



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Writing history : national identity in André Brink's post-apartheid fiction

Lourens, S.T.

**Publication date**  
2009

[Link to publication](#)

#### **Citation for published version (APA):**

Lourens, S. T. (2009). *Writing history : national identity in André Brink's post-apartheid fiction*.

#### **General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

#### **Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## Chapter 5: Intertwined Texts: Between Narrative and Desire in *The Rights of Desire*

“I’m a stranger to the place that has made me what I am.”<sup>60</sup>

*The Rights of Desire* (102)

André Brink’s 2000 novel *The Rights of Desire* purports to be “a meditation on ageing and on love” (from the blurb on its front flap) and takes its title from a line spoken in J. M. Coetzee’s 1999 novel *Disgrace*. Coetzee’s protagonist makes a claim for desire as lying in the realm of the “natural,” hence beyond ethical considerations.<sup>61</sup> Both books were published within a year of each other, and both deal with a protagonist who attempts to dispel, or just alleviate, his disillusionment with life by embarking on a sexual liaison with a much younger woman. Both central characters are white South African males, middle aged and at the end of an intellectual career. Coetzee’s protagonist is lecturer at the University of the Western Cape who is suspended because of his affair with a student, and Brink’s is a retired librarian.

In her article on “The Politics of Shame and Redemption in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*” (2003), Sue Kossew verbalises the conclusion that the readers of these two novels may reach: they deal with the need for identity transformation in a post apartheid age, but from the point of view of the erstwhile bulwarks of apartheid, white South African males. Kossew cites the present-day “collision between private and public worlds; intellect and body; desire and love; and public disgrace or shame,” (155) as the realm wherein Coetzee’s novel explores this change. She suggests this infinitely “complex exploration” is the prerogative of the Coetzee novel alone, suggesting that the work by Brink deals with the same issue in the merely carnal sense.

Contrary to this opinion, I propose that Brink’s novel, too, complicates the process of re-defining a South African identity in the post apartheid era in a broader context, and makes use of desire as a framework. As previously explained in chapter three, Mieke Bal’s conception of a concepts as a framework or “systematic set of distinctions” through which an interpretation of cultural production may be arrived, is useful as it positions concepts in confrontation with, and not as an application to, the cultural object under examination (*Travelling Concepts* 23-4). In line with this, I consider Brink’s deployment of desire as a concept, before taking it as a thematic element in the narrative.

Brink’s use of the concept of desire homes in on the precarious negotiation that inhabits the relationship of every South African with her or his country. The form that this complication takes, I argue, is that of a perpetual frustration of desire. In the novel, the term “desire” is used to different

---

<sup>60</sup> All quotations taken from André Brink’s *The Rights of Desire*, London: Secker & Warburg, 2000, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>61</sup> The quote as it is cited in Brink’s novel reads: “I rest my case on the rights of desire .... On the god who makes even the small birds quiver.”

ends and in the pursuit of different objects, each time following its protagonist Ruben in the formulation of a specific (subjective) understanding of its object under the pretence of a single encompassing premise. That this formulation occurs through the medium of language, in its textual appearance, plays an important role in Ruben's repeated disappointment. The separation from language that he feels, and the subsequent impact that this has on his conceptualisation of himself as a South African among fellow South Africans, is mirrored in an informative manner by Julia Kristeva in her *Desire in Language*. In this work, Kristeva investigates the dilemma that the modern (structuralist) perception of language as text allows for the excess of meaning created by what she calls "poetic language." This poetic language she relates to the functions of language that are translinguistic: they refer to the movement and sound involved in signifying practices that cannot be equated with language's symbolic and informative functions, although they contribute to it. In this chapter, I use Kristeva's insights to analyse Ruben's concurrent fear of, and desire for, this excess that is produced by text.

Both Kristeva's ideas and the structure of the novel lead me to read these excesses as "ghosts," elements that escape substantiality but nevertheless provoke an effect. It so happens that Brink's novel not only describes the haunting of Ruben's house by a ghost named Antje, but also houses an actual ghost in the sense that the narrative infers and then suppresses questions about South Africa's history, thus greatly impacting on our understanding of what is (not) said. By extending this idea of the ghost to an analogy with South Africa's history as the spirit that haunts present-day identity, I involve the inferred and unsaid both at the level of Kristeva's poetic implications and at that of the more recognizably symbolic, the ghost that haunts Ruben.

In his essay on literary history as a "ghost," Miguel Tamen explains the analogy by establishing that a ghost, in its intangibility, is always "a duplicated image" and "second to something" (297), pointing to the thing it stands for at the same time as it creates its distance from it in the way metaphorical language also functions. In my analysis of the ghost of Ruben's narrative, I pay special attention to the role the metaphor plays in its signification. Tamen also posits that history writing is a "re-vision" that revises, not an original that can lay claim to truth, but an original "vision" that triggers consequences without inhabiting a concrete truth to start with. In Brink's novel, Ruben reveals his ambivalence towards the versions of South African history he can, and those he cannot live with, in relating to the personages that symbolise different aspects of South Africa to him. Ruben links the presence of the ghost Antje, for example, to the discernible yet invisible of Kristeva's poetic language, when he says:

It was one of those occasions when *the weight of the unspoken is tangible below the spoken*. In a sense, to me at least, Antje's absence was more real than anything around us .... Like an

obscure moon illuminating our darkness from somewhere very far away, very long ago.  
(emphasis added) (51)

Antje's absence, logical by reason of her death and her hailing from four centuries ago, is "more real" to Ruben than the presence of her bones, because her haunting the present accurately conveys the trauma that characterises South African society today. In contrast to this, Ruben's relationship with his housekeeper, who is a contemporary victim of South Africa's brutal inequality, is marked by ghostly distance: he concurs that his world and Margrieta's, although the same on the surface, are very different beneath, and he dubs Margrieta "as unreal to [him] as any ghost" (142).

Analysing the different manifestations of desire from the novel with the use of Kristeva's conceptualisation of poetic language as the ghostly subtext that is "is tangible below the spoken" (51), I focus on the relationship that its protagonist Ruben Olivier has with language, and in particular with literature; with the various women in, and outside of his life; and, ultimately, with South Africa itself. I interpret these relationships as initially framed as sexual desire – more specifically as a desire for sexual possession – and trace the way in which their (mis)reading camouflages their actual nature as explorations of shifting identities, leading to the unavoidable frustration that haunts both Ruben and Brink's novel.

In what follows I interpret key passages in the novel that set up and then destabilise the various relationships of desire over the course of the narrative, uncovering the disparity between different conceptions of desire in Brink's work, furthering the tragedy of inevitable frustration. To deal with this hypothesis, I invoke the approach of Julia Kristeva. In exploring the relationship between language and meaning, Kristeva identifies two layers within every text that both participate in its signification: that of a genotext and a phenotext, roughly transcribeable as the "semiotic" and the "symbolic." This confrontation between underlying drives and superimposed structures brings us back to Kossew's collision of private and public; disgrace and shame, and, most of all, of love and desire. By investigating those oppositions at the level of language in a reading of Brink's novel, its significance as an exploration of changing identities can be established.

In the three sections that follow this explication, I explore the layered nature of South African identity by analysing the novel's uses of desire in the three different relationships mentioned earlier between Ruben and language; women; and South Africa. My reading of Brink's novel takes the text's dual nature of surface and "deep" structure of drives (the "ghost" of a text) into account. The figure of the ghost will also be analysed through the literal appearance of the ghost of Antje of Bengal in the narrative, as well as as a metaphor suggesting the tangible absence of stories suppressed in South Africa's official historiography.

## Intertwined Stories

*The Rights of Desire* is a novel that entails many stories, all of which bear on the life of its first-person narrator, the 65-year-old widowed Ruben Olivier. Ruben lives in contemporary post-apartheid South Africa in a large Cape house, where he is administered to by his housekeeper Margrieta as well as haunted by Antje, a seventeenth-century servant from Bengal, who was amorously pursued by her white master and subsequently killed in punishment for the sexual transgression. Both Margrieta and Antje belonged to the category of “coloured people” in the old South Africa. Their stories are related to the reader by Margrieta’s colourful and colloquial direct speech, addressed to her employer Ruben whenever she is in a particularly jovial mood. Aside from Margrieta and Antje, Ruben also comes to share his house with Tessa, who moves in as his tenant after the novel has started.

