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

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Chapter 6: Moving Myths: Mythology and Metaphor in *Praying Mantis*

“There is life in this thing they call writing. And it can run further and faster than you ever did.”

Praying Mantis (22)

In his 2005 novel *Praying Mantis*, André Brink returns to the world of Khoi mythology as previously explored in his *First Life of Adamastor* of 1993, this time juxtaposing it with the colonial landscape of eighteenth-century South Africa. As with the earlier novel that presented a Khoi protagonist, the focalisation of *Praying Mantis* is characterized by a marked shift in worldview from Brink’s other novels, and reads somewhat like a fairytale or dreamscape. I argue that the novel, by means of both its structure and its contents, invites us to understand itself as a myth that develops performatively.

While the novel provides a narration of the conversion of its Khoi protagonist Cupido from his Khoi beliefs to the Christian religion and of his subsequent fate, I argue that the complicated narrative structure of the novel, with its various speakers, focalisers and narrators instead enacts a conversion on the part of the reader towards a realization of Western convention as a myth itself. In this way, it proposes a conceptualisation of myth that disables the opposition between African mythology and Western rationality. In this sense, *Praying Mantis* performs “myth” rather than simply describing or transmitting a particular myth, and I will explore how, and to which effect, it does this.

Because myth is “a mode of signification” that is “open to appropriation” by its nature as speech or discourse, as Roland Barthes puts forward in his 1972 *Mythologies*, the interpretation of history and religion as unyielding sureties is discarded by the novel. Instead, the structure of history and religion as made up of stories and narratives that are inconstant and subjective is stressed, as is their value in interpreting the South African context in their very changeability.

Before commencing with an analysis of the novel as myth, not even so much of South Africa’s colonial past, I will argue, as of its present, I first comment on the narrative structure chosen to present the reader with the story of its protagonist and that, I argue, invites us to read the novel as a performative utterance. After this, I examine the concept of myth in terms of discourse and as semiological system as proposed by Roland Barthes. This leads to a specific consideration of mythology in terms of language and metaphor as evident from Derrida’s “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” and then to the distinctively colonial critique of metaphor, myth and discourse in Robert Young’s *White Mythologies*. I connect this to the use made of metaphor for understanding colonial history in *Praying Mantis*, at last returning to the consideration of the book as the story of South Africa today.

Hatched from stories

As asserted above, Brink's narrative ostensibly concerns itself with the history of Cupido Cockroach (or Kupido Kakkerlak, as he was actually known), who, as historiography would have it, became the first Khoi person to be employed by the London Missionary Society as a missionary at the Cape of Good Hope in the early years of the nineteenth century.⁷¹ The novel was written over a period of twenty years, as its author confesses in his endnote, and, perhaps partially because of this, retains a somewhat schizophrenic character that nevertheless corresponds fittingly with the interpretation of myths as what Joseph Campbell calls "productions of the human imagination" (27), in that they refuse to follow a logical sequence or outcome. Campbell sees myth as a means of coordinating the different forces that dominate our life by giving them a place within a mythological system that allows for the coexistence of diverging elements. The three parts that make up Brink's novel also appear discordant at first glance, representing various narrators and a plethora of linguistic conventions, but by examining the novel in terms of myth, a fruitful connection can be made between conceptions of history, religion and narrative that the three parts all foreground.

The novel is divided into three separate parts, not only typographically but also according to narrative voice. Part one makes use of an omniscient narrator, who instantly frames the story as fable rather than history, in spite of dealing with the child- and boyhood of the historically verifiable character of Cupido Cockroach. This narrator confirms the potency of narrative from the onset. The first line states: "Cupido Cockroach was not born from his mother's body in the usual way but hatched from the stories she told." (3). Stories, like origin myths, have the power to transcend the physically real to create their own reality. This reality forms the background of the reader's understanding of its protagonist.

The narrator of Part One also confronts the reader with discrepancies and tensions that make for uncomfortable, but alert reading. This part, in the way of traditional novels, Bildungsromans and true-to-life stories, deals with "The Early Years" of its protagonist: Cupido being born and growing up. However, the documentary nature of this section is destabilized by the first line. We are placed in the realm of myth, in the classical sense, as a sacred story of origin that precedes recorded history. Even this myth, however, is unstable, as the reader is confronted with various versions. The initial story of Cupido's birth is complemented (or destabilised, depending on your point of view) by at least four other versions. The narrator describes Cupido's unmarried mother as offering various explanations for her son's appearance, each time depending on her audience and mood. One

⁷¹ The London Missionary Society was an Anglican (non-conformist) missionary society formed in England in 1795 with missions in the islands of the South Pacific and in Africa.

of these sees Cupido as having been dropped in her lap by an eagle. The reader later understands that the motive of the eagle carries great significance throughout Cupido's life, since he continues to link the foretold reappearance of this eagle to his future fortune.⁷² Another version sees the baby Cupido being stillborn and close to burial when a praying mantis settles on his winding sheet and halts the burial proceedings. The baby draws breath and is "born again," and the figure of the praying mantis, too, reappears throughout the novel as a harbinger of destiny that aids Cupido in making crucial decisions.⁷³

We readers of fiction are unperturbed by these discrepancies, because it is, after all, fiction. The dreamlike, almost surreal nature of what is told is accepted effortlessly because the (erudite) reader experiences the narrative as the unfolding, or, more specifically, the *performance*, of a myth. Here I refer to the theory expounded by John Austin in his influential *How to Do Things with Words* of 1975. Austin's theory discusses the notion of utterances already accomplishing, or at least performing, that which they describe or designate, which proves useful in thinking about literature and literary language, and especially in analysing the unusual arrangement of *Praying Mantis*.⁷⁴

In his article "Philosophy and Literature" (2000), Jonathan Culler asserts that literary language can be considered performative in Austin's sense, even though, ironically, Austin himself precludes literature from his theory by saying that performative utterances have to be "serious" and not, as he puts it, a joke or a poem (9). Culler believes that literary language can never be reduced to its truth-bearing function and, instead, has a world-creating capacity that exemplifies exactly what the performative in language deals with. Literary language *does* as much, or more, as it *says*, and this holds true for Brink's *Praying Mantis*.

