Osita Ezeliora

André Brink (1935- ), South Africa’s novelist of unrivalled energy and imagination, has more than anyone else embraced the fantastical narrative form in recent time in his abiding commitment to re-imagine seemingly self-evident historical realities. Perhaps the most prolific of South Africa’s novelists of English expression, Brink has to his credit 18 full-length novels, anthologies of essays that define his artistic philosophy, a critical study of the language of the novel from Cervantes’ to Calvino, and innumerable essays on literature, as well as rudimentary statements and socio-political commentaries scattered in books and literary magazines all over the planet. His keen sense of alterity and experimentation is aptly demonstrated in his recourse to the medium of fantasy narratives following the dawn of a ‘liberated’ South Africa. Brink’s deployment in Devil’s Valley of this narrative mode, a form that has come to be known more popularly in recent scholarship as ‘magical realism,’ is the focus of this paper. The nature of the magical real as a resistance form attuned to defining the new idiom of a liberated South Africa is one that calls for an investigation, given the embrace of this mode by Brink and a number of South African writers after apartheid. What

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1 This essay is a revised version of one of the papers I presented at the conference, ‘From Orientalism to Postcoloniality’ held at Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden, in April 2006. It is part of a larger study on the contributions of André Brink in the construction of emergent paradigms in Post-Apartheid South African fiction of English expression. I benefited immensely from comments by a number of participants at the conference, especially from Dr. Karin Möller of Växjö University, Sweden, and Prof. Peter I. Barta of the University of Surrey, UK. I have also continued to gain from the immeasurable support of Prof. Bheki Peterson whose interest in my research clearly surpasses that of ‘just a supervisor’; and I am indebted to Prof. Kerstin Shands of the English Department (Södertörn University) and the conference committee for providing me support and opportunity to present aspects of my research in Stockholm, and to the Andrew W. Mellon Scholarships Foundation for generous financial support during the course of my research into new directions in Post-Apartheid South African fiction of English expression at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

2 The concept of ‘re-invention’ has been frequent in Brink’s rudimentary essays. He uses the idioms ‘re-imagine,’ ‘re-visit,’ ‘re-create,’ etc at random. See, for instance, Reinventing a Continent or “Stories of History: Reimagining the Past in Post-Apartheid Narrative.”
does it consist in, and how has Brink deployed this mode in his post-apartheid fiction?

In a perceptive study, ‘Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse,’ Stephen Slemon argues persuasively for a wider perception of this aesthetic narrative mode. He sees it as a fundamentally postcolonial imaginative response to the Euro-narratives of the civilizing master with their inevitable and crafty deformations of the sensibilities and verbal intelligibilities of the colonized subjects. “The concept of magic realism,” Slemon observes, “threatens to become a monumentalising category for literary practice and to offer to centralizing genre systems a single locus upon which the massive problem of difference in literary expression can be managed into recognizable meaning in one swift pass” (Slemon 408-9). Language becomes the central aesthetic domain for the conflict in narrative modes. Indeed, as Slemon puts it: “In magic realism this battle is represented in the language of narration by the foregrounding of two opposing discursive systems, with neither managing to subordinate or contain the other. This sustained opposition forestalls the possibility of interpretive closure through any act of naturalizing the text to an established system of representation” (Slemon 410).

It is rewarding that Slemon’s theorising itemizes three basic issues in the reading of the magic realist text, namely, the recognition of ‘transformational regionalism,’ in which “the site of the text, though described in familiar and local terms, is metonymic of the postcolonial culture as a whole”; ‘the foreshortening of history,’ in which “the time scheme of the novel metaphorically contains the long process of colonization and its aftermath”; and ‘the thematic foregrounding’ of “those gaps, absences and silences produced by the colonial encounter and reflected in the text’s disjunctive language of narration.” Of course, he adds: “On this third level, the magic realist texts tend to display a preoccupation with images of both borders and centers and to work toward destabilizing their fixity” (Slemon 411-412). In a way, therefore, the perception of the fantastical mode as a post-colonial genre finds support and relevance in much of contemporary narratives of the Other, even from the neo-historicist and late capitalist theorising of Fredric Jameson’s persuasion. The politics of content and ideological leanings of this narrative mode continually essentialize the problematic of domination and dispossession. What needs be added are the pattern of the narrative and its processes of dislodging marginal spaces through its creation of what Jameson calls ‘actantial locus’ (Jameson 1981:128).