Margrieta’s narration in the novel, which often run to several pages and are oft-referred to in the surrounding narrative, serves as a secondary, embedded narration that transgresses the limits of what Ruben, whose experiences are distinct from that of most of his fellow South Africans, can convey to the reader. Ruben is removed from the full South African experience because his status as a privileged white South African male has protected him from any intimate knowledge of the country’s violent policies of discrimination. At the same time, his preference for keeping company with books rather than human beings is a self-imposed removal from his context that sustains Ruben’s romantic ideas about the country. With Margrieta’s no-nonsense accounts, delivered in stereotypical “cape coloured” language, a contrast is set up between the image of South Africa that Ruben constructs under the influence of his novels and books on romantic philosophy, and the South Africa that he and Margrieta actually live in.<sup>62</sup>

In her narrative, Margrieta takes on the persona of spokesperson for those figures misrepresented in South Africa’s past. Acting as the mouthpiece through which the story of Antje is told (she purports to be the ghost’s long-standing confidante), and explaining the gender-specific obstacles that Ruben’s youthful tenant, Tessa, is forced to consider in making her decisions, Margrieta directs a puzzled Ruben to the gaps in his knowledge. Needless to say, it is this difference in perception, or, rather, this luxury of Ruben not *needing* to perceive, that accounts for the different forms that their South African-ness takes.

The novel is also the story of Ruben himself, who, in retirement from the library where he used to work, reflects on his Afrikaner youth in rural South Africa; his marriage to the conservative and deeply religious Riana; their estrangement after the loss of their baby-

---

<sup>62</sup> The so-called “cape coloured” language is derived from Afrikaans, Malayan and English, and is represented as frequent intersperses of Afrikaans or slang words in the English novel.

daughter; and the plight of his grown sons, both of whom have chosen to leave South Africa and seek their fortune in other parts of the world. But most of all *The Rights of Desire* is the story of the upheaval Ruben experiences when he takes 29-year-old Tessa into his house as a lodger, and falls madly and unrequitedly in lust with her. All these stories are related in an entangled and even interchangeable way, as, for example, parts of Ruben's experiences with Tessa are overlapped by his reminiscences on Riana, as if they were interchangeable. These separate stories are set against the backdrop of the story of the unravelling South African society that, post-apartheid, is struggling with its divided heritage. Because of the multiplicity of intertwined stories, I take a closer look at the ways in which the novel's narrative strands and narrators create an intertextual knot, employing Kristeva's notion of intertextuality, and what effect this has on the conceptualisation of language as desirable.

Brink's novel announces itself as an intertextual work, because it entertains a variety of stories, in different media, and across different times and imaginings. These form a tapestry that is marked not so much by coherence as by what Ed Block, in his discussion of Kristeva's theories, calls the "messiness, confusion, and even anarchy" that are "part of the attraction of literature" ("Desire in Language" 1983). Roland Barthes writes in "The Death of the Author" that "[t]he text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (53). Here, the notion of "quotations" refers not so much to direct quotations from literary sources but to "different systems of signs," the transposition of which Kristeva, in her 1980 *Desire in Language*, sees "accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position" (15), or, in other words, of the position that emits language and the one that makes it signify.

Kristeva's conceptualisation of intertextuality is concerned with what is generated by these signs within the text. Taking into consideration that meaning is not a direct communication from the author to the reader but is mediated through sign systems of which both author and reader partake, the *process* of making meaning, rather than the static textual remnants of it, takes centre stage. The status of language as stationary is challenged.

Kristeva's "The Bounded Text," which was first published in 1969, marks the occasion where she first coined the term "intertextuality." Here, Kristeva argues that novelistic language is made up of discourses found outside of the novel, which it makes its own and which lend significance to its internal logic. "The text," she states, "is ... a productivity, and this means ... that it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality" (46). Analysis of the novel's intertextuality enables one to examine the assumptions that it puts forward and simultaneously refutes by linking it to a different intertexts. The history of Antje, partly quoted by Margrieta from her personal conversations with the ghost, and partly quoted from the (fictional) historiographical sources that Ruben uncovers, comprises one such a system of signs, for example. The various

versions of her past that Tessa relates to Ruben in the sequence of conversations that Ruben recalls, would be another. Tessa's vacillation between various versions of her own story, none of which she seems able to recall, marks her as an unreliable narrator to the reader, and alerts this reader to the motility of meaning. Each system of signs works with a different conception of what constitutes meaning and each, I argue, relates to desire in a different way.

In her interest in desire as it is active in meaning-making processes in language, Kristeva focuses on the subject as the position from which discourse, and meaning, are made. Language, in this way, is a process, and studies of language an examination of this process. According to her observations on the relationship of language and meaning in her *Revolution in Poetic Language* of 1974 (English translation 1984), meaning is formed in the dialectic between the conscious and unconscious impulses of the articulating subject. This makes the body relevant to the discourse of language. Kristeva sees the logic of language functioning on a material, bodily level. She seeks to amend the structuralist neglect of the articulating subject by positing that any theory of language is also a theory of the subject.<sup>63</sup> Following Jacques Lacan, Kristeva sees the constitution of the subject in and through the medium of language. She amends his view, however, in stating that the acquisition of law-governed behaviour that accompanies the acquisition of language does not drown out the peculiarities of the subject-body.

This subject, like meaning in language, she sees as fluid and unstable, partially reasoning that the role played by extralinguistic elements such as rhythm and tone in establishing meaning cannot be accounted for by a subject that is stable and unified. In order to refer to this (artificial, theoretical) split between the two impulses in language, Kristeva uses the terms "symbolic" and "semiotic." Kristeva's symbolic stands for language proper, as we know it, with its rules and structure. The semiotic is what lies beneath this structure and, although extralinguistic, contributes to meaning in terms of, for example, rhythm, drive and affectivity. Whereas the symbolic provides coherence, the semiotic provides the motivation, or urgency, which causes the articulation to be made in the first place. The symbolic sees the adherence to (e.g. grammatical) rules that makes communication possible, but the semiotic provides meaning in a broader sense, making it *matter*. It is the interplay between the semiotic and the symbolic that makes signification possible.

Kristeva ultimately seeks an analogy with revolution on a political level. The poetic (literally) becomes political (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 26). In *The Literary in Theory* (2007), Jonathan Culler makes use of a similar, yet different, term, "poetics." The analysis of

---

<sup>63</sup> The structuralist insistence on analysing language solely in its manifestation as text of necessity ignores the signifying process instigated by the (extratextual) semiotic.

literary poetics, and not, for example, of literature taken as symptom or illustration of any contextual reality, as he laments that many socio-historical analyses do, could lead to “critical engagements with institutions of power” (11). Culler sees “poetics” as a “second level” of systemacity, over and above the first level, analysing the use of this system within it. This second level entails going beyond the individual work and studying the system of literary possibilities (conventions, expectations) that it arose from (8). The ways in which such conventions engage with certain institutions of power, either in enforcing or refuting it, becomes his object of interest.

The manner in which I interpret Kristeva’s and Culler’s approaches posits them as complementary. Culler’s vision of the revolutionary potential of literary analysis focuses on the system that makes the production of literary works possible, a system that makes use of features that are different from that of empirical experience, or any other system of conventions, and displays a kind of internal logic. This internal logic is what makes interpretation possible, Culler argues, not least in our ability to understand the ways in which individual works subvert it. In deviating from empirical experience, the idea of alternate possibilities, and, arguably, the possibility of revolution, is foregrounded. It is important to consider how such a system shifts and changes, because, as Culler states, “a rhythm that is new and startling in the literary system of one era will be banal, even nonpoetic, in another” (8). Culler’s poetics interprets works within this wider context of works being produced at all, and produced in always changing ways. Kristeva, too, sees formal features as providing content and allowing for interpretation, but focuses on production as process, and not as an end product. Her focus is specifically on the way in which a system, such as a literary system of conventions, creates positions for a subject from which to produce meaning. Kristeva’s speaking subject is a product of a shared system, which ascribes wider significance to the apparently personal breaks in language, such as misreadings and slips of the tongue. In Kristeva’s terms, these breaks constitute part of the semiotic, against the system that produced both the logic of the language that it breaks and the subject that broke it.