Brink's novel unfolds a whole new world before us. Just as Austin considers that illocutionary acts cannot be judged by their status as true or false but, rather, by whether they are felicitous or infelicitous, the tales told by the novel appear felicitous because we are, after all, dealing with an exotic otherness. This otherness will, a bit later, include Khoi gods leaving their divine realm and hunting and swimming alongside Cupido, all of which we absorb without problem. We understand that these stories shape Cupido's expectations for the future and take on solid form in the events that befall him at later stages. As he grows into manhood, for example, Cupido's status on the farm is affected materially when the Khoi God Heitsi-Eibib leaves the confines of the stories told to him by his mother and appears to him in person, helping to transform

⁷² By the end of the novel, the desolate, neglected and emaciated Cupido is finally facilitated in leaving his deserted missionary outpost by a runaway slave whose name is "Arend," translated in English as "Eagle."

⁷³ The praying mantis also figures as the embodiment of the Khoi god Heitsi-Eibib, the son of the good god Tsui-Goab of Khoi mythology.

⁷⁴ Austin's theory, named "speech act theory," makes a distinction between the illocutionary act, which he defines as an act performed *in* uttering; the locutionary act, which is the act *of* uttering; and the perlocutionary act, which sees an act performed *as a consequence of* the utterance.

him into a successful and respected hunter. Cupido braves lions, speaks to meerkats, and comes to an understanding with a water sprite. These occurrences receive the same dry consideration by the narrator of the first section as do, for example, his nausea on first discovering alcohol or his attempts to have intercourse with various farm animals.

At a certain point, however, the first section of *Praying Mantis* does begin to seem infelicitous, and this is when Cupido converts to Christianity. In the same way that Cupido's relationship with Khoi mythology is physical, his understanding of Christianity is also material. This becomes clear because of the emphasis placed on the Christian religion as a religion of The Word. The abstract power of the word, transmitting its material power and creating images in the head, runs parallel to language as performing what it designates. That Cupido adheres to an alternative consideration of the logic of words becomes clear in the following anecdote.

Cupido is sent by the wife of his master to the homestead of her sister with a gift of pomegranates and a letter. On his journey to the outlying farm, Cupido becomes hungry and eats two of the pomegranates. When he arrives and hands over the gifts left in his charge, he is flabbergasted to discover that the sister deduces that he has eaten two of the fruits because, as she explains, "[t]his letter says your Madam sent twelve pomegranates" (20). The subsequent occasion on which Cupido is sent out with a basket of fruit (quinces this time) and he intends to take some of the fruit, he makes provisions for this power of the letter:

he first takes the letter and hides it under a flat stone behind a large boulder. Only after he has finished the quince and obliterated all signs of his feasting does he remove the folded letter from under the flat stone and set out on the rest of his journey. (21)

When, in spite of these precautions, the letter still proves capable of reporting on his conduct, Cupido is converted to believing in the power of the word. "This is strong magic," he concludes. "There is life in this thing they call writing and it can run further and faster than you ever did" (22). Cupido's description of the power of language places it in the realm of physical and material power. This tension between the abstract nature of the power of words, endowed with the ability to place certain images and thoughts into our minds, and the material concept of the power of language brings us back to the performative.

I maintain that this anecdote is not presented to cause hilarity at the shortcomings of the Other, who is seen to interpret as physical what Western thought knows to be abstract.⁷⁵ I believe that, instead, the novel effects a shift in the reader's perception that normalizes Cupido's response and makes strange the notion of letters on paper being capable of turning informant. Although the

⁷⁵ Such as occurs, for example, in the popular 70s movie "The Gods Must be Crazy" and other Western products of popular culture that put their conception of a "primitive" mentality on display for entertainment.

narrator who relates this incident to us is a third person outsider, the focalisation of the first part is mostly that of Cupido. As a consequence his deductions seem reasonable to us, rather than laughable.

The turnaround in this first section arrives not so much with a change in attitude towards the credibility or materiality of these stories as with the transformation of their content. On becoming enamoured of a visiting preacher, Cupido's physical immersion in the story world of Khoi mythology is replaced by his material participation in the stories of Christianity. This, the narrator recognises, is achieved by means of three specific devices, which he terms "magic tricks" in the language of Cupido, and which he tabulates as follows: "The mirrors are the first of these. Music is another. And the third is stories" (44). All three of these reach across the gap between the material and the abstract and combine something of both reality and myth that Cupido deems magic. The association of these magical things with Christianity motivates Cupido's conversion, as he ponders that:

[h]e could no longer be quite sure about Heitsi-Eibib anymore. Not even about Tsui-Goab or Gaunab. It was beginning to look as if there might be more to the world than he had known before. The very thought made his chest contract (52).

The physical discomfort Cupido feels at the upheaval of his view on the world due to the intrusion of another mythology into his Khoi belief-system, exemplifies the function of myth as a structure that helps us interpret the world, or as "tools with which we organise the mass of incoming data," a phrase taken from Mary Midgley's study of myth (4). Because myth functions as the prism through which experiences are viewed and interpreted, suspicion cast on its performance upsets the consciousness of the one looking through it. Yet, to the extent that myths are tied to historical context, they can, and often are, modified when circumstances change.

