identity, or rather – he comes to stand out more clearly as what he has always been, perhaps: from the relatively realist portrayal at the beginning, he becomes increasingly illusive (“not of this world”, 130), set apart from his historical context. It is important to notice that K never perceives himself as an other in relation to a self. Against the colonial naming and mapping, he silently and intuitively insists on his right to be what he is, because he knows no other. He does not feel the urge to *become* what he is not. His obvious asexuality signals his lack of ambition to possess and leave traces of his self. Thus disconnected from the future, he retreats into silence, thinking to himself “how fortunate that I have no desire to father” and “I am one of the fortunate ones who escape being called” (104). He is of the present, enduring, hibernating, a potency only; not living in time (as past, present and future history) but *being*, “in a pocket out of time” (60).

Two sets of images need to be discussed in connection with K’s identity: the stone image, which I have already alluded to, and the image of gardening. Both run through the whole of the text and work on several levels in Coetzee’s habitual contradictory ways.

At some point between the escape from the city and reaching the farm in the Karoo, K ponders upon his lack of ‘belief’ (the urge for meaning and direction?): “Perhaps I am the stony ground, he thought” (48). On the farm, feeling “insubstantial as air” (58) and burying the ashes of his mother in the dry ground, he begins “his life as a cultivator”. He takes pleasure in tending the land “because I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature” (59). Further on, recognising the change in himself when he remembers his life as a gardener in the parks of Cape Town, he is

no longer sure that he would choose green lawns and oak-trees to live among. [...] I have lost my love for that kind of earth, he thought. [...] it is no longer the green and the brown that I want but the yellow and the red; not the wet but the dry; not the dark but the light; not the soft but the hard. I am becoming a different kind of man, he thought [...] I am becoming smaller and harder and drier every day. (67)

K seems to become increasingly one with the land. For Marais, there is an analogy between the change in K's perspective from the vegetal to the geological and K's affinity with the African landscape:

[t]hese descriptions [of the African landscape] convey the immediacy of the relationship between subject and object, self and other. Rather than transforming the presence of the landscape, the perceiving subject is one with it and leaves it open and intact, exactly as it was before it was observed.⁶⁹

Rather than taking the position of the coloniser, then, K as the colonised object identifies with the colonised land:

He could not imagine himself spending his life driving stakes into the ground, erecting fences, dividing up the land. He thought of himself not as something heavy that left tracks behind it, but if anything as a speck upon the surface of an earth too deeply asleep to notice the scratch of ant-feet, the rasp of butterfly teeth, the tumbling of dust. (97)

When "the urge to speak" (48) has left him and "whatever the nature of the beast that had howled inside him, [...] was starved into silence" (68), he recognises that "a man must live so that he leaves no trace of his living. That is what it has come to" (99). Coetzee (through the voice of the medical officer) draws the image of K (and the land with him) as the "castaway marooned in a pocket of time, the time of waiting, camp time, war-time" with "currents of time swirling and eddying all about us" until the "moment of transfiguration in which pattern is born from chaos and history manifests itself in all its triumphant meaning" (158). There is hope of a new world order after the chaos of the present, and K represents an alternative way of thinking and acting in relation to this future. Waiting and enduring, K's gardening is not an act of appropriation, but a fusion of his being with that of the land. With the watchfulness of a 'timorous mouse' (105) and 'the confidence of a blind man' (103), like a mole or a worm (182), he tends the land in secret, by night, until he is found out and hauled from his burrow again. Linguistically as well as physically colonised by the power-holders, who violate his individuality by keeping him locked in their story, he resists like the very land he is part of. Trying to beat back "the old hopeless stupidity invading him" (60) he escapes:

He is like a stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time, is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand. A hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life. He passes through these institutions

⁶⁹ Michael Marais, "The Hermeneutics of Empire: Coetzee's Post-colonial Metafiction", in Huggan and Watson, eds., *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, 77

and camps and hospitals and God knows what else like a stone. Through the intestines of the war. An unbearing, unborn creature. (135)

What I see as Coetzee's own ambiguity between the urge to be part of and the need to stay out of history is doubly reflected in K's insubstantiality as a literary character and in his uncertainty about his own purpose. "You're a baby", he is told by Robert in the resettlement camp, "You've been asleep all your life. It's time to wake up" (88). Later, when 'the men in the mountains', the guerrilla-soldiers actively fighting oppression, come to the farm, he is tempted to step forward and go with them, to be part of their stories:

[..] I would feed them and afterward sit with them around the fire drinking in their words. The stories they tell will be different from the stories I heard in the camp, because the camp was for those left behind, the women and children, the old men, the blind, the crippled, the idiots, people who have nothing to tell but stories of how they have endured. Whereas these young men have had adventures, victories and defeats and escapes. They will have stories to tell long after the war is over, stories for a lifetime, stories for their children to listen to open-mouthed. (109)

In K's uncharacteristically clear and insightful answer lies what I read as the author's own position in relation to history and to his role as author in his contemporary South African context:

K knew that he would not crawl out and stand out and cross from darkness into firelight to announce himself. He even knew the reason why: because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. That was why. (109)

Perhaps not in opposition to, but certainly very different from Brink's realistic fictional rewriting of history, Coetzee defends the right to speak and write unrealistically, artistically and literarily. He writes for the act of writing in itself, as a sign of individual presence. In K's life I read an almost desperate plea that literature as art may be kept and cultivated as food for thought and means of endurance and survival. Because in the individual expression of creativity lies the reason for life, without which the future has little meaning. Both as a literary portrayal of individual resistance in a context unmistakably South African, and as an allegorical interpretation of a writer's dilemma within that context, *Life & Times of Michael K* is "a story of the vulnerable being in a time of the collective demand".

Turning now to the third and final point in my investigation of *Life & Times of Michael K*, I will discuss the whole of the novel in relation to the event as a basic narrative element, to see how the story relates to the time and place of the setting.

I proceed to look into the ways Coetzee makes literature as art, like Michael K, "an allegory – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a

system without becoming a term in it” (166). Thus, I argue that in his artistic treatment of time and place as aspects of the event, as form, he opposes the entrapment of camps, to preserve a greater, more general sense of freedom in relation to the uncertainty of the future.

Before going into detail about the events that constitute the story, I need to briefly comment on the aspects of time and place in relation to the contexts of the work and its author. In an essay on the relation between history and fiction, André Brink refers to the old Spanish narrative tradition of beginning every story with the clause “Once upon a time, there was and there was not...”.⁷⁰ This way of acknowledging the ambiguity of truth, and the fusion of fact and fantasy in every story, is observed by Coetzee here: The place of the events is undoubtedly South Africa. This is made clear through details of geographical names and language. Still, Coetzee retains a certain haziness, for instance by playing down the racial issues and avoiding a realist portrayal of the struggle. Thus omitting the expected stereotypes, he manages to set focus on the simplification of truth in the regular binary opposites of the colonial situation, and the reader is forced to consider his or her preconceptions. In the same operation, the reader is alerted to the more general aspects of the themes investigated in the text, which makes it possible to relate the story of Michael K in South Africa to the Ks of other colonial contexts.

Time needs to be discussed both as a motif in the text and as a literary device in relation to discourse and story. The novel is set in unspecified time, but allusions are made to both present and future in Coetzee’s habitual vagueness. Apart from the middle section, which is narrated in the present tense, relating the experiences of the medical officer here and now, the story is told in the past tense from some point in the near future. The nature of the events reflects a general sense of imminent doom in South Africa at the time of writing, which has made critics see it as an apocalypse, a text about the ending of time. In my reading, the times in themselves, and what happens to people in such times as these, are the most important issues. The aspect of future history embedded in the story of the here and now is nevertheless a core motif, but more, I think, in the questioning of the possibility of creating one’s own personal history than in a debate on the political situation in South Africa.

The relation between story time and discourse time varies a lot through the novel. Coetzee applies temporal variation consciously as a literary device to support the motif of time in the story. High speed in the narration of the dramatic events of life as it happens around K alternates with low speed in his reflections on life. For example, the accumulation

⁷⁰ André Brink, “Reflections on Literature and History”, in *Reinventing a Continent*, 138

of story in little discourse space in the narration of the riots in the city is a stark contrast to the dwelling on the inner life of the protagonist in his 'life as a cultivator', where very little actually happens, but takes a long time to narrate.

These time-contrasts on the discourse level tally with two different sets of events which make up the conflict in the story. On the one hand, there are the events which constitute the South African landscape of war; on the other, the events of Michael K's life as a gardener. The first set describes the present political and social history, but it also serves to rewrite myths sustaining Afrikaner tribalism. The second offers an alternative to this hegemonic culture.