In examining the signification that occurs in the dialectic between the genotext and phenotext of Brink’s *Rights of Desire*, I concentrate first on the relationship that is set up, within this literary text, between the text itself and the wider context of literature. This is expressed in the relationship that the narrative of its protagonist, Ruben Olivier, establishes with other narratives. Subsequently, I shift focus to the connections between this speaking subject and the other narrators in the story, whose position as different speaking subjects, all women, relate to the main narrator in relationships that are complicated by different

perceptions of desire. Ultimately, I connect these to the perception of South African identity that the novel, I contend, seeks to confront.

### **The Magic of Words**

One peculiarity of the relationship between the narrative of *The Rights of Desire* and the context of literature takes the form of self-consciousness about its status as a written work. This is evident both in its deliberate interaction with other written works and the repeated references to its identity as a text. The previously-mentioned relationship with Coetzee's *Disgrace* is taken up in the novel's selection of epigraphs. Epigraphs traditionally promise to express a feature of what is to follow, embedding it in a literary canon to procure a context. Confronted with an epigraph, a (practised) reader is prepared to contrast or compare the quoted text with the one that follows.

*The Rights of Desire* provides two epigraphs, one taken from Wallace Stevens's "The Motive for Metaphor" and the other ostensibly a quote from *Disgrace* that, in fact, turns out to be a misquote. The epigraph reads, "I rest my case on the rights of desire ... On the god who makes even the small birds quiver." Yet, the actual sentence in *Disgrace* runs: "[m]y case rests on the rights of desire ... On the god who makes even the small birds quiver" (Coetzee, 89, emphasis mine both times). The difference lies in Brink's making active an argument that Coetzee's protagonist David Lurie leaves passive: his defence "rests" by itself, whereas Brink roots the justification of desire in activity ("I rest my case"). This highlights the difference in the treatment of desire by the two respective narrators, Ruben Olivier and David Lurie. Both of them are older men who desire younger women, but David regards desire as "a burden we could well do without" (Coetzee, 90), while Ruben regards desire to be a godsend rather than a burden. At the same time, the phrase "I rest my case," in English, functions as a summation that claims self-evidence that requires no further elaboration. This expresses a far greater amount of confidence in its credentials than the precarious balancing act implied in *Disgrace*'s "my case rests." Both phrases, however, posit desire as "on trial," and to be defended.

Brink's pairing of Coetzee with Stevens is significant as well. Prefacing the Coetzee epigraph, *The Rights of Desire* opens with Stevens's lines:

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world  
Of things that would never be quite expressed,  
Where you yourself were never quite yourself  
And did not want nor have to be.

The ambiguity expressed by these lines are a far cry from the clear-cut and semi-judicial assertion of the Coetzee quote, but it nevertheless deals specifically with desire. The stanza of the poem that follows the quoted lines runs:

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:  
The motive for metaphor, shrinking from  
The weight of primary noon,  
The A B C of being.

The “motive for metaphor” of the title appears to be the desire for “the exhilarations of changes,” made possible by experimenting with figurative language, insofar as language aids the imagination and takes account of a reality that goes beyond “[t]he A B C of being.” This “A B C” plausibly refers to the rule-governed behaviour instigated in the subject with the acquisition of language, which imposes restrictions on the drives of the body, experienced as an obligation and a “weight.” Both the word “primary” and “noon” carry connotations of the fundamental, the basic and, by extension, the inescapably *obligatory*.<sup>64</sup> The desire for escaping from this weightiness through change or transference is suggested to bring exhilaration – the happiness of release. The means of the escape, it is implied, also lies in language, but in its figurative variant, represented by “metaphor” in the poem and by “poetic language” in Kristeva’s theoretical work.

Language, according to Kristeva, is, at its germ, comprised of a break between the symbolic and the semiotic, which, she posits, is an “always split unification” (43). This “break” in the signifying process occurs when a subject is identified separately from an object, a signifier from the signified, what she calls the “thetic break” (40). The thetic is produced at the same time that the subject is produced and both are what make language possible.<sup>65</sup> Kristeva sees the revolutionary potential of poetic language for questioning ideology as lying in its making visible of the thetic break, the opposition between the semiotic and the symbolic, as a construct. The thetic, which breaks language into an articulating subject and denoted object, does not simply “fix” drives into symbols, but is constantly interrupted and transformed by the semiotic, which is unstable. In this way, the symbolic is also constantly in flux, as is visible in poetic language (49). The meaning of a poem cannot be deduced from an observation of its surface symbols, which is what sets it apart from non-poetic language (poetry does not say what it says).

---

<sup>64</sup> The notion of “noon” as symbolising the pinnacle or climax of (life’s) achievements is particularly strongly recurrent in the works of Emily Dickinson.

<sup>65</sup> According to Kristeva, the thetic break occurs when a subject takes up position, or makes a judgement or identification, as made possible by the use of grammar and syntax. The thetic break therefore occurs at the threshold of the symbolic and heralds an entrance into the symbolic order.

In the same way, metaphor, as a form of poetic language, does not say what it says. Juliet is *not* the sun; and life is neither a walking shadow nor a poor player, but the state of mind of the subject shines through the words and makes them true. It is exactly what shines *through* the words, and not what meaning can be established by grammar, that Stevens's speaker, in "The Motive for Metaphor," and Brink's narrator, in *The Rights of Desire*, value and desire in language. This is clearly brought to the fore in the novel's description of Ruben's initiation into the magic of words, which happened when he was confronted, as a little boy, with a children's edition of *Don Quixote*. "I could barely read English," he recalls:

most of the book was well beyond my understanding; but the very strangeness of it, the mere rhythms and cadences of the language, cast a spell over me. In a certain village of La Mancha, which I do not wish to name, there lived not long ago a hidalgo. "La Mancha." "Hidalgo." Dear God. This was the meaning of magic. This made even the Bible sound true. (310)

Although recalling the literal text of the book, the narrator remembers being enchanted not by its phenotext, but by the genotext, the semiotic elements of signification. The "very strangeness" and the "mere rhythms and cadences" transfer the magic of words onto the young Ruben. This in spite of, or maybe even because, the words in English, which is not his mother tongue, and Spanish, with which he is not familiar at the time, do not make much sense to him in terms of grammatical structure and meaning. His pseudo-religious expletive: "Dear God," taken together with his sudden understanding of the relevance of religion, as even the Bible sounds true to him where, we assume, it did not before, continues to link this desire for the revelation conveyed by poetic, literary language with the semiotic, rather than with the symbolic.

Ruben's pseudo-religious experience can be interpreted as precisely that "motive for metaphor" to which Stevens' poem refers. The urgency below the surface of language that instils in the young Ruben a desire for expressing himself, parallels Kristeva's understanding of this drive as setting up the possibility for metaphor. In the same way that a metaphor expands meaning by activating an identification that relies on both similarity and difference, and not on sameness alone, the recognition of the self as being both bound by a common language and divided by discreet subject positions, can strengthen instead of threaten one's sense of identity. Kristeva proposes that the bodily logic of signification endorses the connection between the (poetic) language of metaphor, and love and desire (134).

Metaphor, according to Kristeva, is able to transfer meaning without calling upon the power of words to stand for or be equated with concepts, and without having to compensate for physical loss by means of symbolic empowerment, where the symbol acts as placeholder for

the concept. In Stevens' poem, metaphor is placed in the category of uncertainty and indistinction. At the same time, this vagueness and mutability is associated with the positive and the desirable. This is achieved both by means of positive words such as "exhilarations," and by the clear-cut contrast with denotative language (the symbolic) that the speaker describes the addressee as "shrinking from" and, in the final line of the last (fourth) stanza, describes negatively as "[t]he vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X."