The peculiar problematic of South Africa as a post-apartheid post-colony need be noted here. The double colonization seen in the external invasion by the British in the nineteenth century and the later internal ‘colonization’ by the Afrikaner-instituted apartheid created a special identity of South Africa as one doubly torn to shreds by two invading European colonialist vultures, a situation which has left issues of cultural disintegration and linguistic incoherence as major defining features of black South Africa’s socio-cultural
imaginary. Commentators on the magical realist form in African writing have continued to argue for the countless reasons that inform African writers’ fascination with revisiting their history as well as their appetite for reinventing that past. Following this mode of argument in her discussion of Syl Cheney-Coker’s *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* and Haile Gerima’s film, ‘Sankofa,’ Brenda Cooper has noted, like David Coplan, “the terrible history of cruelty and oppression that slaves and their descendants suffered” (Cooper 1996: 176). But in drawing support from Coplan, however, she reaches the shocking conclusion—quoting Coplan—that “the socially harmonious” portrait painted of pre-colonial Africa is “not one in which any non-African American well acquainted with Africa and it’s [sic] history is likely to believe” (Cooper 176). While Coplan might have been “categorical,” he has not necessarily argued “correctly,” as Cooper would want us believe. Actually, the obvious question here is whether there were indeed non-African Americans who were truly “well acquainted with Africa and it’s [sic] history.” Rather, there is massive evidence that the Africa the many so-called Euro-American experts had held up is, indeed, an Africa that never was.3

Elsewhere, however, Cooper raises the question: “If magical realism is as much a set of formal devices and strategies as a way of seeing the world, what can the nature of narrativity itself illustrate about the genre?” (1998: 34-5). It is at this point that we are confronted with a visible departure from the traditional realistic narrative mode with its insistence on empirical verifiability of narrative incidents. The concerns for the Other — the thematics—become immersed in a complex web of narrative structures. The plot development or narrative progression, characters and characterization, authorial views and spatio-temporal manifestations are at once assembled and dislocated, harmonized and contradicted in the author’s paradoxical creations of opposite realities. It is in this sense that ‘hybridity’ or “the celebration of ‘mongrelism’ as opposed to ethnic certainties” is a fundamental device of the magical realist novelist. Cooper suggests:

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3 A most eloquent statement to this position is Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow’s *The Africa That Never Was: Four Centuries of British Writing About Africa* (New York: Twayne, 1970). See also Achebe’s “An Image of Africa,” *Hopes and Impediments* (London: William Heinemann, 1986); Abiola Irele’s interesting essay, “In Praise of Alienation” is another illuminating response to this kind of assumption. Arguing against the kind of romantic nativism that often come from African cultural nationalists, Irele points out that the concept of ‘Otherness’ as it concerns Europe’s image of Africa is not peculiar to Africa alone. The ‘Other’ as a racial and, consequently, cultural idiom of inferior categorization has always manifested in the global politics of domination through the course of history. “When the fact is remembered that the Romans considered these people (other Europeans) savages and barbarians,” Irele argues, “the later pretensions of European ethnocentrism and racism appear in all their hollowness: as the products of a monumental amnesia.” See, for instance, Abiola Irele, ‘In Praise of Alienation,’ in V.Y. Mudimbe (ed), *The Surreptitious Speech: Presence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness, 1947-1987* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 201-224).
A syncretism between paradoxical dimensions of life and death, historical reality and magic, science and religion, characterizes the plots, themes and narrative structures of magical realist novels. In other words, urban and rural, western and indigenous, black, white and mestizo—this cultural, economic and political cacophony is the amphitheatre in which magical realist fictions are performed. The plots of these fictions deal with issues of borders, change, mixing and syncretizing. And they do so, and this point is critical, in order to expose what they see as a more deep and true reality than conventional realist technique would bring to view. (32)

In achieving this narrative mode, interestingly, the magic realist novelist deploys most of the devices of the postmodernist that subsume “irony, parody, disruption and pastiche.” Ethics and aesthetics are united in “tension, danger and ambiguity, threads that often tighten around the novels and produce raw marks on their narrative structures,” just as “time and space are potentially transformed within the hybrid, magical realist plot” (Cooper 32). Hybridity and irony thus become markers for the form and authorial positions respectively. Therefore, she concludes, “characters cannot be assumed to hold the opinions of their authors; omniscient narrators are not as trustworthy as was once thought; and the text has even been known to turn tables on the author and have a last word” (Cooper 36). Brenda Cooper, one observes here, consistently talks of ‘West African magical realists’ (1998:30). But it should be stressed that not all the works of any individual author could be described as falling within the field of ‘magical realism’. Like Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, she sees “the mix of authorial reticence with irony,” as a defining feature of the magical realist text, and that “magical realists inscribe the chaos of history not by way of unity, but by means of plots that syncretize uneven and contradictory forces” (Cooper 36).