Like the tableaux of a theatre production, various scenes are drawn of life in a stifled and stifling system of power-relations, which determine the movements of Michael K and the other 'actors'. Central events are those where the situation of civil war in the city is brought across, those portraying abuse, brutality and the loss of human dignity and freedom of movement, those that reveal the power-holders' manufactured stories. Events occurring in the city, as well as those in the countryside, cumulatively characterise a society of systematised brutality which rests on a grid of bureaucracy. The individual is victimised. The corrupting force of power works on the perpetrator as well as on the victim who is kept down in ignorance, dependence and hopelessness. What we have is a system on the verge of total collapse where the loss of individuality is complete and only the grid remains intact. The 'actors' who represent the system are characterised by their titles and position in relation to power, not by their names: the police-woman, the nurse, the clerk, the soldier, the prisoner, the captain, the foreman, the brother-in-law of the captain of police. Institutions within the system, on the other hand, are given proper names, as if they lived individual lives of their own: Huis Norenius – the mental institution where K grew up, the resettlement camps of Jakkalsdrif and Brandvlei, and Kenilworth – the rehabilitation camp in Cape Town.

In the events which describe Michael K's encounters with society, Coetzee not only comments on the present history of South Africa but also engages in the rewriting of past history in ways that deconstruct and reshape Afrikaner myths of the 'volk's' suffering and endurance. In the description of the dehumanisation of people both on the inside and the outside of the rehabilitation and resettlement camps, for instance, there is an echo of the suffering of Afrikaner women and children at the hands of the English in concentration camps during the Boer War. Recasting history from the viewpoint of the underprivileged, landless and powerless masses not only reveals the habit in a dominant culture to omit the parts that do

not fit with their own stories of endurance and survival, but verifies, and writes back, the reality of the suffering other.

The events of K's individual life are different from these, constituting his existence as a story in 'a pocket outside of time' of the events which describe the unremitting contest for power. His response to acts of subjugation and control is physical and mental withdrawal. After one of his escapes, K thinks "Now surely I have come as far as a man can come; [...] surely now that in all the world only I know where I am, I can think of myself as lost" (66). He enters into his own mode of time, facing "one day at a time": "There seemed nothing to do but live" (66). Later, after another escape, he has learnt to 'love idleness' as

a yielding up of himself to time, to a time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world, washing over his body, circulating in his armpits and his groin, stirring his eyelids. [...] all that was moving was time, bearing him onwards in its flow. Once or twice the other time in which the war had its existence reminded itself to him as the jet fighters whistled high overhead. But for the rest he was living beyond the reach of calendar and clock in a blessedly neglected corner, half awake half asleep. Like a parasite dozing in the guts, he thought; like a lizard under a stone. (115-116)

K's story 'with gaps and holes in it' becomes his own stubborn reversal of plotted, meaningful history. His understanding remains intuitive and fragmentary. Holding on and enduring the present as his 'being in himself', with the essence of a gardener, "or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence" (182), he wonders whether the moral of the whole story is that there is time enough for everything (182). Coetzee gives no clear answers, but in K's uncertain questioning of the meaning of existence and in his refusal to accept others' stories as his, there is a certain hope that the alternative life he attempts to live may one day be possible:

Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time. Perhaps that is enough of an achievement, for the time being. (182)

In the dream which ends the novel, K returns to the farm and in company with an old man starts over again, as a gardener, working with the land as part of it, not as a conqueror.

As an act of writing into the eternal conflict between the ethical demand of history and the aesthetic demands of literature as art, *Life & Times of Michael K* offers few solutions. However, in its attempt to reveal and discuss the mechanisms at the heart of such conflicts, it engages the reader in its invocation of ethical choice. Presenting us with the incoherent glimpses of the history of an individual in times of extreme pressure from the collective society, Coetzee poses questions about how to enter one's present without being entrapped by it. The need to take on communal responsibility is shown to conflict with the need to keep one's integrity and individual freedom.

As a biographical journey through land and mind, *Life & Times of Michael K* rewrites the meaning appropriated by colonial language, literature and mythical history in a quest for a different understanding. Through the account of K's life, Coetzee bares the impossibilities of telling meaningful stories, as well as writing and living meaningful lives in the senseless society of South Africa in the 1980s. K's story works as negation of the biographical form and function: the journey through life towards learning, development and consistency is thwarted in his accidental, aimless roaming back and forth through the physical and mental landscapes of the land and its history. K finds himself unable – and increasingly unwilling – to tell his story in the language of his captivators. It never comes into being as a coherent, plotted history of the individual in society, but remains the bits and scraps of life in between the stories of the others.

Through all of K's meetings with the system, and with his story as it is read, interpreted or told by others, the mechanisms of colonialism are laid open. Imagery of fences and camps point at the entrapment of both coloniser and colonised within a system promoting the alienation of man from the land and from his inner individual self. Thus, meaning is lost. Only gradually does K obtain a sense of intention in his experience of coming closer to the physical land without and within him as he establishes contact between his creative self and the creative powers of nature.

Through Michael K, Coetzee also explores the role of the author, both in the South African context of his present and in general. The ethical dilemma of the white writer derives from his affiliation with the colonial project, and the appropriation of history through the command of language as a medium for colonisation is exemplified most clearly in the eloquent character of the medical officer. Coetzee questions his agency: in spite of well-meaning intentions to oppose silence, attempting to situate oneself within the mind of another, to interpret the other in terms of the self, is related to colonisation. In his incomplete sketching of Michael K, as a story with holes in it, Coetzee signals the other's presence and resistance, but he refrains from assigning it a meaning which is not its own. The other is there, but his story cannot be told until he finds the language to express his self. The change must come from within.

In K's refusal to act in history and in his withdrawal into his own mental world outside of time to cultivate the idea of gardening, Coetzee defends the author's right to write on his own terms, and to keep the independence of fiction as fiction even in times of struggle. Like K, the novel acts in its time by refusing to act according to expectations. In K's incapacity to tell his story as he chooses to live it, lies the author's despondency about present and future;

in K's refusal to bend, however, in his patient endurance of life in between fences and camps, lies the hope of survival into a different future. The novel in all its postmodernist literariness and open-ended ambiguity offers resistance and gratification for the belief that "we have art so that we shall not die of the truth".

CHAPTER 5: *DISGRACE*

Disgrace was published in 1999, five years after the elections that marked the transition from white minority rule to democracy in South Africa, and sixteen years after *Life & Times of Michael K* appeared. In between these two literary events, South Africa went through the final stages of apartheid and nerve-racking political negotiations to end tyranny and avoid the massive blood-shed of war. Political leaders of both sides recognised the necessity of reconciliation between oppressors and oppressed in order to secure future coexistence in the ‘new South Africa’. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in 1995 to provide “as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights”⁷¹ committed between 1960 and 1993. Its ambitious aim was to enhance a mutual understanding of the past to enable the nation to enter a shared future, along the lines of the interim constitution of 1993. The mandate of the commission and the facts of the past excavated in the numerous hearings throughout the country from 1995 to -98 were the dominant issues of public debate these years. Released in 2003, the report is a “repository of South African memory”.⁷²

These significant historical and literary events form the backdrop of my investigation, as they represent the polarisation between historical representation and the aesthetic demand so vital in Coetzee’s fiction: the South African context and the literature of an author as it relates to the changes of this context.

David Attwell describes Coetzee’s novels as “located in the nexus of history and text” where they “explore the *tension* between these polarities”. He goes on: “as a novelist and linguist with a European heritage, working on the experimental fringes of his genre, Coetzee leans towards a reflexive examination of the constitutive role of language in placing the subject within history [...]”.⁷³ Because the author’s own immediate history is so closely linked to the dismal history of South Africa, he cannot avoid having to deal with it. The result is what Attwell calls ‘situational metafiction’. Relating to the question of agency in Coetzee’s novels, Attwell says:

Although Coetzee respects the claims of both reflexivity and historicity, he does not seek a mediating or neutral role in the field of cultural politics. Behind the narrative subjects of each of the novels, [...] lies an implied narrator who shifts stance with and against the play of forces in South African culture.