Far from a neo-romantic extolling of "the primitive" as genuine and valuable, however, the poem reveals that the initial expectation that the inconstancy to which the addressee of the poem is said to be attracted, is disagreeable. It starts as follows:

You like it under the trees in autumn,  
Because everything is half dead.  
The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves  
And repeats word without meaning.

The terms "half dead," "cripple" and "without meaning" convey experiences that are anything but pleasant, but because the speaker has already introduced the idea that someone, the addressee, likes these qualities, there is the presumption that their attractiveness will be explained. And this presumption is not disappointed, because the second stanza runs as follows:

In the same way, you were happy in spring  
With the half-colors of quarter-things,  
The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,  
The single bird, the obscure moon -

The mention of "spring," of "half-colors" and "quarter things," which have either positive or neutral connotations by themselves, sheds light on the attraction of the "autumn" and "half dead" (but not entirely dead) and "cripple" (but not entirely incapacitated) of the first stanza, as lying in their transcending and changing qualities.

The allure of that which is not clear-cut and rigorously defined is transmitted by the possibilities promised by "melting clouds" and an "obscure moon." Which returns us to the stanza of Stevens' poem used by Brink:

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world  
Of things that would never be quite expressed,  
Where you yourself were never quite yourself  
And did not want nor have to be.

The “word without meaning” of the first stanza has here been given meaning according to Kristeva’s *signifiance*. Kristeva’s *signifiance* denotes the process of attributing meaning to articulations, not meaning as a product. It refers to the elements of language that allow it to communicate meaning in excess of the verifiably factual. In contrast with the requirements of *signifiance*, the “things that would never be quite expressed,” in spite of being extralinguistic, and therefore inexpressible, are nevertheless discernible, desirable, and of great import. The *signifiance* contributed by the semiotic element of signification is connected in this third stanza with the ability to liberate (where you do not *have* to be yourself) and to change. Recalling Kristeva’s idea of a poetic revolution, this stanza seems appropriate for a novel that looks at the change in the conceptualisation of South Africa as a nation and of its people as South Africans. Instead of relying on signification in establishing the criteria for South Africanness, the novel appears to forward the “sense” of being South African as a legitimate qualifier. I return to this in a later section of this chapter.

Both the novel’s epigraphs inextricably link desire and language and provide the key of the narrative that follows. The desiring relationship its protagonist Ruben has with literature and poetic language is set up as a complicated one. Ruben’s attraction to literature, as previously shown, is initiated by his recognition of the magic of its semiotic elements, the implications and suggestions that are inexpressible yet somehow discernible through language. In his desire to lose himself in language as a means of taking or abdicating control of his life, however, the element of power enters this desiring relationship and sets Ruben up for disappointment. I now turn to some of the instances in which this complication arises, taking the phenotext and genotext of the narrative into account.

### **Writing as a Rite of Desire**

Aside from the epigraphs, the novel’s thematic connection with other texts is also made apparent in Ruben’s narrative, which is bejewelled with literary quotes as well as with constant reminders that it does make excessive use of quotes. Throughout the novel, Brink’s narrator appears obsessed with words, and seems keen to place language between himself and actual experience. He claims to find reassurance in the realm of knowledge and words because it is “where meanings are manageable precisely because they aren’t binding,” where “illusion is comfortingly real” (32). Whenever an upsetting event occurs in Ruben’s life, he retreats into the safe abstractions of language by musing on the symbolic versus the actual meanings of words, or by offering relevant or irrelevant literary

quotations, or by immersing himself in an “aside,” interspersed throughout the novel.<sup>66</sup> One of the most striking examples of out-of-place quotation occurs when Tessa is nearly gang-raped while taking a walk with Ruben in Newlands Forest towards the end of the novel.<sup>67</sup> After this experience and their narrow escape, Ruben retreats into literary signification and states: “I thought of Henry James...” which is, of course, anything but a normal reaction to a close encounter with violence and possible death (298).

In this way, language is presented as an escape, a way of avoiding the reality that does not seem real to Ruben or, at least, that cannot be handled by him as a real person – only appreciated in a mediated form by imagining himself and others as literary personages. Books, he posits, “never let you down, never say no, never offer a cold shoulder. And custom cannot stale their infinite variety” (23), appropriately using, in this contemplation on literature, a reference from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. In transposing the attractions of Cleopatra onto those of novels, Ruben equates his fascination with literature with a (sexual) longing for a desirable woman.<sup>68</sup> Ruben's conception of the feminine is pivotal to an understanding of his relationship with language and literature. He is attracted to women and sees language as desirable and magical because they both appear to promise something that is beyond his grasp. At the same time, he seeks to bring both his female and his linguistic objects of desire under his control, because he sees this as the only way to reduce his distance from them. In spite of having given Tessa his word that he would not interfere in her life should she come to live in his house, for example, Ruben investigates her workplace, traces back her calls, discourages her from dating other men and, eventually, chases her lovers off his property. Tessa does, therefore, have to adhere to his idea of her as available in order for him to accept her. In the same way, Ruben's writings are left unfinished and unpublished while he perpetually “chases footnotes” (144), trying to pin down his subject and bring it under his control before commencing with the actual writing. Ironically, this positioning of himself as the controlling subject, and his relegation of what he desires as subordinate to himself, foil his attempts at coming closer to what he wants.

---

<sup>66</sup> One of them reads “On Age,” another “On Desire.” All initiate a lengthy and oftentimes rambling diatribe on the meaning of these concepts through the ages and in various literary works, and all of them give the impression of functioning as a comforting distraction from the real crises occurring in Ruben's life.

<sup>67</sup> To the reader of the Coetzee novel, the (near-)rape of Tessa functions in contrast with David Lurie's (near-) rape of Melanie, who “had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away” (Coetzee, 25). Tessa, for her part, “was kicking and fighting like a cornered rat” and “went on screaming and screaming as if she'd never stop” (295-6) during her ordeal. It is when Tessa is confronted with Ruben's advances, and not those of her rapists, that she becomes “rigid,” though unresisting, and appears to be far away from the scene she partakes in (167). This well-known response to rape is called dissociation.

<sup>68</sup> This quote refers to Domitius Enobarbus's praise of Cleopatra which includes the suggestion that “she makes hungry/Where most she satisfies,” relating to Jacques Lacan's contemplation of desire as existing only on the premise that it is never satisfied.

One reason for this is that the use of language to both express and circumvent desire is simultaneously inevitable and fruitless. As Judith Butler discusses in her essay “Desire” (1990), because language is tied up with desire, any investigation of desire through writing inevitably fails. It must give up its writerly features in order to approximate the features of desire, because language always, to some extent, displaces desire. Butler recognises that this tension, this “necessary ambivalence” (370), is perhaps partially to be attributed to the fact that Western accounts of desire (from Plato to Lacan) assume “an invariant structure to desire” based on a restrictive universal heterosexuality that maps out sexual desire in the same way that Ruben appears to do: as the male possession of the female. The signification of desire as found in the dynamic *process* of signifying, and of desiring, rather than merely in static remnants, arises in Brink’s novel on Ruben’s eventual discovery of Antje’s bones in his cellar. “Never before had I been faced with this ultimate essence of bone that both defies and defines humanity,” Ruben states, characterising it as “so indestructible, so obdurate, so firm, so bony” (280). The same is said of the non-physical:

Perhaps the miracle remains intractable. *Because* it decays, *because* it is mortal, *because* nothing endures but bone .... For nothing can match the memory of the lover. Nothing is as durable as desire. (281)

Ruben praises her with literary quotations and references, mostly from the Song of Solomon, until he stops himself: “I’m trying to use words to worm myself into what was pure bone, unmitigated reality. ...it is a dangerous love I bear thee. Do not listen to me. Flee from me.” (281). Ruben arrives at the realisation that any attempts to define his desire through the symbolic will destroy that desire, as well as its object, because the durability of desire lies in its very volatility, transcending the tangible remains that he now sees before him. The significance of his adoring the bones of a ghost that haunts him will be considered in greater depth below.