As Midgley notes, "myths do not alter in the rather brisk, wholesale way that much contemporary imagery suggests," because, as she recognises, "[t]hey are organic parts of our lives, cognitive and emotional habits, structures that shape our thinking, so they follow conservative laws within it" (4-5). This perversely accounts for both Cupido's preservation of habits such as relying on the appearance of portents from the natural world for making decisions, and for his violent rejection of his old belief system as is displayed, for example, in his upturning of the stone monuments to Heitsi-Eibib as he encounters them throughout the South African landscape. During the period of his most expressive rejection of his old way of life, and his manifest insertion into the new mythology, the second section of the novel commences and the narrator is replaced.

As suggested previously, *Praying Mantis* pictures Western ideology as just as much of a mythology as African myth, and makes it appear just as unreasonable. The absurd character of

Western thought is brought to the fore to a greater extent with the onset of section two, which has a first person narrator in the form of the Missionary Society's Reverend James Read, who tells the story of Cupido's conversion and his appointment as first Khoi missionary in a hesitant, awed and self-conscious voice. His narration presents a different voice from that of the first narrator, making self-conscious use of the "I"-form and repeatedly voicing his insecurity about the language he has at hand. At the same time, Read follows the first narrator in placing his narrative in the service of the telling of Cupido's life. He treats Cupido as if he were some sort of demi-God, leading the reader to expect that Cupido, in his capacity as Missionary, is going to do something heroic and important. Read qualifies his daring in taking it upon himself to start this account by saying things such as that he was "allowed" to be near Cupido, and that he was "afforded glimpses of him," showing he is aware of the importance of his recollection as a historical recording of a person of note (114). This becomes quickly absurd, because all that Cupido does is become a harsher and more anti-Khoi Missionary than other missionaries. Read opens his narrative as follows:

The first time I may be said to have properly made the acquaintance of Cupido Cockroach (although I had been afforded glimpses of him before) must have been at his baptism in the Sunday's River at Graaff-Reinet on that stormy day at the end of 1801. (114)

The careful evocation of place and time, as well as of the deviant or foreshadowing conditions, communicates his awareness of the importance of his recollection.

The story Read narrates is valued according to its ability to explain Cupido's fate. Indications of this abound. "How could I ever, then, have foreseen...?" (114), Read asks, also using phrases like "I know now, too late perhaps" (127) and "Where did we go astray?" (183). Hindsight plays a significant role in the mythologizing of Cupido's story. The use of perception after the fact allows for meanings that may not have been available on first experiencing events. Partially through this use of visionary language, the Christian idea of prophecy as indicator of divine authority is ridiculed.⁷⁶ The dramatic emphasis that Read places on minor incidents and effects, which subsequently fail to live up to their status as significant portents, lends his assertions of the magnitude of Cupido's missionary deeds the quality of a myth of its own. Read's allocation of divine significance to the disasters that befall the first Khoi missionary for the London Missionary Society can thus be read as a way of making sense of the mission in South Africa, which was beset with difficulties and must often have seemed futile. By attributing unpleasant events such as the forced removal of the mission station from location to location and the missionaries' defeat at the

⁷⁶ This by reason that, as mere humans cannot see into the future, it can be deduced that they are guided by signs from heaven.

first circuit court of the Cape Colony to a higher power, they could be endured without a loss of faith in the myth of the just cause.⁷⁷

After the sense of foreboding instilled by the second section of the novel, ending as it does with Read's voicing a "sad premonition" with regard to Cupido's fate (215), the third section returns to an omniscient narrator. This, however, is not the same jocular storyteller passing on a legend for posterity of the first section. The third is quieter, more serious and often relinquishes his focalisation to Cupido himself, who battles with the disillusionment that befalls him as he realises that the conclusions he had drawn about the hard lessons learned throughout his life have left him without certainty in interpreting the world around him. All that is left to him is the isolation of his missionary outpost of Dithakong, where he spends the last years of his life. In the excerpts written by Cupido himself in which he communicates with God, he gives God a stern talking to, not shirking the most blasphemous of expletives.⁷⁸

This irreverent attitude towards God returns us to the perception of Christianity as a myth on equal footing with Khoi myth. Cupido's first-hand experience of Heitsi-Eibib is that of a figure who hunts alongside of him, and so his interpretation of God (whom he calls "Reverend God," titling him after the other Christian figures he has encountered) is that of a figure who can be reached by letter (as he can be reached by The Word), and who may be reprimanded for negligence. Rather than presenting a semi-nostalgic and endearing but ultimately dismissive view of Khoi mythology as inevitably to be surpassed by Western understanding, *Praying Mantis* in this way presents Western conventions *as* conventions, and as a series of practises ruled by a particular ideology in much the same way as mythologies.

The account that would seem historically most accurate is the second section, with its narration in first person by an eye witness to the events described. This account, however, shows a discrepancy of world view in relation to the other two. The interpretation of belief as based on abstract symbolism as forwarded by the second section does not align with the conceptualisation of otherworldly powers as materially present in our world in the other two narrative parts. In the following section, I take a closer look at the way in which the conceptualisation of Western convention as myth is characterised. I argue that the narratives of the novel oppose the notion that singularity and simplicity stand for truth, which is a myth perpetuated by Enlightenment according to Mary Midgley's *The Myths We Live By* (2004).