Like Blier and Cooper, a number of African scholars have made great contributions in their recent investigations in the debate on this narrative mode. They have drawn attention not only to the conspicuous presence of the genre in Africa but have also theorized its basic socio-cultural and ideological tenets, as well as its narrative strategies. An illuminating addition to this end upholds that the concern of this aesthetic narrative form is essentially directed towards “a continual re-enchantment of the world.” In his ‘Explorations in Animist Materialism,’ for instance, Harry Garuba (Garuba 271)—borrowing from Raymond Williams’ ‘Cultural Materialism’ and Fredric Jameson’s ‘Political Unconscious’ respectively, tries to distinguish between what he calls ‘Animist Materialism’ and ‘Animist Unconscious’. While the former, for Garuba, is characterized by “its insistence on the materiality of cultural production” based on “a religious consciousness of the material world” (268), the ‘animist unconscious’ “is a form of collective
subjectivity that structures being and consciousness in predominantly ani-
mist societies and cultures” (269).4

In echoing Jameson’s ‘multiple temporality,’ Garuba examines the place
of ‘Time, Secularism’ and ‘the animist social imaginary’ in literary represen-
tation and notes that “Animist culture opens up a whole new world of poach-
ing possibilities, prepossessing the future, as it were, by laying claim to what
in the present is yet to be invented.” It is through this way, he argues, that
“continual re-enchantment becomes possible” (271). Given the diverse mani-
festations of the representational strategies of animism, ‘magical realism’ is
seen to be “too narrow a concept” and, instead, he suggests that “[their] cou-
pling of the realistic and the fantastic are clearly effects of animist material-
ism rather than magical realism” (275). Garuba’s arguments could be
summed up in the following way: while animist materialism involves a spiri-
tualization of the material world, the metaphorization of its materiality in
aesthetic representations is animist realism, rather than magical realism.

As scholar and artist, Brink is not insensible to the dynamics of re-
enchantment which, for him, is implicit in the whole processes of construct-
ing and decoding historical mysteries. If Brink’s post-apartheid novels were
inspired by a novelist’s desire to fashion new modes of fictionalising his-
tory—or indeed, historicising fiction—it could be given to him, in his own
words, that what emerges is “not solving a mystery, but demonstrating how
historical mysteries are constructed” (“Stories of History,” 33). His embrace
of the fantastical mode in three successive narratives immediately attests to
this interest in constructing historical mysteries through his imaginative con-
catenations of the marvellous. But an understanding of Brink’s artistic phi-
losophy, especially an investigation of his numerous essays since the col-
lapse of official apartheid, might help in illuminating what appears to be his
love for, or recent obsession with, the ‘re-invention of history’. This would
not only highlight Brink’s theory of the novel, but also the sense of com-
mitment necessary for that re-imagining, without suffocating the reader with
factualities.

In The Novel: Language and Narrative From Cervantes to Calvino
(1998), André Brink shows that there is no unidirectional way of writing. He
perceives the very act of writing in plural forms in a manner that reminds
one of a similar argument in Dorothy Van Ghent’s The English Novel:
Forms and Functions. Brink argues that narrative modes are encoded in
“languages,” and not in “language” (‘Introduction’, 1-19). One implication
of Brink’s explorations of the dynamic nature of language as “the condition
of story” is the implicit statement that much of what emerges in contempo-
rary critical practice as the magical narrative mode, which many see as a

4 See also Achille Mbembe’s chapter, ‘The Thing and its double,’ in his On the Postcolony
fundamental manifestation of postmodernism, is neither modern nor post-modern. Indeed, for Brink, postmodernism is “no more than an umbrella term for a staggering variety of forms, styles, experiments and manifestations […]. Postmodernism is—among so many other things—a snake swallowing its own tale, as it turns, playfully, ironically, and with lighthearted seriousness, to what once appeared to be its age of innocence” (1998: 3; 19).