Through language, Ruben instils desirability in Antje that goes beyond her current appearance as skeleton, but his attempts are set up to fail. As Butler notes: “if the relation between writing and desire is strangely necessary, then the very effort of writing to present what is beyond itself, to capture or present a referent, will constitute the very trajectory of desire as the push towards necessary failure” (374). The need and failure of capturing reality into words is expressed by Ruben’s preoccupation with possession (of language, of women). After discovering the magic of words, the young Ruben recalls his joy at having words at his disposal in decidedly colonial terms:

To read, and to think, to trace the words back to their origins real or presumed; to invent; to dare to imagine. And then to reread, a new Columbus let loose on endless worlds beyond unnamed seas. (32)

His discovery is framed as a colonial discovery, and is extended to a Christian mythological discovery: “as I make my notes in the margins, I can pursue Adam’s first act of mastery: This is a meerkat, this a porcupine, this a young woman named Tessa.” (32). The magic of language and words are now not tied to the transformative powers of the semiotic but to the power and mastery of the symbolic – the colonialism of Columbus, the patriarchal power of the biblical Adam – and tied specifically to an attempt at mastery over Tessa (“reading her as if she were a book” 32).

At the same time, Ruben’s desire for the qualities of the semiotic remains undiminished, as he compares himself, on opening every new book, with Heraclitus, who claimed that the nature of everything is change itself, leading to the belief that change is real, and all stability illusory. Heraclitus’s avocation of war and strife as the means of change, however, introduces an element of power-struggle in the absorption of literary works. In this way, the novel places the desire for mastery alongside the realisation of impermanence as conditions of reality. As Ruben says:

Small mnemonic markings on paper, through which I may later rediscover the sense that had eluded me the first time around. (Of course it may be unreliable: that is the key to it .... Some secrets, they say, can only be lived, never understood...). (32)

Where the markings jotted down by Ruben imply permanence, or, at least, temporary stasis and an attempt to fix what had eluded him, his acknowledgement of the unreliability of those markings testify to an understanding of meaning-making as a process. Secrets, like experiences, can only be “lived” because that is when they are respected as processes rather than understood (certified, classified, known) as inert relics. The dialectic between static markings and shifting meanings produces signification.

During the course of the novel, Ruben explains his association of words with women, both of which he desires yet misconstrues. He tells of how he did not grow up with books: “Our reality was the hard, masculine world of the farm, where I grew up with no women nearby” (29). An association of books and language with the feminine is thus set up. “That farm world was strictly defined and permitting of no exception: rain, for example, was excluded. It was unreal, imaginary, miraculous” (29). The conditions of farm life could control reality to the extent of excluding rain because it would not permit its entrance into its worldview. Rain can be relegated to the realm of the ghostly, and of the blurriness of the “obscure world” of Stevens’

poem. In spite of this, rain as a phenomenon, and especially as the absence of a phenomenon, does impact on the hard reality of the rural South African hinterland. Its reality is a clearly prescribed, rule-bound experience as found in Kristeva's definition of the symbolic, with no place for that which is associated with the semiotic: those things defined as "unreal, imaginary, miraculous," to which tangible things like women and rain are on occasion also relegated. The durable context that prizes the quality of permanence (and relies on them for survival), consigns both women and rain to the realm of the semiotic out of the fear of their ability to effect transformation.

The way in which Ruben characterises the farm where he grew up reveals a strong dislike for the restrictions that accompany its way of life, which explains his instinctive appreciation of the indeterminacy of poetic language. He laments:

Everything was so endless, everything was so essential, nothing redundant at all. Every stone, every brittle stalk of grass, every tortoise, every thorn tree reduced to what was strictly necessary. It's just that we were too ill-equipped to deal with it. *We didn't belong there. And I still don't belong.* (emphasis added) (105)

Ruben's complaint intimates a horror of a hegemony that permits no excess. This explains his subsequent attraction to the overdetermination of literature. At the same time, his initial grievance that everything was "endless" bespeaks the fear of a lack of control that characterises colonial discourse in justifications of imposing authority. By this analogy, Ruben's contemplation that "they" did not "belong there" expands into a consideration of the position of white settlers in South Africa, who, through lack of local knowledge and through their very skin-colour, were ill-equipped to withstand the harsh light of an African sun that reduced everything to its essentials. The settlers are therefore framed as outsiders and intruders, who "stick out like sore thumbs" and answer their exclusion with a violence as unmitigating as that of the scorching desert sun.

The white Afrikaner rural community in South Africa is founded on the conception of a strong, tough, male struggle with a dry, arid and equally tough desert environment. The resultant justification for habitation of this unwilling land falls flat in the face of alternate possibilities as represented by the semiotic. Ruben understands this when he explains: "There was a time when people believed the earth was flat; in the Kalahari it has remained flat. No amount of science has changed it" (29). It does not matter that another way of perceiving materiality has become available if the perceivers are willingly blind to it. In the realm of the symbolic, perception succeeds an understanding of, and adherence to, the laws of the structure.

By admitting to the importance (or even existence) of that which exceeds the structure, the infallibility and hegemony of structure is undermined.

This, I believe, is what forms one of the paramount struggles for many South Africans of all races in coming to terms with the realities of post-apartheid South Africa: the acceptance that the structure of their convictions is an imposition rather than an inevitability, and therefore open to transformation. Brink's narrator expresses this recognition of the comfort that belief in an absolute provides at the same time as he refutes its permanence: "I'm often aware of an almost physical pang of nostalgia in me to go back." He continues: "[b]ut there is no entry possible into a flat world from a round one" (197).

In the same way, Ruben's relationship with women is complicated by the discrepancy between his desire for participation in their ungraspability and his response to this desire to control them. Ruben recognises, and appreciates, the "magic" promised by the obscurity that he relegates to women, as he does to rain and to poetry, but his attempts to capture this magic inevitably result in its dissipation and his frustration.

The women in his life are unreal to him precisely because they do not participate in his experience of reality. Hence, they are all, in a sense, ghosts, not just Antje. This is because his experience of reality is perceived from the vantage point of the privileged white South African male, who is unable to share the subject position, and thus the way of signifying, of either his coloured house keeper, his young female house mate, or the seventeenth century slave girl whose ghost haunts his house. In looking at the relationships between Ruben and these three women, I aim to reveal the links that are forged between them.

The central presence of a ghost in the narrator's dealings both with the women in his life and with present and absent texts artfully links the novel to the wider intertext of contemporary South Africa. In her 2001 work *Politics Out of History*, Wendy Brown examines what impact the current undermining of the legitimacy of narratives of liberalism and democracy have on contemporary political culture. "How do we live in these broken narratives," she asks in her introduction to the work, "when nothing has taken their place?" (14). Brown recognises that the dislodgement of the notion of progressive history for the sake of inclusiveness may not necessarily achieve inclusiveness at all. Especially in the case of those, like Margrieta in Brink's novel, who have based their identity on the "social injury" done to them, there is a reliance on the idea of progress as a way of redeeming this injury. Without the notion of progress, those who have become politically identified with suffering and exclusion would appear unable to liberate themselves from this identity. The questions of how agency can be derived from a reconsideration of histories of oppression (slavery, colonialism, even Nazism) and what significance these histories have in shaping the present, leads Brown to

a consideration of the figure of the ghost. “Ghosts,” she contends, “figure the impossibility of mastering . . . the past or the present. They figure the necessity of grasping certain implications of the past for the present only as traces or effects,” rather than as laws or structures (146).

As mentioned in the introduction, the ghost of a text could also analogously stand for Kristeva’s semiotic. Brown welcomes the notion of “living with ghosts” as a deconstructive device that disrupts the confining narratives and structures that set our conventional worldview in the same way that Kristeva hails poetic language. The way in which agency can be achieved for the social subject, as well as the way to build a productive relationship with the past, would therefore seem to comprise of thinking of the present as contingent. This posits the present as the result of political and social developments and, by extension, thinks of the past as concurrently present.