⁷¹ Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No 34 of 1995

⁷² Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, eds., *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press 2005), 1

⁷³ David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 2-3

In other words, Coetzee's figuring of the tension between text and history is itself a historical act, one that must be read back into the discourses of South Africa where one can discern its illuminating power. We might call this narrator the self-of-writing, or the "one-who-writes", as Coetzee himself puts it.⁷⁴

Attwell is referring here to Coetzee's fictions before the fall of apartheid, but are his claims valid for the part of the oeuvre that was written after this time-shed too? Relating the questions of my problem statement to this novel, I will ask how Coetzee approaches the interrelatedness of the discourses of history and fiction in a postcolonial debate on personal and public aspects of identity and belonging. How can Coetzee's explorations and rewriting of western-based language and literature be read back into the South African context of the 1990s and act historically in this society?

My reason for including *Disgrace* in my narrow selection of literary works is the fact that it is the first novel in which Coetzee explicitly addresses the political and social situation in South Africa after 1994. In addition to that, there is the linkage to *Life & Times of Michael K*. The South African setting is the same: like Michael K, and the author himself, the character of David Lurie is formed in the span between the city of Cape Town and the rural landscapes of the Karoo and in that of historical myth and present realities. As for the story, the one related in the present tense here might be the one waited for in *Life & Times of Michael K* as the near future after civil war and social and political collapse, a story of new possibilities for individual choice and life out of camps.

Disgrace is hardly a title for a story of optimism and reconciliation, though. Coetzee's first novel to address postapartheid South Africa is one of personal agony, brutal anarchy, menace and suspense:

David Lurie suffers humiliating debasement of his roles as man and scholar after an illicit love-affair with a much younger student at a university in Cape Town, where he works as a professor specialising in literature and communication. Refusing to give in to the subsequent claims for public apology, he loses his job and his social standing. He goes to visit his daughter on her smallholding in the Eastern Cape, in a vague hope that simple country life may restore his self-esteem and give inspiration to his creative ambitions. Inhabiting a mental vacuum between the every-day life of the 'lowly' in the area, whom he fails to identify with, and the higher spheres of romantic literature, Lurie is an observer of his own self and his position. His self-centred attempts at reconciliation of his past and his present lives in view of an uncertain future are broken off by a violent attack on the farm: his daughter Lucy is raped and David fails to protect her. Father and daughter are estranged by the incident. He wants her to sell out and leave, considering the insecurity and violence of a disintegrating society as hopeless to live with. She is adamant to stay on and willing to accept the dangers and insecurities as unavoidable aspects of life as it is in the post-colonial turmoil of South Africa. Back in Cape Town, David experiences the despondency of his existence there and an overwhelming vacancy of future. When he learns that Lucy is pregnant, he returns to the Karoo, sets himself up in his own rooms and decides to live the dreariness of the present, waiting to see what the future holds.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 3

The tension in the story arises from the apparent similarities that suggest a linking between this story and *Life & Times of Michael K* which is subsequently negated: Michael K's time for gardening has not come about, at least not in the sense of a new world order of individual freedom and harmonious coexistence of people and land. On the contrary, the sense of apocalypse and doom is even more uncomfortably incisive here than in the novel written in the final stages of the apartheid regime. In many ways 'waiting' still seems to be the word characterising society: in a new 'interregnum' where people clamber for positions in the 'new deal' of power, brutal tyranny is replaced by brutal anarchy, and people of 'the old order' are caught in the swamp between past and future. The question echoing in Coetzee's portrayal of the shifting relationships between the former colonisers and the colonised – the selves and the others – is essentially whether it is at all possible to write a new story on the basis of the old, and if yes, then how? What sacrifices will it take? Will the truth as facts about the past suffice to change people's minds? Is the legacy from the apartheid era too deeply inscribed in people to allow for anything but a shift of roles? In its explorations of the colonial and postcolonial, is *Disgrace* proclaiming the impossibility of K's time for gardening and life out of camps?

I will argue that *Disgrace* is a powerful historical act in its investigations of the possibilities to make sense of past and present for a future, and in its negotiations of the alternatives available. In its revelations of the authorities' need for new myths in building consensus, the narrative rivals the official history of reconciliation.

Entering a debate on form and the ethical demand on the writer, Coetzee once commented that "making sense of life inside a book is different from making sense of real life – not more difficult or less difficult, just different".⁷⁵ Throughout the many-layered complexity of *Disgrace*, I see 'making sense' as the key term concerning both the story inside the book, the role of language as a means of communication and expression, and the role of the book itself in the world ('worldliness' is the term used by Said). In accordance with the ambiguous double-ness of Coetzee's writing, the term is used both in its ordinary meaning of understanding and as a term stating an opposition to the *finding* of meaning inherent in a coherent, plotted series of events. In this point lies what I think is this novel's 'worldliness': in its implied statement that there is no *one* fixed story, no *one* truth, neither of the past nor of the present. In fact, there is no coherent story/history at all, just language and a series of events which are open to interpretation – to *make* meaning from. Colonialism is based on the appropriation of the one meaning, the one truth, blocking out all others, and in this process,

⁷⁵ Coetzee quoted in David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, 11

historical and fictional mythmaking have been the legitimising force. In *Disgrace* Coetzee both reveals the mechanics of such colonial mythmaking and rewrites them to make *new* sense.

Having stated what I see as the governing thematics of *Disgrace*, I will proceed to show how meaning is discussed on various levels. Turning first to ‘the story inside the book’, I will show how the *making of sense* through language and text informs characterisation, plot and discourse.

On the surface this is the story of the disintegration of one man’s history: David Lurie’s fall from grace is his fall out of his own story as it is plotted and understood by himself. His life loses the meaning he has imposed upon it: his expulsion from the elevated scholarly world of the arts, and his failures in love, leave him in limbo, like a ghost. He is forced out of his own structure, and his life becomes a wavering between his old ideals and the need to understand the conditions of life now. This echoes on an individual level South Africa’s ‘fall from grace’ through colonialism and the anarchy after.

The novel strongly resists being summarised: there is no strong sense of causality in this plot, of one event leading to another, of purpose and intent. Two main incidents supply a skeleton structure: the first is the illicit love affair and the humiliating request for public atonement that follows, the second is the violent attack on father and daughter on the farm. Both of these work to ‘deconstruct’ the fixed and set character of David Lurie. For the rest the story consists of a string of events loosely connected by the questions the protagonist poses regarding the possibilities for an understanding of his downfall. Since no answers are given in the story, the reader, like David, must look elsewhere for meaning.

There is no sense found and no sense made inside the story, but that in itself is a statement: Lurie fails to *find* the meaning inherent in what happens to him. He must either *make* his meaning or accept the lack of purpose and give up. Coetzee’s ways with language and narration reflect his views on writing in a broad sense: We are all texts written by what we read, and in the choices we make from what is available to us, we constantly read and rewrite ourselves to make our meaning. I see the intertextuality of the discourse as an urgent request to the reader to participate in the process of reading into the layers of text that constitute the being of both Lurie and the novel. Both ‘texts’ contribute a wide set of linguistic options one may choose to enter into, and the story changes according to how the various elements are read together. In the end nothing seems to be coincidental or purposeless: every word twisted and toyed with, all the clusters of words torn from other textual contexts, words and sentences in foreign languages, scraps of poetry, philosophy and

dialogue are brought together in a conglomerate of intertextuality. The discourse reflects the process Lurie goes through, or evades, in his attempt to come to terms with life as a set of choices – ethical and aesthetical or both.

On one level, the characters may be seen to act their given roles in a political and social scenario of competing forces in a new positioning for power, mirroring the processes of colonisation in the past. The colonial mind of that past is very much present in the now of the novel, but in new disguises as the roles are shifted. The ambiguity of these roles, signifying Coetzee's avoidance of closure, secures an opening up to continuous interpretation and possible change.

In his portrayal of the various characters as individuals in their own right, as rounded characters responding to their own times and to each other, Coetzee investigates the possibilities of making *new* sense of history. With David Lurie as a location for the struggle between the colonial mindset and a new philosophy of freedom, the necessity for a fundamental change of view on future is advocated. Therefore, I will concentrate on the protagonist and touch on the others as they interfere with his story.

If the novel resists being summarised, the character of David Lurie resists interpretation. *Disgrace* simply resists any simple reading. The difficulty of giving a meaningful account of the story's plot and themes reflects the complicity and interplay of all its levels. David Lurie's story is no *one* story from A to Y, from beginning through middle and to solution at the end: it is a collection of glimpses into layer upon layer of words, language, images – links in a string of text that the reader may choose to go into. Some make immediate meaning, some don't, but all lead further and generate a labyrinthine experience of language. As David Lurie – a communications expert and literary scholar – is formed by language and contributes to the forming of others in language, the narrative subject behind (who is and is not Lurie) interprets him and what happens to him in words and texts that have contributed to his formation. Then there is the implied narrator and, finally, the conscience of the author who in *his* use of language, his own and his interpretations and choices of canonical texts, characterises his protagonist. Layer upon layer of language, layer upon layer of possible meaning.