For a writer who has been variously charged with crass opportunism⁵ and overt politicality⁶ in many of his narratives, it needs to be stated that the seemingly fresh fascination with the experimental and the exploitation and deployment of the immense possibilities of language is not an entirely new development for Andre Brink. If he ever betrayed any such inclination in his narratives, his poetics has always been engaged in the search for the truth. He had written in ‘Mapmakers’ at the peak of official apartheid and its censorial obsessions that the writer is eternally engaged in the task of “[drawing] the map of his vision of truth. […]. The writer is not concerned only with ‘reproducing’ the real. What he does is to perceive, below the lines of the map he draws, the contours of another world, somehow a more ‘essential’ world” (Mapmakers, 167-9). Elsewhere, in ‘Imagining the Real,’ Brink insistently calls for a more imaginative mythologization of reality. In a way, Brink’s poetics is enduring in his quest for excavating the ‘myth of history, myth and history, and history of myth’ (‘Making and Unmaking,’ 1998: 231-252). While observing, therefore, that “the employment of ancient myths in modern guise has become one of the most characteristic narrative techniques of the twentieth century” (Mapmakers, 218), he suggests that it is through the rediscovery of such mythologies that “all important literature” revive “the abiding truths which determine the relationships among men and between man and the world” (Mapmakers, 219). The writer should strive, therefore, to “deepen fact into mythical truth,” for, it is through this process that “we recognize and acknowledge the existence both of ourselves and the world” (Mapmakers, 221).

Brink’s theorizing of the novelistic technique of mythopoetic narratives raises a fundamental question in the context of the Post-Apartheid imagination. The cacophony of voices within the intellectual community in South Africa is rather immense and, like the narratives of the new era, falls within what David Attwell has described as “a field of ambiguities.” But Brink as a novelist, it does seem, defies this charge of a tendency towards the ambiguous in any negative context. It could indeed be claimed that Brink’s mythopoiesis and Post-Apartheid narratives transit from a fascination with re-

⁶ Sue Kossew appears irritated with what she describes as the “dogmatic quality” and politicality of Brink’s artistic philosophy and engagement with social responsibility. See Sue Kossew, Pen and Power, (Amsterdam- Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996, 25).
imagining, and embraces the past in a manner that could at best be described as Brinkian: a quest for an understanding of the present through an imagined recreation of the past—an ‘imagining of the real,’ of “myth of history, myth and history and history of myth.” The challenge for the writer, then, is to engage in an aesthetic manipulation of language for a synthesis—a narrative—borne of the narrational conflict in imagining the real and in realizing the imagined. It is in this respect that his Post-Apartheid novels could be understood within the binary limits of ambiguity and disambiguation.

The project of re-inventing the past, then, given his prolific statements to this effect, is the preoccupation of Andre Brink after apartheid. In an interesting article, ‘The Changing Priorities of South African Writers,’ he elaborates on the exciting developments and experimentations that range from the nostalgic to the fantastical, and seems particularly happy with what he sees as a “turn towards the imaginary,” a recognition of “the fantastical deeply rooted in the real,” which is, perhaps, “an authentically African version of magic realism.”

In yet another illuminating essay: ‘Stories of History: Re-imagining the past in Post-Apartheid Narrative,’ Brink proposes “a transgression of the boundaries of an originary sensual perception,” with the view of “infusing the ordinary with a sense of the extraordinary, the everyday with a sense of the fantastic, producing a result in which the whole is decidedly more than the sum of its parts” (1998: 31). Brink, in this regard, takes further his long dreamt narratological bent towards historical narratives. The overriding question of essentialism resurfaces in his apprehensiveness over the place of morality and socio-historical relevance should narrativity be confined to ‘pure invention,’ and by consciously and totally eschewing historical realities. This would, he argues, restrict readership to “the irreducible fact of textuality” even though “textuality does not obviate historicity or morality.”

If the manifestations in Brink’s post-apartheid narratives, particularly works like Imaginings of Sand, Devil’s Valley, or, indeed The Other Side of Silence, or, for that matter, the manifestation of this narrational mode in Mike Nicol’s The Ibis Tapestry and Zakes Mda’s The Heart of Redness and Ways of Dying, among others, are to sum the embrace of the fantastical mode as evidently found in much of post-apartheid South African fiction of English expression, it might then be argued that these writers have found affirmation in Brink’s submission that “the best we can do is to fabricate metaphors—that is, tell stories—in which, not history, but imaginings of history are invented. Myth may have preceded history, but in the long run it may well be the only guarantee for the survival of history” (42). For, indeed, the new fiction is fundamentally a fabricated metaphor of historical memory, of the private and shared experiences of the South African social humanity across race, socio-economic status, gender, repression and domination.