The way in which the three women that are part of the novel’s narrative treat the past and present and relate them to their specific experiences of living in contemporary South Africa informs the main narrative. This connects Ruben’s musings on literature and desire with the larger issue of his national identity. Margrieta, as an embedded narrator whose narration serves as an intertext, displays an easy acceptance of the contradictions that inhere South African reality, providing a foil for Ruben’s compulsive escape from these violent disparities. Tessa, too, offers flexible interpretations of reality in her constant reinvention of herself and her past, leaving Ruben upset at the overturning of order that simultaneously entices him. Both women exhibit an autonomy that culminates in the figure of Antje, whose palpable absence is the focus of Ruben’s attempts at arresting the past in order to make sense of the present, before he realises both the impossibility and the undesirability of doing this.

All three women are relegated to the realm of “ghost” or “absence” by Ruben in his definition of their distance to him. These women haunt more than just Ruben’s house and infiltrate his understanding of South Africa as a nation with a past and future that are both unsettled. In looking at the way that their narratives claim recognition of alternative interpretations of events, I first focus on Margrieta’s narrative embedding. The person most directly in contact with the country’s past, both in her attempts at redress from the new liberal government and in her repeated and close dealings with the novel’s ghost, who, I argue, functions as a metaphor for the country, Margrieta introduces a sense of the reality of contemporary South Africa into the novel.

### **Margrieta**

Margrieta provides the reader with an alternative to Ruben’s use of quotes to turn reality into a containable literary experience. She asserts that the refined and restrained nature of literature

makes it entirely separate from reality; one that cannot “set foot” inside that reality nor should be expected to. Margrieta acknowledges that poetics follows its own logic, and that it is useless to try to recruit this logic to confront the outside world, as Ruben attempts to do. When she recounts to Ruben how she is marked for death by gang members in the neighbourhood where she lives because they suspect her of betraying them to the police, she tells him dry-eyed and firmly:

The Lord goes with us all the way to the valley of death. But there’s one place he won’t go en that is out there on the Flats. When the white people dumped us there all those years ago they made that place hell. En he won’t set his foot down in hell. He’s jus too scared. En you can’t blame him neither. (141-2)

Margrieta, who is a devout Christian, is able to reconcile her firm belief in the omnipotence and mercy of a Christian god with the injustice that she experiences in her daily life by admitting an apparent contradiction into her perception of reality. The existence, side by side, of the logic of religious belief and that of the observable world does not present a contradiction to her at all. She can believe that Jesus is merciful and able to perform miracles, but, just as she realises that white people would not set foot in the Cape Flats to which they unfairly consigned their coloured fellow South Africans, she finds it reasonable that the white Jesus would be reluctant to call upon it as well. In the same way, the apparition of Antje’s ghost presents no dilemma to her – the housekeeper perceives her and that is sufficient to warrant Antje a place in her reality.

On contemplating Margrieta’s relation of the events that befall her, Ruben admits that their experiences of reality are decidedly different. Although both inhabit the same country and even the same house, their subject positions and processes of signification differ dramatically. Ruben muses on the distance between himself and Margrieta, relegating his concerns about Tessa and his desire for her as one of those things (along with a leaking tap and a squeaking gate) that should merit no importance to a person living within a country where people are constantly exposed to violence. He also admits that, even when it does affect him personally, the reality of this violence is consistently screened from him. He is protected from experiencing it first-hand, because his privileged position sees such things become real to him only on reading about it in a legitimate source such as the newspapers. This is why, as quoted above, Margrieta is “as unreal to [him] as any ghost” (142).

In this sense, it does not really matter that Antje is an actual ghost and Margrieta a real woman whom he has known for nearly forty years, as both of them occupy a different, ghostly space from him. Relegating Margrieta to the realm of ghosts, Ruben is allowed to sidestep the

realities of the country that he lives in, as well as the reality of women in contemporary (or past) South Africa.

Margrieta's solidarity with women, whether white or coloured, real or unreal, comes to the fore in her narration. Margrieta is kept informed about the goings-on in the Cape Dutch house by Antje the ghost, who briefs her on what happens while she is away. She always selects to believe Antje's account of what has happened in the house rather than the placating explanations provided by Ruben. She says:

I take the word of a woman who knows what it is to be sucked out by a man like an orange en then thrown (*sic*) away. Because she was a slave and because she was coloured and because she was a woman they all treated her like shit. I can't let that happen in her house. (134)

Margrieta relates truth to hardship, as if victims have a greater ownership of the truth. She draws a parallel between Antje and Tessa, while Ruben believed her to disapprove of Tessa because of her "loose morals." However, Margrieta hints that she does not disapprove but believes that she, as a woman of the modern South Africa, has an obligation not to allow herself to be mistreated. This almost suggests that the freedom that was denied Antje must be reclaimed by Tessa as atonement for the slave girl's fate. In this way, Tessa comes to stand in for Antje, both of whom are given interpretative voice by Margrieta.

This conflation is made further apparent by Margrieta's linking of the increased frequency of Antje's appearance with Tessa's taking home of various paramours to spend the night. Margrieta comments that, on observing Tessa with her lovers, Antje "still see the same things happening what happened in her time." When Ruben tries to refute this parallel by reminding her that Antje was a slave, and Tessa is a free person, Margrieta retorts: "What woman is free, Meneer? You tell me" (248). In this way, she suggests that the reducing of women to bodies to be possessed, manifest in the institution of slavery, continues in a cloaked form in the present day. Ruben's deliberate distancing of the women in his life, relegating them to the realm of ghosts, could be argued to effect a similar reduction. The urgency of his desire for them takes the form of a desire for sexual possession, as one would desire to possess an object, not merge with an equal, something borne out by his attempts at controlling Tessa's sexuality by protesting the presence of her lovers in his house.

Tessa does however have her own voice in the novel as well through the conversations she has with Ruben that he records, in which he proves incapable of restraining her in either a bodily or a narrative way. By looking at these dialogues, I hope to illuminate the disparity inherent in Ruben's interpretation of his desire for Tessa: on the one hand, stemming from a

fascination with her free and easy manner and, on the other, engendering a desire to have and to hold her, as he puts it. I link this disparity with the dual nature of signification that forms the attraction of poetic language as well as with the contradictions that inhere Ruben's desire to possess what he, after all, sees as a ghost.

### **Tessa**

Ruben's attraction to Tessa is initially framed in terms of her distance from him. She is young whereas he is old; she is spontaneous and outgoing where Ruben's life is orderly and mostly solitary. He admits that Tessa makes him act out of character, that she intrigues him. He calls her "this improbable girl, blown in by the storm, unconscionable, obnoxious, outrageous, beautiful. (A chance to practice the scales of my adjectives)" (24). His chance to enjoy the use of words makes him tolerant of Tessa's impertinence, or at least makes it manageable in the relegation of his experiences with her as something recollected in language, in hindsight. In this way, her existence is thrown into question; he describes her as "improbable."

At the same time, the pleasure that he takes in her is associated not with the rule-bound aspect of language but with the "rhythms and cadences" of the semiotic: he revels in the *scales* of adjectives: their sound and feel. The sense that it is not the descriptive, categorising capacity of adjectives that is admired here is also conveyed by the unusual choice of words, such as "unconscionable," and their ill-fittingness, juxtaposing the traditionally negatively connoted "obnoxious" with the positive connotations of "beautiful."

Ruben recognises that Tessa does not fit into any of his classifications when he attempts to categorise their relationship only to find it does not fit into a particular slot. "She does wifely things for me," he begins, continuing, "She does motherly things .... She does sisterly things," and also: "She does lovely things" (239- 40). In the same way, Ruben is unable to apprehend her by attaining her "story," as Tessa offers him various versions of her family background and past as well as of her present-day occupations each time they speak. On asking after her parents, Ruben is initially told that Tessa's father was murdered during a bloody burglary and subsequently that he died from an illness. The third time that her father is brought up in conversation Tessa tells Ruben, with intimations of *Disgrace*'s David Lurie, that he was a university lecturer who disappeared from her life when he took off with a nineteen-year old student. When Ruben responds with a baffled "I thought you said your father got killed?" Tessa responds, without blinking an eyelid, that she was "speaking metaphorically" (78).