Considering these 'moments of language', I will explore Coetzee's reading of past, present and future through Lurie and show how the author in his 'situational metafiction' enters a postcolonial debate on identity. The complexity and ambiguity of the protagonist is brought across by the third-person narrator, who varies his narrative distance to the protagonist. Through his highly ambiguous use of language, Coetzee as 'the-one-who-writes'

directs the attention of the reader with deft, unassuming control, balancing between the obvious viewpoint of David Lurie and a position closer to an ordinary omniscient narrator. In this way, the reader is seldom quite certain about the protagonist, whether what he says reflects his true self, his self as he would like to see it, or if it represents the views of a conscience outside him. This narrative distance allows the author to comment upon, place judgement on and communicate doubt to the implied reader about the sincerity of the protagonist. When for instance Lurie thinks about his love-life, there is this vague idea that he has become insensitive to his own needs, that he confuses contentedness with listlessness in order to deaden his sense of loss and defeat:

His needs turn out to be quite light, after all, light and fleeting, like those of a butterfly. No emotion, or none but the deepest, the most unguessed-at: a ground bass of contentedness, like the hum of traffic that lulls the city-dweller to sleep, or like the silence of the night to countryfolk. (5)

About the relationship to Melanie he comments “That is where he ought to end it. But he does not” and “She will not know how to deal with him; he ought to let her go. But he is in the grip of something” (18), conveying a distance between Lurie’s mind and his voice. When, later, the difficulties become more evident, the moral distance is more pronounced: “if she is behaving badly, he has behaved worse. To the extent that they are together, if they are together, he is the one who leads, she the one who follows. Let him not forget that” (28). The variations of pronouns effectively underscore the ambiguity of the man. After the attack on the farm, Lurie despairs:

In a while the organism will repair itself, and I, the ghost within it, will be my own self again. But the truth, he knows, is otherwise. His pleasure of living has been snuffed out. Like a leaf on a stream, like a puffball on a breeze, he has begun to float toward his end. He sees it quite clearly, and it fills him with [...] despair. The blood of life is leaving his body and despair is taking its place, despair that is like a gas [...]. you breathe it in, your limbs relax, you cease to care, even at the moment the steel touches your throat. (107-108)

Here the ‘one-who-writes’ becomes more visible through the shifts from the ‘I’ to the ‘he’ and the ‘you’, moving the viewpoint from the protagonist to the one who sees, placing Lurie’s experience into a wider context.

When stepping away, the narrator makes us see what is not clear to Lurie: “He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her”(24) and places judgement on the insensitive womaniser (or coloniser): “Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (25). The ambiguity thus created establishes Lurie both as a victim and an accomplice.

The protagonist’s complexity is underscored by the ambiguous attitude of the narrator and he comes across as a person who both fails to understand himself and what happens to

him and one whose personality is constituted by numerous dichotomies. Knowledge of mind and soul is contrasted to that of the heart, the 'archetypes of the mind' are contrasted to the reality of the world, waiting is contrasted to acting, and the present is an undefined state in between past and future. As the story proceeds, these gaps are revealed to Lurie and he makes measured efforts to bridge them.

Lurie's relationship with animals is an illustrative example of these contrasts in his personality and of the change he goes through. Bev Shaw, the veterinary assistant and Lucy's friend and accomplice has a crucial role in guiding Lurie towards a recognition of his own hidden qualities. First he speaks his intellectual mind:

As for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let us be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty of fear retribution. (74)

After the attack and experience of guilt and suffering, he notices a change in his reactions, although still "He does not understand what is happening to him": on his way home after assisting Bev in putting down dogs at the clinic "he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake" (143). In the end, humbled, he is able to see animals as defenceless victims of desire (the colonial mind): "He and Bev do not speak. He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love"(219). In his own state of complete and utter disgrace he is finally able to recognise grace in life around and connect emotionally with it. Lurie's relationship to women, of course, also exemplifies this change from a self-centred conqueror to a state of awareness that suffering is a 'condition of man' and a growing ability to identify with the victim.

Still, the doubleness in Lurie's character as written text is most clearly brought out, I think, in the use of Wordsworth's poetry and in the characterisation of Lurie as a "disciple of nature poet William Wordsworth"(116), who in his time advocated a view on the harmonious co-existence of man and nature so fundamental to the Romantic poets. Lurie's affinity with this idea sharply contrasts the dualism at the centre of the colonial mind, which materialises as an urge to dominate. The event in the novel where Lurie interprets passages of *The Prelude* with his students serves as 'a flash of revelation' (21) in the novel as a whole and in relation to Lurie's character. When he says that "For as long as he can remember, the harmonies of *The Prelude* have echoed within him" (13), what is brought to mind is the one-ness of nature at the heart of Wordsworth's philosophy, unconscious knowledge deeply lodged in Lurie's

own heart. His re-reading of himself is the process of language bringing this intuitive understanding to the surface, for the ideal to merge with the real.

The dichotomy of ‘the ideal world of imagination’ and the ‘real world of the senses’ is the theme of the ‘Alps sequence’ where the poet expresses his disappointment with the reality of nature as it ruins the pure image formed in his imagination. The conflict is clearly one that engages the scholar: “The great archetypes of the mind, pure ideas, find themselves usurped by mere sense-images”, but, he continues, “The question is not, How can we keep the imagination pure, protected from the onslaughts of reality? The question has to be, Can we find a way for the two to coexist?” (22). In his subsequent interpretation of Wordsworth he is touching on the essence of his own life/story after Melanie and, indeed, of the whole narrative:

As the sense-organs reach the limit of their powers, their light begins to go out. Yet at the moment of expiry that light leaps up one last time like a candle flame, giving us a glimpse of the invisible. The passage is difficult; perhaps it even contradicts the Mont Blanc moment. Nevertheless, Wordsworth seems to be feeling his way toward a balance: not the pure idea, wreathed in clouds, nor the visual image burned on the retina, overwhelming and disappointing us with its matter-of-fact clarity, but the sense-image, kept as fleeting as possible, as a means toward stirring or activating the idea that lies buried more deeply in the soil of memory. (22)

This idea of a possible merger of an ideal image with the sensory reality seems to be the motivation for Lurie’s continued – although hesitant and faltering – exploration of his own identity.

The doubleness of form and themes, which I also pointed at in my discussion of *Life & Times of Michael K*, reflects what Stephen Watson has called ‘the coloniser who refuses’ (Memmi’s expression), signifying the white author at once part of and opposed to his Afrikaner background. Penner says: “Coetzee goes beyond the politics of contemporary South Africa, beyond the material motives of colonialism [...] to explore the Cartesian origins of the master/slave mentality, what Watson calls ‘the metaphysics of power’”⁷⁶. According to Watson the author is at once drawn to the being-in-itself and the being-for-itself and cannot decide whether to act in the world or withdraw from it: “If they choose contemplation, history will not cease to remind them of their irresponsibility and guilt. If they decide to act, to enter history, the world of being that they have necessarily left behind will continue to be present to them in the form of an inner hollowness”.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Dick Penner, *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* (New York, Westpoint, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1989), 26

⁷⁷ Stephen Watson quoted by Penner, 25

If to continue in the metaphor of language as it relates to *Disgrace*, the conflict in the author is reflected in the conflict in the protagonist between his personality as it has been formed by the discourse of colonialism and the language of dissent that he is enmeshed in as a “disciple of nature poet William Wordsworth” (116). Lurie is forced to act in the world, or rather, having acted the womaniser – the coloniser of women – he is forced to take the consequences. Choosing not to go through the motions of public confessions and absolution, he is barred off from his literary world of contemplation and forced to seek personal and real purge through further acting in the mundane history of ordinary people. The real world is threatening to ‘usurp’ his ideal world of literature, music and beautiful women. What happens to this character in the span between the first and the last sentence is a deconstruction of personality and a baring of the linguistic-historical elements that have formed it. The narrator, and the man, stating that “For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” is of another world than he who on the last page, finally giving over, says “Yes, I am giving him up” (220). This process, brought out by the part of the narrator which is linked to the voice behind, ‘the-one-who-writes’, and communicated to the implied reader, the protagonist-narrator is not aware of. Things happen to him, but he does not see, fails to hear and repeatedly states his failure to understand. Still, the words and language of the ‘real world’, filtered through the words of the ideal world of literature work on him.