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What emerges as Brinkian aesthetic in the ‘new’ South Africa, however, is best exemplified in ‘Interrogating Silence: New Possibilities Faced by South African Literature’. While he has always called for a re-imagining of the ‘real’, Brink, here, insists that in the light of the new order, writers should try to revisit narratives of the past because, as he puts it, “[H]istory provides one of the most fertile silences to be revisited by South African writers: not because no voices have traversed it before, but because the dominant discourse of white historiography (as well as temptations to replace it by a new dominant discourse of black historiography) has inevitably silenced, for too long, so many other possibilities” (22). As always, Brink’s idiom points to his fascination for a re-fashioning of the factual past. He writes of ‘re-visiting,’ ‘re-inventing,’ and ‘re-imagining’ in the quest for a new literary form that will locate its synthesis in the creative blend of historical realistic narratives and post-modern narrative techniques. “If stories are retold and reimagined,” he argues, “the re- is of decisive importance: each new invention happens in the margin of the already-written, or against the background of the already-written” (22).

In terms of its mode of aesthetic realization and the expectations of the reader, Brink considers the reader a major participant in the creative process who must, inevitably, be left with the choice of a moral position only suggested by the re-invented narrative: “[T]he new text does not set itself up as a ‘correction’ of silence or of other versions of history; but through the processes of intertextuality set in motion by its presentation, it initiates (or resumes) strategies of interrogation which prompt the reader to assume a new (moral) responsibility for his/her own narrative, as well as for the narrative we habitually call the world” (23). In dismantling the many walls of silence, marginal subjectivities should be the major focus of aesthetic investigation, and these subsume the women of South Africa—black and white, and the roles of blacks generally including the so-called ‘Coloureds’ in the historical evolution of contemporary South Africa. It is interesting that in three successive novels—Imaginings of Sand, Devil’s Valley, and The Other Side of Silence Brink shows interest in the representation of the subversive female figures. He explores their contributions to the making of Afrikanerdome (Imaginings of Sand and Devil’s Valley), and equally depicts quite eloquently the psychological liberation of women who suffered various forms of colonialist violation, exploitation and denigration (The Other Side of Silence). Brink takes this pursuit as a personal credo in his post-apartheid narratives. He affirms:

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9 In re-imagining the ‘real,’ Brink’s project of the historical narrative transcends mere fascination with socio-political factualities to the formalistic: ‘how-ness’ in constructing historical mysteries in fictional narratives must be seen to be basic, and should sometimes be given more priority than the ‘what-ness’ of that mystery. Most of Brink’s essays on the developments in post-apartheid narratives return to the need to ‘re-imagine’ or ‘re-inventing’ the past.
What interests me particularly at the moment is the link between woman and history: woman as a presence largely excluded from official South African discourses; and history as canon. [...] And it seems to me that this kind of enterprise may serve as a starting point of a completely reinvented South African history: history, in fact, reimagined as herstory” (23).

In what he calls “the discovery of Africa,” Brink addresses what has preoccupied the minds of very perceptive scholars of South Africa on how to resume proper critical dialogues between South Africa and the rest of the continent. In an era of continental integration, literary scholarship and creativity should embrace the singular task of a holistic apprehension of the African cosmology and cosmogony. While Michael Chapman has suggested “re-arranged relationships in literary education” in which African literary texts will fruitfully be studied comparatively with Western texts that address issues relevant to Africa’s socio-historical and cultural life, Andre Brink in ‘Interrogating Silence’ (25-27) is more eloquent not only in his calling for some seriousness in the study of black African writers, but more so in his recognition of the resonant magicality in the work of Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi, Tutuola, Okri and Kunene. He considers this narrative mode a paradigm worthy of investigation in the new South Africa.10

Critical responses to the novels of Andre Brink vary in recent scholarship. With the enduring reputation as the South African novelist who “has most blatantly challenged Afrikaner power” (Chapman, 402), Brink is also perceived by Michael Chapman as engaging in “political and literary opportunism.” As he puts it, “[H]is usual practice is to grasp outside of his own literary structures, which in their frequent use of writer-narrators hint at their ‘art,’ and attach his stories to the more sensational events of the times” (403). If account is taken of the fact that Brink’s new interest in the representation of the female voice coincides with current trend in global gender politics and the privileging of previously marginalized subjectivities, then Chapman’s assessment of Brink’s ‘emergency’ novels remains true of his post-apartheid narratives.