⁷⁷ Derogatorily known as the Black Circuit, the circuit court case of 1812-1813 saw Father Van der Kemp and the Reverend James Read attempt to bring white farmers to justice for the cruel treatment of converted Khoi. The case was lost by the missionaries due to lack of testimony – the assumption still ruling in the colony that Khoi could not give testimony because they could not swear on the Bible, regardless of their status as Christian converts.

⁷⁸ "I know that you are a busy man," he writes to God at one point, "[b]ut this is crushing my balls" (257).

The name of Hottentot

Aside from the division of the novel into three sections, other features give it the character of a complex structure that opposes history as chronologically verifiable or comprehensible. In this way, it opposes the idea that simplicity stands for truth, which Midgley sees as a myth that became disseminated during the Enlightenment. Midgley isolates this idea as one of three myths that continue to influence intellectual and moral thinking in the Western world today. In a section entitled “Complexity is not a Scandal,” Midgley exposes the conviction, held in the social sciences as well as in much of the humanities, that “only one very simple way of thought is rational,” as a misleading doctrine (21). This Enlightenment myth, which she dubs both “imperialistic” and “strangely ambitious,” is described by Midgley as centring on two claims, that of infallibility and of unity of thought. In fact, she states, “[r]ationality does not require us to be infallible, nor to have all our knowledge tightly organised” (23). She goes on to argue that “we need scientific pluralism – the recognition that there are many independent forms and sources of knowledge – rather than reductivism, the conviction that one fundamental form underlies them all and settles everything” (27).

This, perhaps, is the aim of *Praying Mantis*'s complexity. By juxtaposing, and thus equating, Western and Khoi ways of organising the world, the status of Western discourse as a “white mythology” that becomes invisible as mythology because it is normalised, is suddenly made visible. In the same way that Richard Dyer, in his study *White* (1997) cited in chapter four, reveals white culture to be a construct that has become invisible because it has set itself up as the norm, *Praying Mantis* forwards white ideology as naturalised and therefore seemingly incontrovertible.⁷⁹ The novel's structure performs the pluralism of vision that is needed to combat the silent assumptions that accompany such normalisation. At the same time, its narrative structure is marked as a metafiction because of the many fictions and texts that interrupt its surface. The use of various narrators, literary devices and citations draws attention to its status as a work of fiction, and allows for the problematisation of the invisibility (and “whiteness,” in Dyer's term) of literature as an artefact that responds to, but is removed from, reality.

Literary references are made by means of a series of epigraphs that open the novel and set up expectations about its content. One of them dates from the time in which the narrative is set, and comprises a nineteenth-century commentary about the insignificance of the “name of Hottentot,” believed by the cited article to be one of “little note.” The effect achieved by this citation is a contrary one. It anticipates that these low expectations will be refuted by the narrative that follows. Considering the fact that the subject of the novel is “the first ‘Hottentot’ missionary enlisted by the

⁷⁹ I will return to the concept of “white mythology” in the next section of this chapter, where I discuss the conceptualisation of Jacques Derrida and its subsequent development by Robert Young.

London Missionary Society” in a colonial country beset with racial barriers, this expectation takes on a special urgency. The full quote runs, “The name of Hottentot will be forgotten or remembered only as that of a deceased person of little note.” The use of the adjective “deceased” prepares indignant readers for an encounter with the racist colonial mentality of the early nineteenth century. Because of the accent placed on this sentiment, a concomitant expectation of its readerly reception as aberrant is also implied, making *this* brand of Western mythology, at least, seem strange from the onset.

The second epigraph dates from 1984, the year, as we read in the endnote to the novel, in which Brink began this novel. The quote comes from a work by Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, which deals with the meaninglessness of modern-day life as seen through the prism of the experiences of an American professor of “Hitler studies,” who becomes contaminated by an unknown toxin and faces his death in the meaningless surroundings of small-town America (“white noise” refers to random or uncorrelated signals). The quote plays believers and non-believers out against each other in an unexpected way in the assertion that the existence of non-believers grounds belief. The unorthodox proposition that “[i]t is our task in the world to believe things no one else takes seriously” again provides an alternative to Western mythology, this time referring to the convention of siding “tasks” and responsibilities with what is serious, and not with what “no one else takes seriously.” Here, the value placed on rationality as a way of understanding the world around us is thrown open to question. Instead, the imagination is forwarded as an important tool for interpreting the world.

The third and last epigraph dates from the time at which Brink again took up writing the novel, after a long period of neglect (this was in 1992), and comprises a deliberation on Erasmus’s concept of “free will.” It begs the question whether a man can choose to be mad, and, more importantly, of whether he can choose not to be. Like the other two epigraphs, this deliberation offers an insight that is reached by turning around what is conventional, destabilising the presumption that what is normal is considered as such because it is the wisest option. Concurrently, this last citation sets up the implication of being “compelled” to a way of life or course of action by something beyond mere human “will,” in the same way that the subsequent narrative of the first part makes clear that accident, or fate, can invalidate intentions.

The implications of the quotes prefigure the implications of the other narrative voices of the novel. All of them contribute to conjuring up the story of Cupido, but no one voice is presented as having “the last word,” least of all The Word itself. As mentioned, aside from the variety in narrative voice and focalisation discussed earlier, an interspersion of other textual devices occurs within the three narrative voices, influencing their interpretation. One of these forms is that of the endless lists that appear in the first and third parts.