Coetzee once said that “history is an imposition of meaning on time and events, but that time and that meaning are actually linguistic; they are language”.⁷⁸ This idea that language is what in the deepest sense constitutes story, history, literature and identity runs through all the layers of *Disgrace*. Both the story inside the novel and ‘the novel in the world’ reflect a deep suspicion of English as the colonial language and explore how new sense can be made through rereading of text in the widest definition of the word.

In the story Coetzee lets David Lurie re-invent his identity through a radical re-reading of Byron’s life and poetry. At the beginning the Byron-theme is part of his contemplative self, located “in the realm of ideas” (63): “He enjoys the late-afternoon quiet of the reading room”, “reading all he can find on the wider Byron circle” (11). After having met Melanie, the affinity with the darker sides of the Byronic Hero are alluded to in the author’s use of “Lara”, where the parallels between the protagonist of the poem and the one of *Disgrace* are clear,

⁷⁸ Coetzee quoted by Penner, in *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* (New York and London: Greenwood Press, 1989), 26

both to the reader and to David Lurie: 'the erring spirit', 'a stranger in this breathing world'(32) who "doesn't act on principle but on impulse", "the source of his impulses [being] dark to him"(33), is both Byron, his hero and Lurie. The implied narrator reads Lurie's fears of the future into and from the poem: "it will not be possible to love him, not in the deeper, more human sense of the word. He will be condemned to solitude" (34).

Byron's hero is one of the aforementioned 'moments of text' one may choose to read into the novel to enhance the 'making of sense' from it: the moody, passionate and self-conscious man to whom the moral codes of society do not apply and who is consequently seen as unrepentant, is not a hero in the ordinary sense. He is a man above the average, a victim of his impulses which, in turn, make him a victimiser, both repulsive and attractive.

The connection between Byron's dark hero and Lurie is also made in numerous moments of imagery and disconnected clusters of words 'lifted' from other texts (poems, letters, biographies): allusions to vipers, reptiles, serpents connect both men to sin and guilt (16,121), both are described as ghosts, from the fringes of history, and Lurie is characterised as "mad, bad and dangerous to know" (77), which are the words Byron's mistress Caroline Lamb used about him after their first meeting.

The conflicts in Lurie's life – his fall and his difficulties in making new meaning of himself and the world – is doubled in the story of Byron and elaborated on in the sub-story of the 'Byron-project'. "*Byron in Italy*, a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of a chamber opera"(4) is supposed to be Lurie's contribution to the future, something to leave behind (63), but words and music will not come, or what comes does not seem right to him. As he gradually loses himself and is emptied of desire (as a motive for colonisation), the affinity with 'Byron the hero' is replaced by his sense of connection with Byron the old, the dying, the ghost. Hence, the "lush orchestration" (63) first intended is abandoned as false.

Lurie's disenchanting conviction that "the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul"(4) impels his grappling with this project which constantly resists its creation. Out of touch with his true self, he seeks the language to express his heart: "First on Lucy's farm and now again here [in Cape Town], the project has failed to engage the core of him"(181). Eventually, after all his humiliating confrontations with the world, after having become a 'dog-man', dedicated to saving "the honour of corpses"(146), feeling "like a fly-casing in a spiderweb, brittle to the touch, lighter than rice-chaff" (107), having shed the contents of his self that was of the old, he is finally receptive to the new story of Byron. In the emptiness of his house (which has been broken into and robbed), unwanted and lonely, the music comes to him, but the once

passionate hero has been reduced to a shadow, a ghost with no voice of his own. In his place the Teresa “he hears shadowed in his inner ear” – the abandoned, aging, longing woman – comes forward. Lurie’s question about whether he “can find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman” (182) alludes to Bev Shaw and what she has taught him about his heart’s capacity to understand. Listening to his deepest self he reaches the musical language that can express the mutual feeling of suffering and longing in their story and in his own. Like with Bev then, Teresa leads and he follows (186) creating the music and being created by it (187). Teresa gives voice to Byron and Lurie gives voice to her. This expresses the idea (in Wordsworth’s poem) of suffering and love between the image of the ideal and the total despair of reality. When “he has been eaten away from inside and only the eroded shell of his heart remains” (156), his eyes and ears are opened to the ‘invisible’ (22). Through the experience of suffering – his own immediate pain, as well as suffering as a condition of life – he learns to open up and question what it is to be human ‘in this place, at this time’ (112). In his innermost, bare self, a new kind of dignity resides, which makes him perceptive of the sublime in the ordinary and motivates a change of attitude and action. Thus, his loss of worldly dignity connected to his colonial identity is proven invalid, unethical and insubstantial. The heart at the core, the capacity for unconditional love and compassion, is the only one valid facing the future.

Considered as a whole, as one text written by the many ‘moments of language’, *Disgrace* negotiates the relationship between personal story and public history. As an ‘act in history’ it reads its historical past and writes back to its historical present. It presents options but offers only convoluted and ambiguous answers. In my attempt to reach an understanding of the novel’s making of meaning for the future I will first look at it in relation to the TRC and their quest for truth as a basis for reconciliation.

Disgrace discusses the belief inherent in the constitution of 1995 that national unity and peace could only be reached through establishing the truth about the crimes committed under the apartheid regime. Which and whose truth to bring to light, and how the TRC was to react to this truth, were topics for much dispute: many felt that the commission’s mandate to grant amnesty to the perpetrators of crimes (on both sides) in return for their full confessions, would jeopardise the process of contrition and healing. It was feared that the public truth would not necessarily lead to the personal remorse that is normally a condition for forgiving and forgetting and aid the transformation of mind necessary to transcend the divisions of the

past.⁷⁹ Besides, the distinction between the active perpetrators of criminal acts and the passive political and social forces embedded in a system behind were naturally perceived as problematic for the understanding of moral responsibility. The concept of truth in relation to fact, story and personal and public history was as problematic as ever. This is what *Disgrace* is written into, as an act of language in history.

David Lurie's fall is a direct consequence of his refusal to enter the discourse of reconciliation that informs the university committee investigating his affair with a student. He is willing to admit to the facts and plead guilty to the girl's accusations of inappropriate conduct, but when the committee demands public expressions of remorse as evidence of his "spirit of repentance"(58), he is unable to comply. Lurie sees through their word-game to the moral conflict of public pretence and personal lack of sincerity. "They are his friends. They want to save him from his weakness, to wake him from his nightmare. They do not want to see him begging in the streets. They want him back in the classroom" (52). The compromise of absolution as reward for a statement of remorse that may be interpreted "as if [coming] from his heart" would guarantee his place in society, but "it reminds [him] too much of Mao's china. Recantation, self-criticism, public apology"(66). In the face of public disgrace, he desperately tries to keep his inner state of grace by refusing to act against his heart. The chair of the committee expresses the aim of the TRC and what many felt ought to be added to its agenda: "the criterion is not whether you are sincere. That is a matter, as I say, for your own conscience. The criterion is whether you are prepared to acknowledge your fault in a public manner and take steps to remedy it"(58).

While Lurie is unable to express in words his willingness to change, he must learn to feel grief by submitting himself to the acts of the world. The penalty inherent in the process of coming to terms with his disgrace in his gradually emerging ability to bond with people and animals, to see his own real self as part of nature, becomes the counselling he refused to submit to during the committee hearings.

Lurie's story of fall and resurrection is a statement about the necessity to make reconciliation a matter of personal transformation. It is an investigation of the problem he posed in relation to Wordsworth's *Prelude* about the need to bridge the gap between the world of ideas and the world of the senses. Only after having tested his ideals of a higher life in the real world of agony and strife can he find a level in himself, behind the colonial self, where he can connect with the world. His new identity is re-written, not re-found, in the

⁷⁹ Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, eds., *Negotiating the Past*, introduction 1-5

“nexus of history and text” where all is language. Only in a state of naked humiliation is he able to understand the essence of dignity and bond with the truly humane.

In this respect, the novel seems to question the validity of the ideals of reconciliation stated in the constitution. The gap between the ideal world of democratic ideas, equality and peace aimed for in these ‘myths’ for the future, and the real world of hatred, fear and crime in the present is striking. The novel acts as a reminder that the lines of division created by the myths of the apartheid regime are still at work. Beneath the changed positions in relation to power, class, race, colour and gender continue to determine the relations between people. The bringing to light of the stories of past wrongs in the belief that facts of truth will lead to forgetting and forgiving and help reconstruct society is revealed as new mythmaking, which inevitably leads to silencing of the voices that oppose consensus. Lucy’s refusal to tell the whole story of the attack on the farm for instance, is a direct consequence of the failure of the authorities to provide safety and justice. The police is characterised by their isolated pretence of influence and power, in ‘fortress-like’ buildings behind ‘fences topped with razor wire’ (153), content to maintain an illusion of agency while in reality hesitating to get involved. In the real world people are left to fend for themselves, and their attempts to make new sense of the present in view of an obscure future are a hazardous bargain in the gap between actual possibilities and the dreams of better lives.