It has been suggested that Brink’s “status as a post-colonial writer… is problematical” (Kossew, 1996:5). But if this charge is true of his earlier fiction, it is doubtful whether any such claim would hold for his post-apartheid novels. For, indeed, his reconstruction of colonialist mythologies through a critical re-visitation of history within the dictates of the magical narrative mode places Brink as, perhaps, the most engaging in the new quest for a re-definition of South Africa’s literary identity and paradigm shift. Going by Sue Kossew’s description of the post-colonial status of South African writing as belonging to that “aspect of the post-colonial (theory) that does not exist after colonialism but in constant engagement with, and resistance to,

10 It is strange, however, that not a single work of a black African writer appeared in his recent book-length study, The Novel: Language and Narrative From Cervantes to Calvino.
the hegemonic oppression of imperial power, whatever form that may take” (7), it could be argued that Brink’s post-apartheid novels clearly define him as a counter-hegemonic novelist. And in spite of her accusing Brink of sexism and racial nostalgia in Colonization, Violence, and Narration in White South African Writing (1996), Jane Jolly captures Brink’s historical narrative in her post-colonial explication of A Chain of Voices. “[T]he form of Brink’s novel,” argues Jolly, “works against the distinction between ‘fact’ and fiction: the reader is encouraged not to recognize that the historical is always fictional, that the claim of originality is not a solution but an exercise in appropriation” (53).

Two commentators that draw perceptive attention to the mythopoetic dimensions of Brink’s narratives, however, are Sandra Chait and Isidore Diala. While Chait’s comparative reading of Brink’s The Cape of Storms and Mike Nicol’s Horseman interrogates the novelists’ search for answers to whatever could have inspired and sustained the recurrent cycle of human stupidity in form of racial separatism, Diala attempts to locate answers in biblical parallels as part of the monumental structures of white mythologies. Writing in ‘Mythology, Magic Realism and White Writing after Apartheid,’ Sandra Chait believes that the white South African writer has chosen to return to re-examination of mythology through the magical realistic narrative. This way, the whole question of racism, repression and violence in apartheid South Africa was essentially sustained through a combination of white and biblical mythologies. In evoking the personality of the gods in the sustenance of the evils of racism and violence, however, Chait argues that in The Cape of Storms, and Horseman, respectively, Brink and Nicol have “unwittingly undercut their own criticism, exposing one evil while concealing society’s real evil by making it seem natural” (2000: 17-28).

In his investigations of “Brink’s frequent depiction of characteristic Afrikaner reduction of the Bible to a white mythology that complements the materiality of apartheid,” Isidore Diala (2000) similarly observes: “Brink’s insight (in fact) is that colonial myths harden into metaphysical facts and that their origins are imperceptibly obliterated in the colonizer’s consciousness. If imperialism is usually associated with inhuman violence and appropriation, a basic reason is that the colonizer soon forgets that myths of the Other’s subhumanity are his own creations taken as truths” (80, 82). As in his counter-hegemonic inscriptions of the apartheid era, Brink’s post-apartheid narrative has continued with a reconstruction of Afrikaner hegemonic mythologies. This is as evident in his non-fictional writings as it is in his imaginative work: in Imaginings of Sand and in Devil’s Valley. In fact, in Devil’s Valley, more than anywhere else, Brink’s deployment of the magical narrative form demonstrates this view. If the novel is essentially attuned to a parodic revaluation of the life of an arrogant blindman desperately attempting to retain power and political domination over the so-called subhuman Other, it does so against the background of a strong persuasion that the
dominant certainly needs more redemption than the dominated. Isidore Diala elegantly captures this vision of Andre Brink in his reading of Brink’s anti-apartheid narratives when he observes that

The 1976 Soweto riots led Brink to a clearer discovery of his mission as an artist—a preoccupation with the possibility of the Afrikaner’s redemption. With this, too, he found clearer applicability of the virtues of asceticism in the realm of politics. Brink’s maturer view of apartheid is that the oppressor, not the oppressed, was in dire need of spiritual purgation, of the cleansing of a guilty conscience, and even of liberation and redemption. Aware that the greater sacrifices demanded of blacks and coloureds enriched their humanity, Brink condemned apartheid basically because he was convinced that it impoverished the humanity of the Afrikaner and moreover was an illogical culmination of centuries of Afrikaner history, characterized by rebellion against tyranny, and an affirmation of human dignity and freedom (85).

Given this drive for a racially harmonious South African society, it is salutary that Brink, like Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee, should address himself to a serious consideration, Diala argues in another essay, of the issues of ‘Guilt, Expiation and the Reconciliation Process in Post-Apartheid South Africa’ (Diala 2001/2002). In his reading of Gordimer’s The House Gun, J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace, and André Brink’s The Rights of Desire as postmodernist statements that attempt to show the way forward for a nation whose political history resonates with alarming levels of psychological injuries amongst the racial Other, Diala submits: “By their invocation of the past, they strive to exorcise the present of its enduring trauma. In the contexts of the epic drama of national reconstruction rooted in reconciliation, they affirm the substance of the entire transformation process in post-apartheid South Africa: that whites’ guilt-consciousness and recrimination be transformed into the acceptance of responsibility and that blacks’ recovery of marginalized histories be compassionate and exclude the old orthodoxies and chauvinism” (68).

