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

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## Epilogue: Writing the South African Self

“We still need the mess of forgiveness.”

“I always thought forgiveness was a tidying up.”

“It depends. True forgiveness opens you up to all the darkness in yourself.” *Imaginings of Sand* (265)

The refusal “to make white,” as borne out by my consideration of *Praying Mantis*, can be extended to the critical acknowledgment of darkness in the other works I have discussed in this study. The insight provided above is from an exchange between the narrator of *Imaginings of Sand* and a local member of the ANC preparing for the 1994 General Elections. It encapsulates the predicament of contemporary South African identity as imagined in the post-1991 novels of André Brink. The “darkness in yourself” stands for the abhorrence of contamination, the realisation that one’s identity is not just defined by one’s forebears or loyalty or birthright, but by the experience of the encounters—with others, with the land, and with the self—that refuse definition or consistency. This experience is characterized as darkness because it admits to the dependence, and therefore to vulnerability, that being a South African among South Africans brings. It is also defined as darkness because it refuses attempts to whiten the experience by naturalising, and thus making invisible, the imposition of Western norms.

The fascination with darkness is not limited to Brink’s post-1991 narrators, however. It is already found in Joseph Malan, the protagonist of the pivotal *Looking on Darkness*, discussed in my introduction. Malan, too, sees “[t]ruth...not [as] a collection of facts which can be narrated but a landscape through which one travels in the dark” (34). The difference between Brink’s earlier and the later novels lies not so much in the correlation of national identity with a connection to the land, nor with the ascription of darkness to both this land and the people who inhabit it. Simply stated, in all of the novels a struggle takes place with the anxiety of identity, which is followed by the realisation that the land defines the person, provoking a sense of being that can be sensed and recognised but not necessarily fathomed or explained by qualifications of birth or race. In this study, I argue that the difference between the pre- and post-Apartheid conceptualisation of this struggle and this realisation lies, rather, in the different way language is imagined to play a role in it.

Language comprises the arena in which Brink’s post-1991 narrators wrestle with their identity. In *On the Contrary*, Barbier plays with the idea of language as an assumption of authority, first using language for purposes of aggrandisement, and then discovering that, as the self-confessed liar he is, his own inability to keep track of the versions of his story prevent him from truly participating in it. This dilemma is solved when Barbier becomes sensitive to the stories that are told by the land, which he connects with the slave-woman Rosette, after which he resigns

himself to being a mere component of the land's narrative, being told as much as telling. The link between reliability and authority being severed, Barbier can resign himself to the death sentence that is his fate. Kristien, in *Imaginings of Sand*, is also initially baffled by the conundrum of language. The women's stories that her grandmother passes down to her contradict dominant historical discourse as much as they contradict each other. Only after a cathartic confrontation with the Gothic sublime, comprising a distress that is simultaneously a release, Kristien achieves the insight that conflicting memories and histories can co-exist without presenting a threat to one's sense of self. *The First Life of Adamastor* takes the form of a self-conscious literary exploration of conflicting and connected viewpoints that co-exist in the context of a land that endures, making individual fates subordinate to the continuance of South African identity.

*Devil's Valley's* Phillip Lochner's misgivings about his identity as a South African, the products of his disillusionment with its repressive history, are similarly transformed by his confrontation with language and stories, and, in particular, with the silences that inhere in them. After acknowledging the co-existence of fantastical and realistic elements in the valley that he visits, and after seeing them performed by the landscape that surrounds him, Lochner abandons his journalistic fervour for unearthing the truth and admits to himself that those elements have made him what he now is: "Less than [he] was, or more" (368). Ruben, in *The Rights of Desire*, inverts Lochner's frustration with the lack of journalistic clarity in stories by regretting the presence of factuality, not fictionality, in the story of his life. But Ruben also experiences a transformation in his understanding of himself when confronted with the contradictions of language. Instead of providing the safe haven he has always longed for, his retreat into literature separates him from what he desires rather than allowing him to merge with it. Only when he acknowledges that "[t]here is a world outside ... which requires me and strangely concerns me" (306), can he experience South Africa, and being South African, as something more than an abstraction, keeping his desire intact. Finally, Cupido proves in *Praying Mantis* that the barrenness of the land harbours the richness and complexity of the story of who he is. The dawning of this realization releases Cupido from his exile in the desert, and closes the novel on a hopeful note as he moves forward on a cart. "[I]t does not seem to grow dark," he observes, because "high above streaks the star, its dazzling course showing them where to go" (275).

The existentialist resignation to oppression as displayed by Joseph Malan makes way for hopefulness of a joint South African future in these later novels, conceived in relation to a change in the understanding of language. Brink's later narrators play with language, with contradictions and impossibilities. In contrast, Malan has no access to words, and therefore no access to hope. He is an actor, who uses the words of others, and who regrets not being able to use his own in private as well as public. He is scolded by his lover for addressing her with quotes, making her unsure as to

whether she is making love to him or to John Donne. When he stands on trial for murder and is expected to relate the transpired events “in his own words,” he fails to do so. Malan’s triumph comes in the form of death, a fate that, he believes, does not make him a “victim of [his] history,” because he willingly abandons himself to it, finding release in the termination of oppression (393). He remains “dark” in that the “invisible opponent that watches us day and night...with diabolical finesse” (366) fails to get the better of him. Yet, he can appreciate darkness only as a way of ending his fate, not as the start of something new.

In contrast, Brink’s post-1991 works envision a new way of being South African. While the apartheid-era protagonists were pictured as tragic heroes fighting an invincible evil, the end of apartheid sees a new type of protagonist in Brink’s work, one who questions his or her identity in a manner that is playful and dialogic. In this way, these works reflect the process of imagining a new kind of identity for the non-literary South Africa as well.

After all, not only literary language forms a contentious issue in debates on South Africa, but language as a medium of communication as well. My choice for Brink’s English-language novels is by no means an accident in this respect. Although South Africa has eleven official languages, English assumes an almost hegemonic position in South Africa. The use of English is a central political issue, not least because of its perception as perpetuating a neo-colonial ideology. English is set up as a neutral and transparent medium of communication, supposedly available to all. Yet, the use of a language within a country has a great impact on representations of public space and national identity. In this sense, English carries great symbolic weight. I believe it important to weigh that acknowledged problem against that of the use of language as a critical resource. Becoming sensitive to how the English language is deployed in literature, and in Brink’s work specifically, can be a means of decolonising language, and, by extension, decolonising the people who speak it. The form that English has taken in Brink’s novels draws attention to the institutional and colonial logic of the language, setting up alternative narratives that facilitate postcolonial agency. Brink’s novels confront the language with its past, and try to do away with notions of idealised purity or correctness.

The purity of the ideal community, put to the fore in *Devil’s Valley*, for example, is repeatedly undercut in Brink’s novels. The aesthetic variations that the Devil’s Valley community displays (women having four breasts, men no arms, grandmothers looking like owls) ridicule the purity that that community enshrines. In the same way, *Imaginings of Sand* criticizes the notion of an unambiguous and comprehensive South African historiography, making the case for overlapping histories instead. More than making a case for tolerating diversity, all the novels emphasise the need for embracing contradiction; contradiction no longer seen as a perpetrator of divisions and social

stratification. Through literary imaginings, authors like Brink help discard the unhelpful fatalism of apartheid-era writing in favour of an anticipation of the future.