The notion of the metaphor brings Tessa's texts onto the level of poetics and the semiotic. Her stories, whether they are of the different professions she makes up for herself and for Ruben on meeting new people in bars, or the lies that she tells Ruben about her reasons for

leaving her previous boyfriend have an internal logic not comparable to an observable reality. The unreasonableness of Ruben's perturbation at Tessa's "lies" is made palpable to the reader in the dialogues between the two. For example, a comparison is set up for the reader between Tessa's proclamation of constant foreign travels under the care of an infatuated boyfriend, which she subsequently and easily contradicts with an angry complaint that he never took her anywhere, and Ruben's contention that his most important travels have been in books. Ruben's version of reality fails to attain unequivocal authority in this comparison, even when based on his own criteria, because even the real trips were to the classical concerts, museums and libraries of certain countries, keeping them in the abstract realm of experience (52). Ruben's assertions of experience are as real or as unreal as Tessa's, in that Ruben refuses to leave the world of books and Tessa refuses to be contained by it.

Tessa, like Margrieta and Antje, is a ghost to Ruben, an absence that he can sense but not contain. He goes on to say that, when Tessa is absent, "...the shadow of her absence falls over the whole house. Yet it is a curious luminous shadow. Because when she is not here I can imagine her more perfectly than when she is with me" (240). Tessa's physical presence and real-life behaviour defy Ruben's expectations. When she is not there she can remain more constant in his mind. This explains his anger when Tessa does something that is entirely characteristic of her but contrary to Ruben's ideal, like bringing men home to sleep with them.

Tessa vehemently positions herself outside conventional South African identity. To the question what she would "really like to do?" Tessa answers with a scathing, "Whatever it may be, it won't be a cherished husband, three and a half children, a mortgage and shooting lessons on Saturdays" (80). This calls up an image of South African (white) suburbia in its invocation of appropriately sentimental/romantic emotions ("cherished husband"); its responsible filling of the white-population quota ("three and a half children"); and its matter-of-fact insistence on the protection of this (white) family unit by means of a brand of violence that would be shocking to its European counterpart ("shooting lessons on Saturdays"). Tessa sets herself up as an outsider to this South African idyll, not because she cannot attain the ideal described but because she claims not to subscribe to it as an ideal.

Tessa's evanescence frustrates Ruben's desire for order, and when she continues to escape his definitions by her constant changing of her story, Ruben changes tactics and channels his desire for her into a physical direction. Their relationship is not that of lovers, as Tessa does not allow Ruben to make love to her. But, intent on forcing her into a recognisable classification, he sets his sights on physically penetrating her to resolve his insecurities about their relationship. It is out of fear of lack of control, and the premonition that this comes paired with a loss of the identity he has shaped for himself, that Ruben phrases his desire for Tessa,

emanating from an attraction to her unbridled nature, in order to curb it. He desires her because she eludes him, which is why he wants to control her to end the torment of his desire.

After thwarted attempts to convince Tessa of the need for consummating his sexual desire, Ruben comes closer to his goal at the end of section two of the novel. She appears to him in tears, saying that she needs him. "I misunderstood," he admits in hindsight, "I thought she meant sexually" and he undresses her (166). Before she is fully naked, however, she stops him and confesses that she needs to have an abortion. Section three opens with her lying in the hospital bed after the procedure: "Monday, 14 September. This is unimagined territory and still unimaginable. It is now, it is here" (171), Ruben reports as he sits beside a pale and sleeping Tessa. Her disclosure of the need for an abortion had interrupted his consumption of her body, both because of the shock at the news and the realisation that what Ruben was about to claim was already (or at least had been) possessed by someone else. Tessa's own unwillingness (she was crying and clearly not in the mood for sex) does not seem to have entered his consideration. As the present invades Ruben's thoughts ("it is now, it is here") it is compared to a territory that cannot be imagined and explored because it forms part of the real that remains unreal to Ruben. The intimation here is of a colonialism that maps out a territory, capturing it by abstract means rather than, or in addition to, concrete ones.

At the same time, Tessa, more than the "unexplored territory" of colonisable landscape, is compared to a ghost. Ruben comments on her body as "white and clothed in white," relating this image (strangely, considering the context) with an "image of chastity, haunting me, stalking me as surely as any ghost" (178). The image of chastity that Tessa presents to Ruben is a projection that remains convincing as long as Tessa is passive and inert. It is also plausibly a way for Ruben to hold on to her now that Tessa is "further removed than ever by this experience which excludes me, the male, the old man" (171). The reproductive responsibility of women excludes men in the biological sense - men cannot experience an abortion first-hand - but also by the deliberate mystification and concealment of the fact of abortion in social discourse and, in particular, from the discourse of male experience. Ruben is barred from Tessa in his frustration at being unable to partake of what she experiences and, more concretely, in having had no part in her pregnancy.

In this sense of escaping him, she is compared to his wife Riana, who spent some time in hospital after the stillbirth of her daughter and who, now dead, could be argued to take the position of an actual ghost in his narrative. Ruben's ruminations address the dormant Tessa as a "you," which sometimes transforms into a "you" more likely to refer to Riana. "To live forward and understand backward: Kierkegaard," Ruben states (186), when he draws clear parallels

between Tessa and Riana.<sup>69</sup> He succumbs to the idea that his past life with Riana can only be interpreted after it has been experienced, as the past informs one's grasp of the present. His narrative begins to conflate the experiences of sitting beside Tessa after the abortion and beside Riana after she lost their daughter: “‘Don’t talk now,’ I said, to Tessa, to Riana. Neither paid attention to me” (186). And: “Neither of them spoke on the way home” (188). The way in which these sentences are phrased give the appearance of Riana and Tessa sharing a same space which, on a metaphorical level, they do. Ruben’s narrative continues the conflation:

“It’ll be like a new start,” I said as I carried Riana across the threshold, a dead weight in my arms.

“If only one could make a fresh start,” she said and started crying again.

“Somehow it does feel like a new beginning,” said Tessa as I carried her into the house, which amused her hugely. (188)

Even Margrieta partakes in this doubling up of the past and present. “Margrieta was there, as always,” Ruben describes, “[f]ood for Riana food for Tessa.” (188).

The women who live in the house on Paapenboom Road are drawn into contact with each other by means of the parallels in the minds and actions of the constant factors of context, experience and location. Riana and Tessa seem to cross the threshold of the house at the same time and receive nourishment and care from Margrieta simultaneously, even though Riana has been dead for eleven years by the time that Tessa arrives. The fact that they share a location and a context, Ruben and Margrieta, allows them to share the temporal space as well. Tessa becomes Riana and Ruben reverts to his former self in the narration of the story of Riana and Ruben’s troubled marriage. Ruben recognises that the women he is surrounded by share a connection to each other across time and space. He also assesses a difference that excludes him from possessing them, but he does not yet attribute this distance to his very insistence on possession as his condition for relating to women.

“What annoys me is the way they exclude me,” Ruben ruminates on Margrieta and Tessa’s discussions of Antje. “As a man, but even more significantly as someone operating on a different level, from which the access to theirs is barred” (133). This denial of access is what troubles Ruben in all his relationships, and he constantly allocates some secret power to the condition of being a woman, akin to the mystical power he ascribes to literature. The “different level” he refers to relates to the level of signification of the semiotic, which provides meaning in a way irreducible to, although not entirely independent from, structural logic. In looking for

---

<sup>69</sup> “It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition it becomes more and more evident that life can never really understood in time simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it - backwards.” (Kierkegaard, 137).

meaning only in the surface words of a text and by disregarding the passions that drive language and mark the transference of meaning from a signifying subject to an other, Ruben becomes estranged from himself as a human being.