But while in Imaginings of Sand temporality constitutes a significant aspect of Brink’s narrative of alterity and the post-apartheid imagination, in Devil’s Valley the ‘time’ element is less obvious. Yet, we are aware that a strange set of humanity called ‘the blacks’ has finally taken over political power in the ‘outside world’. The sheer disgust expressed by a number of the citizens of this ‘inside world’ over the bizarre development is Brink’s narrative device of drawing attention to the spatial location of a blind set of humanity who, unfortunately, have continued to live in ignorance, incest, gerontocracy, diffidence, and have, in the process, visited untold injustice against her own people. If Devil’s Valley is a post-apartheid satire on the primitivism and inadequacies of apartheid as a system of separate development, it is a very eloquent one for the reasons that it portrays the oddities of racial separatism
to include a recycling of human stupidity and frustrates the citizens’ rights of desire. Racial separatism is also seen to be arrogantly gerontocratic, just as it is generally unprogressive. It is indeed, by the enormity of hypocrisy prevalent in the community, a valley presided over by devils. More than anywhere else, perhaps, it is in *Devil’s Valley* that Brink shows how the dominant certainly are in greater need of salvation than the dominated. But like *Imaginations of Sand* and *The Other Side of Silence*, *Devil’s Valley* is also a narrative of the reconstruction and re-evaluation of the place of marginal subjectivities—the indigenous population, and the roles of the Afrikaner women. It is equally a daring representation of South Africa’s era of transition to democratic non-racialism. Unlike other novels that address the theme of political transition, however, Brink’s *Devil’s Valley* is distinguished by the novelist’s adoption of nightmarish realism or the fantastical narrative mode. The entire narrative has an aura of the supernatural and the mythical.

Repetitions, contradictions, reality and fantasy, sympathy and satire, truths and deceptions are all united in a marvellous narrative that originally sets out as a project of excavations of a people’s history, by an apparently frustrated crime-journalist who, at 59, is determined to “[make] a contribution to society” (11).

As an ‘investigation’ by a crime reporter, then, it is little wonder that *Devil’s Valley* appears in the first-person narrative, given the personal involvement of the narrator in many of the incidents within the two weeks of his trip to the bizarre, never-never land of ‘Devil’s Valley’. The motivation is ‘the recent appearance’ of some citizens of the Valley in the outside world after “the War,” which appears to have given credence to what was originally a mere speculation: “a legend took root about a community of physically and mentally handicapped people in the mountains, the sad outcome of generations of inbreeding” (14). Brink, it does seem, is begging the question: if apartheid is such a noble project, why does it lead to self-destruction, including social, economic and spiritual blindness?

The central figure is the journalist, Flip Lochner. The choice of the investigative reporter taking on the role of embracing his life-long dream of becoming a historian of repute appears to be a deliberate narrative ploy of novelist Brink whose interest in the nexus between historical narratives and narratives of history has led to his utilization of the magical narrative form through the mobilization of the many mythologies of the peoples of South Africa. In spite of the many repetitions and contradictions that mark the narration, moreover, it is possible to map the narrative progression: stirred by the bug of life’s struggles, of the pleasures and disappointments of a once ambitious young man now gradually approaching the end of his career, Flip Lochner, 59, crime-reporter, is given the privilege of attending a history seminar at South Africa’s Stellenbosch University. He arrives at the scene and is immediately reminded that a former classmate of his, Twinkletoes Van Tonder, is now one of the nation’s most respected historians and aca-
demics. He contrasts the feeling of Van Tonder’s accomplishments with his own experiences. The realization that he has failed as a journalist and, worse still, as a husband and father, rekindles his desire to make a contribution to scholarship—a dream that fuelled his master’s degree dissertation. Following his presentation at the seminar, a young man, Little Lukas Lermiet, accosts him, and they soon develop a friendship that ends tragically almost immediately, when Little Lukas is killed in a road accident.

The young man, however, has succeeded in arousing Flip Lochner’s curiosity about life and humanity in his homeland, Devil’s Valley. Flip Lochner takes a trip to this weird territory, and in ten days, he is able to excavate not just the history of Devil’s Valley in its diverse manifestations, but also manages to draw attention to the psychology governing events and customs amongst the inhabitants. These range from a sense of contentment defined by a primitive closure against all kinds of invasions by “outsiders” to the sustenance of their values through beliefs in superstition, violence, and a perverted sense of justice where it is possible to face public execution for stealing a cup of water, and yet escape ordinary trial for offences as severe as murder and incest.