In the first part, the reader encounters lists of, variously, wild game that Cupido's first master shoots on a hunting trip; names of places he encounters on his journey into the hinterland; and the unlikely items transported by rogue missionary Servaas Ziervogel on his visits to lonely farmer's wives.⁸⁰ At first glance, these tabulations take on the appearance of the pseudo-scientific charts of colonial record, associated with a colonial power structure that lends the overarching metanarrative the framework of an ideological grid of colonial documentation. The first such encountered list reads:

eleven lions
 forty-two elephants
 seven hippopotamuses
 ninety-eight springbok
 twenty-three hartebeest
 two rhinos
 seventeen zebra
 thirty-one wildebeest
 a single camelopardalis (a rare beast, almost as
 improbable as a unicorn)
 and eight Bushmen (5)

The list provokes distaste at its dry and objective tone, and ends on a repulsive note when it includes human death as well.

In her consideration of scientific myth, Midgley characterizes the use of the list as a "favoured way of appearing scientific policies can be called scientific if they involve counting or measuring something, never mind whether that particular thing needs to be counted or not, and never mind what use is being made of the resulting data" (19). The pretence of objectivity that accompanies scientific appearance is exposed in the novel as grotesque, considering the brutal practices that must have preceded this tabulation. At the same time, the narrator of the third part of *Praying Mantis* also undermines the (Western) association of lists with order by including in his catalogues both reasonable and unreasonable items.

In his final capacity as missionary of Dithakong, Cupido tells a group of visiting travellers of his own travails by recalling various place names:

...
 Okavango and the lake at Ngami
 as well as Kgalagadi and the Chella Mountains
 and Lebebe and Omabonde
 and the Okawabga River and Andra and Humpata (230)
 ...

⁸⁰ Including, among the recording of "sugar and coffee" and "needles ands cotton," items such as "the skull of St Peter as a child" and "two white-plumed wings of an angel from Macedonia" (40).

He goes on with his list until he comes to:

Samarkand and Sumatra
 Vladivostok and Nizhni-Novgorod
 and the Great Bear and Orion with his girdle and the
 Southern Cross
 and, for all one can tell, Saturn and Uranus
 and the New Jerusalem (231)
 ...

All pretence to scientific objectivity is abandoned with this use of the list, and the erstwhile tool for colonial control begins to take on the form of a song or chant, which evokes the mentioned places rather than try to capture them in a catalogue.

Another variation takes the form of the letters that Cupido writes to God. These vary in quality and language as his mastery of written language improves and his emotional state vacillates, and give a view of events different from the way they are described by the other narrative voices. Through this first-person account, we can trace the progress from his desire to adopt a single mythology to cope with the world to his acknowledgment of the folly of linking his life to any one single narrative. In his last letter to God, for example, Cupido conflates the “Dearest Beloved Revrend God” (sic) with the Heitsi-Eibib of his previously-abandoned Khoi belief. “[Y]ou who live in the Red Sky of dawn” he continues his address, “...who struck Gaunub on the hip to cripple him and cause him to die” (271). This equates God with the Khoi hunter god Heitsi-Eibib, who challenged Gaunub, the god of evil and death, to single combat and won.

This espousal of a syncretistic worldview only comes towards the end of the novel, when every kind of misery and misfortune has already befallen him. It is strongly linked to Cupido’s changed understanding of the workings of stories and words. Where, at first, he had extolled the magic inherent in words, which could “run faster and farther than [he] ever did” (22), his last reflection is that “the Word is no more I got to go past Him” (271). This conveys a renewed understanding of the power of language as lying not so much in the solidity of Western letters as in their articulation of the world beyond.

Introducing the reader to Western attempts to order the world, like religion, letters and lists, and making the reader aware of the seductive promise of control that they offer, *Praying Mantis* points to the correlation between what is perceived as history, and what as fable. It presents us with a concern for complicating our systems of ideological imposition, making use of the dual meaning of mythology, both as a way of making sense of the world and as a way of conjuring up a new world.

In his book *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space* (1986), Joseph Campbell believes that “[t]he life of a mythology derives from the vitality of its symbols as metaphors,” and that these metaphors, as images that embody our conceptualisation of experiences, deliver “not simply the idea, but a sense of actual participation in such a realization of transcendence, infinity, and abundance” (18). In this way, the abstract *is* material, as (symbolic) conceptualisation affects, and *effects*, our (material) experience. By allowing the reader to immerse herself in the world view of Cupido, Brink’s novel goes beyond a narration of the idea of Midgley’s pluralism of vision, and actually allows us to participate in different ways of making sense of the world. The reader is not only immersed in a story presented as myth, but invited to probe its propositions, both in the sense of an interrogation *and* an incorporation of its viewpoint.

I now take a closer look at these propositions, and at the way in which Western conceptualisations of mythology have travelled into new territories. As Mieke Bal writes in her *Travelling Concepts*, the development in the interpretation of concepts (such as that of mythology) as they travel, does not require a resolution of discrepancies in reading, but, instead, can be used in laying meaning open to questioning. By refusing to subdue alterity in the allocation of meaning, concepts that travel circumvent the naturalisation of assumptions, which, as discussed, is itself a “white mythology.”

I first turn to Roland Barthes’s conceptualisation of (Western) ideology as mythology, and extend this to Jacques Derrida’s notion of conceptualisation itself as a myth, before turning to the specifically postcolonial critique of mythology as “white,” in various senses of the word, by Robert Young. I then use Mieke Bal’s concept of “metaphoring” to link this to the narrative of *Praying Mantis* as both performing a myth and bringing to light a presumption about South African history as shaped by a white mythology.

Remaking the Khoi world

Although Brink’s novel profiles itself as an exploration of the stories that explain the nature of reality in Khoi culture,⁸¹ its underlying concern aligns itself with Roland Barthes’s conception of mythology as naturalised power in a specific cultural context. In this case, the specific cultural context is that of colonial South Africa, and, by extension, that of South Africa in the present-day. The distance between the two perceptions of myth is not that great. Both focus on what Mircea Eliade terms sacralization, yet, the importance of language as a structuring device is underplayed in the first. The role of religion in this novel, as perpetuated by colonial oppression, however, remains uncontested in both.