Turning to the final point of my investigation, I will discuss what I read as the author’s strategies for making sense of history. In his postmodernist intertextual mode, Coetzee introduces Wordsworth’s nature philosophy to the South African context. *Disgrace* explores the possibilities of change through holistic thinking on man and nature.

Here I will concentrate on Lucy’s role and her relationship to Lurie and Petrus. In many ways she is a representative of an intermediate position in relation to the colonial past and the ‘new’ South Africa. Having been born to white, middle-class intellectual parents, Lucy has deliberately broken both with urbanity and the value-systems of ‘her own kind’ to settle for rural life among a blend of people of different backgrounds. Lurie reflects on how strange it is that she should become so different: “But perhaps it was not they who produced her: perhaps history had the larger share”(61). Her lack of ambition to succeed in a material and commercial sense disappoints the father, but as he changes, his understanding for her choices grows. Her story is of the time in between, still in the writing, with an unstable and insecure view to the future: “a frontier farmer of the new breed. In the old days, cattle and maize. Today, dogs and daffodils. The more things change the more they remain the same.

History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein. Perhaps history has learned a lesson” (62).

In a larger, more generally human context, Lucy represents the female values of romanticism and Wordsworthian nature philosophy, which can be traced in numerous moments of language through the novel: her choice of lifestyle is more emotionally than intellectually founded. Her repeated refusal to partake in Lurie’s logical reasoning, and his failure to make sense of her explanations may be read as conflicts between intellectual and sensory understanding. She represents a new ‘Age of sensibility’ at odds with his ‘Age of reason’ (which, as I have discussed, he is gradually working his way out of, towards a ‘whole’ identity). She says “I wish I could explain. But I can’t. Because of who you are and who I am, I can’t. I’m sorry”(155).

Lucy’s being a lesbian points at a negation of these female values, but since her ‘friend’ Helen has left and she has the air about her of a woman “[withdrawn] from the field of love”(65), her homosexuality is left somewhat uncertain: Lucy as a lesbian is her father’s reading of her, perhaps typical of his masculine, naming and labelling, colonising ways of understanding and dominating. There is an idea that Lucy, as a consequence of her intuitive understanding of what values should be brought on to the future seeks the company of women. After the assault, her father feels an outsider, excluded from the world of women and the ‘blood-matters’(104) which serve as bonds between them:

Not for the first time he wonders whether women would not be happier living in communities with women, accepting visits from men only when they choose. Perhaps he is wrong to think of Lucy as homosexual. Perhaps she simply prefers female company. Or perhaps that is all lesbians are: women who have no need of men. (104)

She has all the physical and mental strength of a ‘boervrou’ (60), with a practical, no-nonsense attitude to life in the country, but at the same time deep affection for the land. Even after the assault, the rape and the feeling of being hated for what she is, there is no doubt in her about what to do: “I’m not going back for the sake of an idea. I’m just going back”(105). In answer to Lurie’s question about the motive being postcolonial guilt and expiation, she answers “Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don’t act in terms of abstractions” (112).

Lucy’s attempts to write her story in opposition to male values is threatened on an intellectual level by her father and on an ideological and postcolonial level by Petrus, the former ‘dog-man’ and farm hand who is slowly working his way upwards in society. While she shares the characteristics of Michael K, the gardener, Petrus is gradually taking on the coloniser’s attitude to the land: “A man of patience, energy, resilience. A peasant, a *paysan*, a

man of the country”(117) with “a vision of the future in which people like Lucy have no place”(118). He works the land “all very swift and businesslike; all very unlike Africa”, building and fencing in, extending his family and making his presence felt as a shadow spreading. Lurie sees Lucy defeated: “Were this a chess game, he would say that Lucy has been outplayed on all fronts”(151).

Petrus is one of those clambering for new positions in relation to power in these times-in-between. He is ambiguous, keeps his story to himself and refuses to give clear answers. Instead he hints at the possibility of a merger on his terms in the future and does what suits him best in the present, be it good or bad (like the ‘erring spirit’ of *Lara*, which serves to connect him with Lurie and the colonial mind). His role in the attack on Lucy’s farm is unclear, opening up to ‘dark readings’(118) of his story. Coetzee makes it quite clear, though, that making sense of Petrus is difficult, if possible at all, given that the language of the coloniser will not suffice to communicate any truth about him:

More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. Pressed into the mould of English, Petrus’ story would come out arthritic, bygone. (117)

What is possible to read is only the history written into his body and the story that emerges from his actions. For the rest “he is entitled to his silence” (116) and Coetzee leaves him a complex and ambiguous mixture of Africa and Europe.

The presence of violence represents the other major threat to Lucy and a future imbued with female values – the ‘age of feeling’. The hatred manifest in the actions of the three black rapists is the legacy of the apartheid regime, an aspect of the colonising enterprise that both former coloniser and colonised have to relate to in present and future. Lucy, as a white woman both of the colonial and the postcolonial, is marked out to pay what she sees as her ticket to stay on the land. Petrus’ affinity with violence, his acceptance of its rights and his willingness to use it to his own ends, makes him a double threat: ‘usurping’ the land and her freedom in return for protection.

What Petrus and Lucy have in common is the conviction that “this is the only life there is” (74) and the fact that they manage to relate to the circumstances as they are. Their opposing views on the land, her need to feel part of and his to own and control, is rendered pessimistically as a lost battle for the softer, less profitable values. Lucy’s pregnancy, however, represents a turn towards new hopes of a different future: made in the violence of the present, a hybrid being, it will none the less be her child to care for, and “a child of this

earth”(216) for her to induce with her intuitive understanding of the one-ness of nature; “*das ewig Weibliche*”(218).

Lurie finishes in a fashion with Byron and thinks of new readings for new beginnings: Byron is linked to lost passion, Victor Hugo might teach him about grandparenthood (218).

In *Disgrace*, although set in postapartheid South Africa, Coetzee continues his investigations and disclosures of the conditions for colonisation and decolonisation, attempting to ‘make sense inside the book’, using characters who struggle – more or less successfully – to ‘make sense of real life’ as it happens to them. By working his way into the deeper structures of language and laying these structures open, he conveys the message that truth and coherent meaning can not be found, neither in history nor in fiction, but must be made through choices. Language is a creative force and a means of communication, but English, as a colonial agent, is disqualified and unsuited to express a unitary South African identity. By tearing apart the fixities of both history, fiction and the language they rest on, Coetzee bares the constructions of power. He does so from within the historical context of contemporary South Africa, but refuses to be limited to this context. His scope is a larger one.

Through the ambiguity of the characters and the open-ended writing of their identities, Coetzee brings out the various readings of the past that inform the uncertainty of the present. In contrast to the myth-making authorities who in their eagerness for an idealised future turn to the facts of history in the hope that ‘truth’ may lead to reconciliation, Coetzee turns to language and literature to reveal the underlying ‘metaphysics of power’ (Watson). In his reading, the society of postapartheid South Africa no more than in that of the colonial era works ‘irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex’, and the reason pointed at is the dualism of the colonial mind, which is a legacy from western philosophy deeply inscribed in both coloniser and colonised through language. The separation of subject from object, self from nature – where the first is always privileged over the other – leads to alienation, a sense of being lost in the world, an emptiness of the soul which one will always try to fill out through the ‘usurping’ of the ‘other’.

Coetzee has said that he is “suspicious of lines of division between a European context and a South African context, because I think our experience remains largely colonial”.⁸⁰ Thus, the bringing together, through text and ‘moments of language’, the colonial origins in the European tradition and the workings of power in ‘new’ South Africa is a baring of the

⁸⁰ David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, 14

colonial condition in general. The story of Lurie and the others are stories of alienation and attempts to make new sense of the world and life in it – for all beings, ‘kin, kind’ (194).