During the course of the novel it becomes clear to Ruben that he remains barred from participating in the human experience because he forcefully demonstrates his presumption of a right of dominance and ownership. “[H]ere I am,” he continues his complaint, “they make me feel, with a ghost in my own house, yet the only way I can gain access to her is vicariously, through books, through the notes I’ve made over the years” (133). This contrasts strongly with Margrieta and Tessa’s personal encounters with the ghost. Ruben unconsciously phrases his frustration in terms of a lack of access and possession that runs contrary to his sense of ownership as implied in the phrase “in my own house.” This suggests that possession of the house means possession of Antje in the same way that Willem Mostert could legitimately “own” Antje because she was his slave. In these colonial terms, Ruben feels that the written possession of Antje’s person by means of his “book-knowledge” of her falls short of actual physical experience. In my final consideration of Ruben’s relationship with women, I look at his fascination with the ghostly figure of Antje, and argue that it is in his pursuit of her, and his ultimate failure at capturing her, that Ruben gains insight into his understanding of being South African.

### **Antje**

The novel starts with the sentence, “The house is haunted” (3). The novel is haunted by the palpable presence of its most manifestly absent character: the seventeenth century slave girl Antje of Bengal. On her first visit to the house, Tessa is confronted by Antje, whom she runs into on making a stop at the bathroom. Ruben gives her Antje’s background (40-49), and so introduces South Africa’s colonial history into the narrative. Antje, he explains, was brought from Batavia in 1696 at the age of seven and sold off to William Mostert, a previous owner of the house on Paapenboom Road, at the age of eighteen. What follows is a tale of sexual obsession that leaves unconfirmed whether Antje was a willing partner, or even instigator, or a slave girl at the mercy of her owner. Instead of clearly specifying Antje’s position, the tale introduces sexual desire as framed by political and power inequalities. The way in which these historical events are recounted, although at first presented as a story told by Ruben to Tessa, is given the character of a text that is constantly rewritten.

For, in spite of the construct suggesting that this tale is told by Ruben, the language is writerly and almost formal, lacking the interruptions characteristic of spoken conversation. In

addition, a reference is provided whenever a source is used.<sup>70</sup> Tessa objects to Ruben's reduction of Antje's story to the few written historiographic sources that he has managed to dig up and explains her misgivings when she says: "[i]t's supposed to be Antje's story, but she hardly features in it," at the same time coming to the conclusion that this oversight can probably be attributed to "all those historians [being] men" (51). Ruben ignores her summation on the gender-bias of historiography and counters her complaint by speculating that this, precisely, may be why Antje is still around.

In spite of her "hanging around," however, Ruben fails to experience her presence on anything but a strictly textual level, as she never appears to him. Similar to his determination to possess Tessa in response to his attraction to her detachment from him, Ruben is resolved to capture Antje, which eventually takes the form of his discovery of her bones in his cellar. On being confronted with her remnants, however, he understands that her allure lay beyond the empirically observable. In comparison with Ruben, Antje's material "absence" as representative of all South Africans subject to abusive power *is* "more real."

The "obscure moon illuminating our darkness from somewhere very far away" (51) that Rubens detects on finding Antje's bones, cites Stevens's "obscure moon" that lit an "obscure world" of metamorphosing potential in a way that is even more dramatic than in the poem. Antje's moon "illuminat[es] our darkness" and hints at the need for salvation from something negative, as darkness is associated with ignorance and evil. The illumination that Ruben interprets Antje as providing is that of acknowledging injury, and preventing continued wrong. Even those that fail to fall under the categories of what constitutes abuse in terms of, for example, the definitions of "victim" drawn up during the TRC proceedings explain, or the lack of acknowledgement of coloured discrimination by both the previous and present government. Stevens's "half-colors of quarter-things" that are "never quite expressed" deserve consideration still wanting in South Africa, and for this reason, as Tessa states, "perhaps we need our ghosts as much as they need us" (250).

In *Desire and Language*, Kristeva links wanting to longing. She recognises that all literature is structurally incomplete – not finite but rather a process. This incompleteness, she posits, is what engenders desire (55). She states that:

To complete the novel as literary artefact (to understand it as discourse or sign) is a problem of social practice, of cultural text, and it consists in confronting speech ... with its own death – writing. (57)

---

<sup>70</sup> e.g. "Even in the fullest and most recently published account of Antje's life in Geoffrey Dugmore's *A Sparrow for Two Farthings: Slavery at the Cape, 1657-1795* (Juta, Cape Town) there is little more than conjecture" (40) or "cf. Dugmore, pages 109-11" (42).

The death of speech, or conversation, as an interaction between subject and object that is prone to change as the relationship between subject and object oscillates, occurs when writing, whose symbolic nature still sees constant interruption by the semiotic, is regarded as complete and an artefact. Ruben is in danger of doing this when he seeks comfort in the lie of the stability of language. The true nature of Ruben's desire for literature, and for Tessa, and for the ghost, lies in their transformative potential, and can thus only exist under this perpetual provocation. The incompleteness that marks South Africa's history, as symbolised by Antje, requires acknowledgement so that the "obscure world" can be illuminated.

Under the influence of the narratives of the women around him, Ruben eventually transforms his relationship to Antje and, by extension, to the country that he lives in. Tessa points out the analogy between the two on discussing the state of the country one evening. When Ruben customarily lapses into abstraction and says: "... this country makes it hard to win," Tessa heats up:

It's no use thinking of "this country" is if it were some great abstraction, Ruben. It's all of us .... The country is not just crime, and corruption, and failure, and whatnot. We must believe there's something more to it, something larger than all of us, a kind of hope, a kind of potential. It's something like Antje of Bengal: even if one doesn't see her, we must be prepared to believe in her. (206)

Antje here represents South Africa not only as a relic of a past that will not stay put, but as a reminder of the need to keep looking beneath the surface of the visible and continue to reconstrue it in order to effect (revolutionary) change. This message, at last, appears to reach Ruben.

## **Conclusion**

At the end of *The Rights of Desire*, both Margrieta and Tessa have left Ruben. But, he contends, he is not alone because Antje of Bengal is there to help him face the reality of the country outside of his study. The conclusion of Ruben's narrative suggests that, because he has "no doubt about her continued presence anymore," he no longer has to assuage this doubt by the futile means of tangible material evidence. As the palpable material of texts, or (ghostly) appearance, is always contingent on change effected by the intangible layer of signification beneath it, meaning lies with the signifying subject responsible for this dialectic, and not with its surface symbols. Ruben has therefore ceased to ascribe importance only to texts as residue, and has transferred his comprehension of the importance of the bodily component of signification to a realisation of the importance of bodies as fellow (South African) subjects. Ruben is determined to remedy the problems faced by the country that he lives in by remaining

part of it, and opposes his sons' arguments to emigrate by stating that South Africa needs him. His closing summation is "My desire is intact," which, in this context, submits a new perception of desire as fuelled by a sense of perpetually being needed, and perpetually being responsible.

More than "a meditation on ageing and on love," the desiring relationships in *The Rights of Desire*, on closer reading, denote a desire for participation, or even immersion. This desire for engagement is, however, continually thwarted because its subject, inevitably complicit in the country's power structures, remains tragically caught between his intuitive desire to connect and his inability to conceive of that desire as anything other than a means of control. By examining desire in *The Rights of Desire* in terms of Kristeva's semiotic and symbolic, I have laid bare the discrepancy between its narrator's enchantment with signification effected at a semiotic level and his crediting of the symbolic with the sole ability of meaning-making. I argued that those aspects of language and of women that escape Ruben, although he is drawn to them, inhabit the position of an invisible yet discernible "ghost." This figure was eventually linked to South Africa as a nation with a past that continues to haunt its present.

Only by acknowledging this "ghost" for what it is – a reality underlying his surface perception of reality – and by recognising the difference between his cognitive conception of desire as an imposition (what he "wants") and his intuitive perception of desire as an aspiration to "belong" or to "fit," can Ruben Olivier's desires finally be addressed and is he able to confront his South African identity. The analysis of this conceptualisation of a national identity that can envision the potential of transformation continues in the following chapter.