⁸¹ In the sense, for example, of narratives traditionally passed down about divine and heroic beings and linked to the spiritual life of the Khoi community.

In the still widely-read *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion* first published in 1959, Mircea Eliade shows how religion emerges from myth. The desire to explain and control the world gave rise to the desire to experience the world as sacred, which actively called a world into being: “the experience of sacred space makes possible the ‘founding of the world’: where the sacred manifests itself in space, *the real unveils itself*, the world comes into existence” (63). Eliade foresees later considerations of myth as constructed, and acknowledges that socio-historical factors play a central part in this. “[T]here are,” he begins, “differences in religious experience explained by differences in economy, culture and social organisation – in short, by history” (17). The development of writing in the West, for example, partially explains the metaphysical nature of Christian beliefs, just as the proliferation of oral transmissions in Khoi culture influence the conceptualisation of divinity in Khoi mythology, where intervention by the Gods is experienced in a material way. Historical context influences perception, and history, indeed, is what directly gives rise to myth for Roland Barthes.

Myth, for Barthes, is “a system of communication, a message” (109) closely tied to the workings of history. Barthes challenges the “naturalness” of cultural practices and texts by demonstrating how they are artificial constructs subject to an imposition of meaning. These constructs create a mythological reality intended to maintain existing structures of power. “[M]ythology can only have an historical foundation,” he states, “for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things” (110). Barthes places myth within the realm of semiology, where language is interpreted as conceptual rather than referential. “Semiology has taught us,” he says, “that myth has the task of giving historical intention a natural justification” (142). By uncovering the hidden myths that mask power structures as truths, Barthes’s brand of mythology inevitably engages with political issues.

One scholar who delves into this engagement between mythology and politics in the specific context of missionary intervention in nineteenth-century South Africa, is Elizabeth Elbourne. In her article “Word Made Flesh: Christianity, Modernity, and Cultural Colonialism in the Work of Jean and John Comaroff,” Elbourne responds to Comaroffs’ seminal *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (1991), which previously formed the pinnacle of analysis of South African missionary influence. In her reply to their interpretation Elbourne puts forward the intriguing proposal that, rather than seeing missionary undertakings from the vantage point of the christianisation of Africa, they can be interpreted as bringing about the Africanisation of Christianity.

Elbourne believes that a reading of missionary work as essentially furthering the oppositions that served colonialism focuses too much on the Western origin of Christianity, which “contains deeply embedded culturally specific assumptions” (43), ignoring African agency. Interpreting

Christianity as a language of cultural domination, gives an oversimplified view of the performative process of “colonizing [African] consciousness” (8).

Elbourne asserts that conversion was “an act, with attached rituals and beliefs” (35), and follows the Comaroffs in reading missionary endeavours as *performances*. By performing civilisation it was hoped that South Africa’s indigenous population would follow suit and adopt Western practices. By the notion of one universal truth, the rejection of existing traditions would ostensibly also be achieved. Elbourne complicates this situation, however, when she notes that it was not the straightforwardness of its world view that converted Khoi people to the Christian faith, but the promise of power that its exclusive vision implied. This is also what motivates Cupido to learn to read and write, as this written language can run “farther and faster” than his spoken word (22).

So whilst an immersion into the Christian word to a certain extent achieved the adoption of a Western world view and, by extension, an acceptance of Western authority, it concomitantly gave Khoi converts a way of negotiating a better position for themselves in the colonial context, even to the extent that, as Elbourne notes, “prophetic figures emerged from time to time to use aspects of the Christian message in a context that suggests how quickly its language became unhinged from missionary guardianship” (26). The context referred to here was that of the Christian doctrine of equality, which was used by indigenous converts to oppose assumptions of authority by white farmers. This “African prophetic innovation” (26) caused much anxiety among white South Africans who, in order to re-establish authority, forwarded race, and not religion, as the determinant of colonial status. Christian ideology and language, once unhinged, proved impossible to re-attach to the idea of exclusivity.

Language inevitably plays a role in our observation of the world and language is always complicit in structures of power. Thomas MacLaughlin explores this idea of language as “a conceptual grid, a system of values, through which we experience reality” by linking this conceptual grid specifically to figurative language (86). Metaphor, which stresses connections based on the logic of words as they refer to aspects of the outside world, plays a central role in this.

In “White Mythology” Jacques Derrida challenges the traditional opposition between concept and metaphor in philosophical theory. Metaphor, he argues, has been regarded as a “loss of meaning” and a “detour” from “proper meaning” (270). But as a matter of fact, Derrida argues, philosophy exists precisely by means of metaphor, as assertions of truth are made in the form of metaphors. This admission does not necessarily devalue a statement or finding, because meaning does not diminish simply because it is transported by means of language. Metaphor, in this way, is not alien to metaphysics but is itself a metaphysical concept. As Derrida states: “Metaphor remains, in all its essential characteristics, a classic philosopheme, a metaphysical concept” (218). It is not

possible to speak about metaphor non-metaphorically. This is so because a metaphor must be performed in order to grasp its meaning. The very word “metaphor” itself, as Mieke Bal notes in her article “Metaphoring: Making a Niche of Negative Space” (2006), is a metaphor.⁸²

Bal’s article on “metaphoring” proposes a development of Derrida’s deliberation on the absence of a clear distinction between literal and figurative language. Where Derrida infers that a purely literal language may not exist, but only a language where the figurative origins have become invisible (or “white”) because of over-use, Bal puts forward the concept of “metaphoring” to reconceptualise metaphor within the context of a performative understanding of language (164). Metaphoring, as a verb, performs a transferral of meaning that does not necessarily rely on referentiality. Instead of assessing the appropriateness of a metaphor by its proximity to what is referred to, the act of metaphoring, Bal contends, does not transfer “meaning in a referential or representational sense, but a preoccupation that *requires re-enactment* in each event of occurrence” (165, emphasis added).