I read *Disgrace* as one “single authentic note of immortal longing” (214). As a collection of ‘moments of language’, a collage of text, it seems a burning effort to comprehend the human condition of suffering. Thus, the nucleus of the novel is the grace in managing to sound from the heart, in unison with the rest of nature, a note of unconditional love and selfless compassion to ward off the life-threatening devils of a split colonial mind.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

At the outset of this thesis, I stated my main aim as that of investigating the relationship between history and story in the fiction of André Brink and J.M. Coetzee. This concluding chapter, then, aims to bring together my main points about each individual work. Moreover, I will trace the development within the fiction of each writer, linking the works subjected to discussion to the changes of the context they write from and comparing their attitudes and strategies in relation to the questions I have asked.

In the first chapter I have tried to show how, in *An Instant in the Wind*, Brink positions himself with the inferior other in the shape of a white woman and a black man, thus re-imagining the past from their viewpoint. History as fixed truth is countered through the baring of the myths that have made the man and woman, black and white, others to each other. The process of shedding colonialism's limited and limiting identities reveals to the characters how history has been made up of myths and silences aiming for and legitimising subjugation and control. Once left to themselves outside the rigid restraints of society, they manage – albeit imperfectly and partially – to see through these barriers and become solely human to each other. A South African identity is suggested as something beyond the determinants of class and colour, in the acceptance of the otherness of Africa as other and abandoning the need to rename and make familiar in order to control.

The protagonists' development from mere roles in a segregated society to believable characters in an African setting is rendered real in a leap of the imagination of the narrative conscience. The conversion from the colonial mind to the postcolonial conscience lies in the narrator's choice to re-imagine back into reality the stories of the slave and the white woman, thus obtaining a more nuanced and ideologically less distorted view of the historical reality in which the fiction is anchored – a reality in which existing power-structures were legitimised as natural and self-evident. Thus, the love-story of a remote past demonstrates the potential of the fictional imagination to oppose the discourse of history and the mythmaking of a dominant culture. Brink's agenda is not to compete for the 'true' version of history, but to contest the truth-value assigned to public history and introduce imaginative readings for a probing of the present situation.

In *Imaginations of Sand*, Brink, in line with the theories of Hayden White, explores the story-nature of history and man's natural inclination to create his self through narration. In the historical context of South Africa in the late 1990s, the author deftly uses fiction to connect with a postapartheid, open future, via a present reality extended through imaginative reading

of the past. He attempts both to fill the silences of official history and to contradict its obvious lies and misreadings in the service of Afrikaner nationalism aiming to legitimise and sustain political and cultural hegemony. Again he positions himself with the other of the white, dominant self, but not explicitly to investigate black identity and story. Rather, he incorporates the issues of race and colour in his re-reading of colonial history in what seems to be a quest for an original, authentic understanding of the Afrikaner identity. Ouma Kristina's legacy is not presented as *the* truth but as ambiguous possibilities holding fragments of truth as potential for cross-reading and choice. Bringing the prolific host of stories, legends, myths, dreams and fantasies into the open gives room for a comparative reading, mirroring the process of transgression and learning in traditional storytelling. Brink – through Ouma – seems to suggest that a South African postcolonial identity lies in the acceptance of the hybrid reality of the past.

Proceeding to compare the two novels, I will now consider the role of the author in relation to his context and to the discourse of history on either side of the political watershed of 1994. In *An Instant in the Wind*, the fact of apartheid and its origins is explored through the imagined stories of the system's captives, the slave and the woman. The essential aim is to bring out an understanding of the present as unethical and unnatural and to point at other (silenced) possibilities. In *Imaginations of Sand* the fact of apartheid abolished prompts the author to set history in motion again, considering the diverse present as a starting-point for a common, multicultural future. A particular aim seems to be the resurrection of the Afrikaner as the hybrid white African and to bring him home to Africa from his position of cultural alienation and enslavement under apartheid. Women and women's ways are seen as key factors. They represent the hidden and forgotten parts of the greater truth of the present. By choosing the female approach in his re-visitation of the past, Brink rewrites both the marginalisation of women and the white master narrative of history.

Both novels are imbued with the author's belief in the capacity of the imagination to counter the stifling facts of history, encouraging personal transgression of set boundaries and provoking political and social change. In common with the teller of stories in oral tradition, the author of fiction has the role of the mediator, situated between personal story and public history. When history is bent in the service of power, the author takes it upon him or her to work as a repository of memory through his or her imagination. The act of telling stories is more important here than the truth content of each individual story. Storytelling embodies the energy and restless drive towards truth, whereas myth-making history tends to fix it and arrest the creative search for understanding.

Although Brink's resort to story and imaginative possibilities is remarkably constant, it is possible to see a development of his attitude to writing and to his historical context. He has stated the primary responsibility of the author as that of engaging the word in dialogue with silence. Writing under the difficult conditions of apartheid, Brink set into practice his belief in fiction to reveal what was happening, identifying causes as well as reasons and pointing at different options. In common with most white writers, he felt the pressure to act the reporter and historian of the present and witnessed the development towards a simplified and limited truth in the service of the struggle. The need to report events and actions as they occurred encouraged a realist approach and favoured the historical over the more textually experimental engagement with silence. In *Imaginings of Sand* the textual approach of postmodernism is much more pronounced, signalling the change of the context the author relates to and the changed nature of the silences which the author's language engages with. In his re-visitations of history to address its gaps, Brink is searching for the collections of narratives that constitute us and the world we inhabit in order to enhance the healing-process of individuals and society after the calamities of apartheid rule. In the new context, postmodernism, Brink says, "offers particularly exciting challenges, because the postmodern text is never read 'in its own right' but as a myriad of intertextual relationships, specifically with established discourse(s)".⁸¹ The understanding of the text as 'mere fiction' is prevented by this intertextuality: "each new invention happens in the margin of the already-written" and thus engages with the world as story. Consequently, "it inserts itself into the reader's consciousness as an invitation to a moral choice".⁸²

While in the first novel Brink writes against colonial appropriation of land and people, in the second he writes for a rediscovery of Africa. The stronger presence of African myth and legend and traits of magical realism invoke a new definition of the South African identity as postcolonial. Through his female protagonists' reengagement with the silences of the past, the writer claims not the conqueror's *right* to the land but the postcolonial mind's will to re-discover it on its own terms. If in the first novel the alien African landscape rejected the white coloniser, it has become important to the sense of home in the protagonist of the second.

The third chapter accounts for my reading of *Life & Times of Michael K* as a negation of biography. I ask how the novel can be seen to act in its time and place and at the same time withdraw from the responsibilities imposed on the author in its political context. What I have found is that both in form and in content, the novel makes postmodernist claims to the right to

⁸¹ André Brink, "Interrogating Silence", in *Writing South Africa*, 22

⁸² *Ibid*, 22

speak on its own terms, as literature. It retains its independence of a South African literary-historical context while at the same time entering into serious examination of the time and place it was written in.

Coetzee acts in the contemporary history of South Africa by revealing the mechanisms operative at the basis of colonial practice and the impact of this practice on the human psyche. The political reality of South Africa is alluded to in the setting, the characters, the events – baring the brutality of the systematic physical appropriation of body and land. On a linguistic level, in terms of language and speech, in form as well as content, the novel shows the ways in which the mind of the subordinate other in a colonial system is appropriated and subjugated by the colonising self. Likewise, it shows the mental enslavement of the coloniser, the torment of being entrapped by history in a system for ever defined by the binary oppositions of self and other, powerful and power-less, master and slave, right and wrong.

As a white oppositional writer acutely aware of his own complicity with colonialism, Coetzee both enacts and attempts to dismantle the binary oppositions which characterise the apartheid society. Through his persistent ambivalence and avoidance of closure, he draws attention to questions of positionality and agency. The novel as such, its narrators and its protagonist are all characterised by their ambiguity. Through them, the writer interrogates ideas of authorship and authority and brings attention to the colonising nature of language itself and the act of writing. While he does not hesitate to tear down the myths of his own Afrikaner white historical background, he is reluctant to replace the vacancies with the voices of the underprivileged and silenced identities. The narrative conscience circles around K, making his presence known to the world through the rendering of his inactive actions, but refraining from entering his conscience with any measure of certainty. What we are served are possibilities, not solutions. The other is allowed to keep his otherness through his silence. This acting in his present through not acting, or writing back to his context without writing it out as closed story, is the strong statement in the novel, made by ‘a coloniser who refuses to be a coloniser’. At the same time, the novel also states the right of the author and of fiction not to be subjugated by discourses that claim to be possessed of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’. Like K, Coetzee defends the right to keep, and proclaims the necessity of keeping, individual creative life out of the rigid boundaries of genre and style, not by saying it but in doing it.