Bal warns against what she terms the “disabling abstraction” of generalisations. Instead of essentialising truth claims that, as she warns, “easily mislead... us into believing that states and situations are inevitable,” and so deny “the possibility of political agency” (165), she pleads for agency and performance as entailed in the act of metaphoring. By metaphoring the particularity of one idea or experience onto another, whilst retaining the connotations specific to their configuration, the gap between distinct situations *can* be bridged. The meaning of both elements augment each other in the dynamic process of metaphoring, without one connotation acting in the service of another. This retention of particularity returns us to what Campbell called “the vitality” of [a myth’s] symbols as metaphors” (18), allowing for an immersion in myth by participating in its central ideas, such as the idea of transcendence, infinity or, in the case of the nineteenth-century Khoi, the idea of a radical equality among Christians.

Extending this train of thought, I argue that the understanding of God that Cupido demonstrates in Brink’s novel is not presented as simplistically literal in a laughable, quasi-primitive manner, but shows a sophistication of conceptualisation that renders Western traditional notions of a divide between the literal and the figurative comical. Cupido’s amalgamation of the Khoi way of making sense of the world with the textual conception of reality of the white missionaries, not only makes *visible* the invented nature of both, but makes perfect *sense* in the context of the Khoi missionary. Robert Young, in his *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990), takes this idea a step further.

Young departs from Derrida’s notion of metaphor as the inescapable (both excessive and deficient) access point for western philosophical thought to a consideration of Western history as

⁸² Its Greek translation is “to carry from one place to another.”

the inevitable point of departure for considering all histories. Hence, history is a “white mythology” that sets the limits for any project for knowledge about history. So-called “world histories,” whether Marxist or capitalist or liberal or conservative, are always histories of the west, seen from a Eurocentric viewpoint. In this way, Western ideology is a mythology that is both “white,” in the sense that it becomes transparent as a mythology, and in the sense that it is a mythology that “makes white,” that erases divergence. Young takes a quote from Derrida’s essay:

Metaphysics - the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own logos, that is, the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason (Derrida, 213).

In his examination, Young posits colonialism as the “dislocating term” in the debate between theory and history, as both of these are implicated in the history of European colonialism, and both continue to provide the contemporary framework for the conditions of institutional knowledge and practice (vii). The field of postcolonial study, Young also seems well aware, provides the terrain needed to do justice to the complexity of history and its multifaceted composition in political, social and linguistic terms. The simple oppositions of Hegel’s binaries, such as that of masters and slaves, colonizer and colonized, can be circumvented in the spirit of Foucault’s critique of the sovereign model of power, which presumes that, as power resides on a single basis, can easily be reversed (5). “You cannot get out of Hegel by simply contradicting him,” Young posits, “for your opposition is likewise always recuperable, as the workings of ideology or psychic resistance”(6). Contradiction, in Young’s analysis, is replaced by Derrida’s deconstruction in effecting a decolonisation of history, brought about within the realm of language.

The realisation that dialecticism can never be opposed by its reversal (as it would preserve the dialectic) formed the focal point of Elbourne’s analysis of the historical interpretations of South African missionary endeavours, too. Her insight that the christianising of indigenous South Africans did as much to alter the nature of South African Christianity and *all* South African Christians (not only the indigenous members) as it changed the world view of those it newly converted, goes a long way towards making sense of the attitude towards the Word exhibited by Cupido Kakkerlak in Brink’s narrative.

Considering The Word

Brink’s novel fights the war waged by language and words in the creation of myths that uphold the political status quo on the battlefield of religion. The conflation of the meaning of “the word” and “The Word” plays a central role within its narrative, in the same way that the dual meanings of “mythology” are brought to life within its pages. According to Jonathan Culler, in *The Pursuit of*

Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction, metaphor expands its reach in modern considerations of language, and has become the “figure of figures, a figure for figurality” (189). The myth that metaphor is capable of transcending the oppositions it straddles to access a truth undermines the power of metaphor, as demonstrated by Derrida and Bal’s considerations discussed above.

Thomas MacLaughlin attributes to metaphor the capacity for a “magical sharing of meaning.” Unlike metonymy, which relies on connotations built up over time in a specific historical context, metaphor creates associations “on the basis of a deep logic that underlies the use of words” (84). This “deep logic,” whose connotations, for MacLaughlin, already seem to approximate those traditionally aligned with magic, characterises the performance of myth as it is borne out by *Praying Mantis*. As Cupido becomes increasingly aware of the power that resides in the tenacity and flexibility of words, he connects their deep logic with his conception of magic in that they are both able to construct and change reality. The magic that Cupido detects in words, and, specifically, the written word, can be attributable to his finding their “logic” not so much “deep” as unreasonable.

This inappropriateness also characterises metaphor, as Jonathan Culler explains (1981). In this piece, Culler explains metaphoricity as the result of interpretative processes that are performed on being confronted with “textual incongruity” (232). The suggestion is that surface descriptions sometimes fail to express what is salient, and require the enhancement of figurative conceptualisations. Again, this would point to a clear-cut distinction between the real and the figurative, of which Derrida and Bal remain unconvinced, and which do fail to acknowledge the real as constructed by language in the first place.

Cupido, in pointing to the artifice inherent in the white mythology of textual associations, differs in his understanding of words from those used in his mother’s, and later his wife Anna’s, oral stories, as these are set up in the text as participating in a different logic, one that engenders rather than describes. When Cupido’s mother’s describes the land “far away” that she came from to her young son, she tells him:

“It is a bare place”

“How bare?”

“Just bare. No word has come to lie on it yet to say how bare it is. So it is just bare.” (17).

This exchange appears to hark back to a world before words at the same time as that it characterises these words as unnecessary in recalling a history and maybe even obstructive to the process.

Marshall McLuhan, in his 1962 *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, asserted that the advent of print culture caused the cultural predominance of the visual over the oral by its

privileging of writing over speech. “The technology and social effects of typography,” he notes, “incline us to abstain from noting interplay and, as it were, ‘formal’ causality, both in our inner and external lives. Print exists by virtue of the static separation of functions and fosters a mentality that gradually resists any but a separative and compartmentalizing or specialist outlook” (126). The domination of writing over other forms of language is, in itself, a mythology of the west, and acts prescriptively in the way in which it frames perception of the world. This bias of writing over speech has been called *graphocentrism* or *scriptism*. McLuhan argues that its effect extends to social organization, especially in terms of the “specialist outlook” he mentions.

When Cupido adopts the written form of language as his new god because of the magical powers he attributes to it, this absorption of power turns out to be anything but empowering, as it ties him to a restricted set of values and ultimately leads to the narrowing of his worldview. In taking The Word of Christianity at its word, Cupido displays violently intolerant behaviour in his aggressive conversion of non-Christians and his destruction of non-Christian sacral sites. The progress and development that graphocentrism attributes to writing is undercut. Cupido contributes to this immobility by counting on the solidity of words. After Reverend James Read has presented him with a bible of his own, he encounters Cupido one day sitting on the ground with a much-depleted bible on his lap, intently reading every word on a page and then, when reaching the end of the page, tearing it out, crumpling it and stuffing it into his mouth. Read is horrified and confronts Cupido, at which Cupido replies:

I am consuming the Word of God. . . . There is so much that I still do not understand, Brother Read, . . . So I decided I must eat it and swallow it to absorb it in my body. Only then will the Word of God be fully part of me. Then no one can ever take it from me again. (185)

The need for material absorption is at odds with Read’s understanding of written language as transmitting value via an abstract absorption. Yet, the tension found in the symbolic language of the Christian bible, with its bread and wine becoming blood and body, and its word being made flesh, provides an apt context for Cupido’s questioning of the boundaries between the physical and the abstract.

In *Transfiguration* (1983), Frank Brown makes an analysis of metaphor and religion in a way that opposes this idea of an inhibiting conflict between literal and figural meaning. He disagrees with the conventional characterisation of both poetic metaphor and religious language as sign-systems that are purely “self-authenticating” (149). Instead, he argues that “however self-referential or noncognitive some function of religious language may be, the ‘game’ played by such language as a whole becomes trivial and even incomprehensible unless it is understood as concerned, ultimately, with more than itself” (150). Because he assumes that these systems of

symbolic language are neither trivial nor incomprehensible, he deduces that the complex relationship between experience, words, and what he calls “a higher or deeper Word” can be successfully explored. The way in which he foresees this happening is by the realisation that our sense of reality is related directly to the language we use, and that metaphoric and conceptual discourse both mediate what lies beyond the confines of language (151). He speaks of “the dynamics of metaphor” as serving “to incorporate and help create the vital tensions and awareness fundamental to the religious dimension of human experience” (173) in the same way that Derrida recognises metaphor to function as a “transfiguration,” both remaining within language and pointing to that which is beyond it.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have argued that, by telling us the story of first Khoi missionary at the Cape, Cupido Kakkerlak, *Praying Mantis* performs a myth, one that proposes a conceptualisation of myth that disables the opposition between African mythology and Western rationality. Rather than trying to present us with the mythology of the Khoi in a manner that exoticises and makes laughable their practises, the novel concerns itself with the mythology of the West and, specifically, with what Robert Young (after Derrida) calls a “white mythology.”

As Culler states in the previously-cited “Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative,” literature, even more so than non-literary language, exemplifies Austin’s performative in that it “accomplishes the act that it designates” (503) and creates for us the world that it describes. The world of *Praying Mantis* is the dry and barren hinterland of South Africa, where overt activity and incident seems lacking, but where narrative reveals much to be going on beneath the surface.⁸³ The narrative of *Praying Mantis* is desert-like in that not much occurs in the way of material events, but the shifts in perception and understanding of its protagonist, Cupido Kakkerlak, first with his conversion to Christianity and later with his realisation that Christianity performs its own mythology, literally *creates* a world of difference for the reader.

By examining the narrative structure of the novel, its multiple narrators, as well as its employment of self-consciously literary devices such as citations, tabulations and epistolary interludes, I was able to analyse the way in which Brink’s novel prepares us to understand Western conventions, both linguistic and ideological, as mythologies that are made “white” and thereby indiscernible. In this way it became possible to read *Praying Mantis* as a narrative that tells the story, not so much of South Africa’s past, as of a future South Africa that is empowered to refuse to make white its truth and, instead, is able to embrace the complexity of its history.

⁸³ Its last section, consisting of 55 pages or so, are, in fact, entirely taken up with the protagonist’s residence in Dithakong, a missionary outpost in the desert without church, houses, or inhabitants.