In the fourth chapter we have seen how Coetzee writes back to his postapartheid present in the story of the degradation of a white intellectual man. *Disgrace* is set in the era of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and writes against the belief that the opening up to the truth about the past through the silenced stories of the previously colonised would suffice

to create a harmonious common future for the 'new' South Africa. Even though positions of individuals, social groups and authorities have changed in relation to power, life is still informed and conditioned by divisions of colour, class, and gender. As in the previous novel, Coetzee bares these divisions and explores the colonial mind and the mechanisms of imperialism, but this time from an angle much closer to his own position within the tradition of white supremacy. In the voice of an unidentified third-person narrator, David Lurie is broken to pieces as man, father, womaniser and 'expert in communication'. The reasons for his own misery and the pain he causes to others are revealed to be his will to conquer and dominate through his intellectual mind. The tool is Lurie's own - and Coetzee's - the language that made him what he was and which bars him from the understanding of what he should or could be. I have tried to show how *Disgrace* as a maze of text brings across ideas and possibilities that the story of Lurie's fall fails to reveal. Activating his unique linguistic and literary skills, Coetzee falls back on language and event to reveal to Lurie and the reader that there is no plotted meaning to find in the past: meaning must be made in the constant choosing among the possibilities opened up through language. This strategy for a rereading of identity involves the reader in an intertextual debate on ethical choices that have to be made.

The conflict in Lurie's plot-less story originates in his character: it incorporates the dualism of the colonial mind, which has resulted in his alienation from himself. In his written self, torn between desire and responsibility, nature is divided from culture and mind from heart, leaving a void that he will always try to fill by subsuming the other. Only by reaching back into the one-ness of his true human being, his bare being-in-itself, does he obtain a measure of freedom from emptiness and desire. Above all, the presence of Wordsworth's philosophy and poetry point at the possibilities of freedom that lie beyond story and history in the realms of language that provoke the heart more than the head. The postcolonial has to do with a state of mind more than a political situation before and after the physical colonisation of land. Reaching there is no easy task, as the deconstruction of Lurie amply demonstrates. Concluding, I find that *Disgrace* holds little optimism for the future.

As mentioned already, part of the reason why I have chosen *Disgrace* as Coetzee's postapartheid novel is a feeling of its close relations with *Life & Times of Michael K*. As I have tried to show, this affinity is to do with the obvious similarities in setting, atmosphere and the oppositions between identities of self and other in a society determined by apartheid, of the before and the after. Hopefully, my discussion has managed to demonstrate that there are also close links in their subject matter and themes. Coetzee's negotiation of identity and agency, and his concerns with the author's position in society, saturate both texts. In the first,

these issues are mixed in the general debate on the colonial as a condition which determines all aspects of life. No solution is offered of how to end it, the idea seems to be that it works towards its own unavoidable termination. Waiting and enduring while keeping the idea of the postcolonial alive, and cultivating in the imagination the idea of freedom and communion between people and land – these seem to be the options available. The author's ability to stand firm against the pressure to conform to the truths of the various camps is vital in order for art and creative life to survive as a force in society to resist alienation.

In the second novel, Coetzee shows how the postcolonial is not necessarily an aspect of the postapartheid society and that postapartheid South Africa in reality is as segregated as before. While the postcolonial is still only an idea kept alive in art and language, the idea of the colonial is very much present as a force that has contaminated the minds of both coloniser and colonised and inform the new struggle for positions in relation to the future. The dualism at the basis of imperialism's urge to control and possess has rendered both coloniser and colonised strangers to their selves. Man's position in the world is characterised by conflict and alienation. The hope of a life after suggested in *Life & Times of Michael K* is embedded in the will to search for the holistic essence of true self. Coetzee imagines this essence of individual reality through his grappling with words in order to create a literary language enabling him to express a different identity. In his insistence on the capacity of literature and fiction to serve as a force in society against the entrenchment of history, realism and truth, Coetzee sticks to literature's own modes. Through his interaction with language, the author – like Michael K – keeps the idea of creativity alive. For Coetzee, postmodernist textuality is therefore both a means and a solution.

Turning to the last point of my conclusion, I need to go back to the very reason for choosing the field of postcolonial literature and the South African context for my exploration of fiction in relation to history: my experiences with the differences in the approach to history in the fiction of André Brink and J.M. Coetzee as mutually beneficial. As stated in my introduction, my long-standing relationship with Brink's novels was challenged in my more recent meeting with Coetzee's work. The story-world of Brink which had opened up new literary territories to me and brought a sense of learning and understanding things vastly remote and still possible to make part of my horizon, was disrupted by Coetzee's fictional world of uncertainties. The concepts of history and truth became increasingly complex. Concluding this thesis, I will briefly account for my understanding of the similarities and differences in these two authors' fictional ways of coming to terms with the world as story, of which I as a reader am made an accomplice.

I see Brink first and foremost as a story-teller in the tradition of literary realism, as the mediator acting in his present to bridge the gap between the personal and the public aspects of history. Firmly located in a South African context, Brink has felt, and still feels, the need to assume responsibility, identifying the most important issue as that of the relationship between the individual and his or her society.⁸³ His medium is the story (although he has always spoken extensively from the public stage). For Brink, the author's function arises from the context he writes from, not as an imposition of an obligation from outside,⁸⁴ but as a consequence of "a profound and agonising commitment" to his society.⁸⁵ In the apartheid era, his need to contribute resulted in stories that questioned, opposed and rewrote the oppressive master narrative. Addressing large audiences both at home and abroad, he used the story to open eyes and raise (white) consciousness. Writing in the mode of realism and adhering to the parole of the time "to tell things as they are", he was also wary of the risk involved in the binary thinking encouraged by the need to mobilise for the struggle. When in the new South Africa fiction has regained its liberty to be just that, Brink has extended his literary register and moved along the scale from the historical approach towards the more textual. Still, Brink's stories remain with you as stories, as literary entities in their own right, autonomous. Rich as they are in language, imagery and symbolism, they may develop in the mind of a reader, yielding more on each new reading, and yet they remain closed stories to be re-visited and to re-engage with.

Coetzee's most distinctive artistic quality, as I read him, is his ambiguous doubleness: a mind and a heart seemingly irreconcilable, contesting in language for the upper hand, for control, for some kind of mastery of literature and of life. In his refusal to submit his craft to serve as an instrument in the struggle, thus relegating fiction to the role of providing 'handmaiden' support to the discourse of history, he maintained from early on the importance for literature to act on its own terms to contest the binary visions on reality and any simple understanding of truth.⁸⁶ Both under apartheid and after, his work has demanded its right and its obligation to remain a free force in society. Only then can it continue to reveal the myths of power and to be-in-itself as art – the imaginary as a counterforce to reality: "We have art so that we shall not die of the truth".

Still, as I have tried to show, Coetzee did not retreat into his world of art. Rather, he engages constantly with the South African context from which his work is inseparable and

⁸³ André Brink, *Mapmakers*, 34

⁸⁴ André Brink, "Interrogating silence" in *Writing South Africa*, 25

⁸⁵ André Brink, *Mapmakers*, 35

⁸⁶ See J.M. Coetzee, "The Novel Today"

without which it is unthinkable. His novels are textual entities comprising the dialogue between his Afrikaner colonial heritage and his affiliation with the western literary world. From his position in the middle, he attempts to span the cleft and address the generally human. Both under apartheid and in the process of democratisation which followed, he opens up the discourses of both history and fiction in order to scrutinise that variant on the human condition often referred to as colonial. But refraining from closure, Coetzee offers no moral colonisation of truth.

Unlike Brink, who gives numerous possible answers through his ‘imagining of the real’, Coetzee remains the questioner and the dissector. While Brink offers comparative reading of story, Coetzee invites moral choice on the level of language: as a constituent element of identity, story, history and story, language becomes a mine-field where the mind and the heart contest for power. Incomplete and insufficient, incorporating both the spoken word and silence and being an instrument of domination as well as of free thinking, it remains our only means to bond. This is the challenge Coetzee offers: the conscience of ambiguous doubleness expressed in language, which forces the moral choice in the reader. If for Brink the world is made of story, and our way to engage with it is through storying, Coetzee seems continuously to be groping for some essence in language to express the truly human while also always questioning his own agency. This is the challenge I experienced in my encounters with his texts, and what I have tried to account for in this thesis: the sense of perpetual uncertainty of existence.

Brink’s novels stay with you as stories; Coetzee’s remain as ever-changing texts to return to for renewed exploration and creative re-invention. While Brink seems at ease with his role in society and his identity as a South African, writing with a throbbing heart to bring both awareness and solace, Coetzee is the uncompromising writing intellect in search for the language capable of expressing his ailing heart.

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