We get an idea of the concept of power, religion, health, gender, education, justice dispensation, class and racial (in)tolerance through the many interactions of this central figure with the inhabitants of the Valley. Central to the understanding of this society are ‘names’ and ‘naming’. Individuals are defined either by their profession, physical attributes, or their mannerisms. The presiding Vicar of the local church, for instance, is called ‘Brother Holy’; the agent in charge of invocation of water during draught is ‘Jurg Water’; the painter who attempts to keep public memory through his art is ‘Gert Brush’; the judge that presides over cases including sentencing convicted persons to death, and who attends to all dead persons is ‘Lukas Death’; the lady who has the gift of a fine dancer is ‘Talita Lightfoot’. Some of the women are defined by their affiliations to marriage: Dalena-of-Lukas Death, Hanna-of-Jurg-Water, Annie-of-Anwyn, and so on.

Flip Lochner observes these developments, but also tries to participate in the running of the community within the period of his investigation. This angers many privileged male members of the community; some plan for his death, and majority of the inhabitants were persuaded into believing that the ‘unholy liaison’ of Flip Lochner and the much loathed Emma was responsible for the many tragic incidents at the Devil’s Valley. The sequence of incidents that follow Flip Lochner’s many attempts to dig up the past are better seen in the series of tragic deaths that follow: in less than two weeks, the small community where everybody knows everybody witnesses the deaths of Anwyn, Ouma Lisbet Prune, Ben Owl, Prickhead, Piet Snot, Jos Joseph, Tall Fransina, Jurg Water, Emma, Lukas Death, among others. Flip Lochner is finally able to return to the outside world, from where he develops his story in a manner reminiscent of a remembered dream.
But *Devil’s Valley* is not a simple story. It is a loaded narrative that is at once symbolical, analogical, and parabolical. In almost every respect it is an allegory, and it is in the blending of the real and the fantastical—the believable and the delusional—that the narrative assumes its basic metaphorical function. Whereas the many magical tales that sustain the narrative are drawn variously from the mythologies of the so-called Bushmen, the Hottentots, the Afrikaners, and the Biblical, ‘Devil’s Valley’ could be read as a mythical aggregation of the many Afrikaner settlements in South Africa; and in terms of temporality, the moment is as suggestive of the period immediately following South Africa’s successful transition to democracy as it is now or as it was yesterday. What would readily emerge from this reading, then, would include the many centuries of Boer perception of South Africa as ‘the promised land’ on the one hand, and on the other, the modus operandi of the ‘Broederbond’—the unit entrusted with the task of ensuring racial purity—notorious during the apartheid days by the secrecy of its modes of operation and its rightwing ethics.

The very first encounter of the journalist with the ‘legendary’ or perhaps mythical old man, Lukas (Seer) Lermiet, the founding father of the Devil’s Valley, is fraught with suspicion and hostility. It might be immaterial to perceive Lukas Lermiet as a fictional representation of Jan Van Riebeeck; yet, it is interesting that Andre Brink distances the population, or any of South Africa’s several ethnic groups from the concern of journalist Lochner. It is possible, however, to decode and place the weird and fictional characters and the population within the linguistic circles and ancestry of the dominant South African languages. The old man, we are certain, at least, spoke with a typical antiquarian ‘Dutch accent’ (4), just like most of his descendants; and one could easily have located—within the context of blood and belonging in South Africa, his community of whites had he spoken in a typical ‘antiquarian British accent.’

As metaphor, therefore, *Devil’s Valley* could be read as Brink’s fictional aggregation and parodic revaluation of the Afrikaner Broederbond and the ‘primitive closure’ that was sustained for so long a time through the then fanciful idiom—at least to the initiators—of ‘apartheid’. With a legalistic structure that frowned on the ‘rights of desire,’ contact amongst racial groups was met with brutal punishment, and the ‘Immorality Act’ was at hand to provide authority to presiding judges. The implication is the condoning of greater immoralities and social aberrations like ‘incest,’ ‘child-abuse,’ ‘wife-battering,’ and murderous engagements. Within this society, the human mind is subjected to irrational fears to the level of outright timidity through the sustaining structures of superstition. It is in the exploration of these larger social aberrations through the efforts of the investigating journalist that the novelist applies himself to an aesthetic reconstruction of the more fundamental issues of marginality and marginal subjectivities in *Devil’s Valley*. 
With a passionate commitment to ensuring racial purity, the patriarchal oral traditionalists of Devil’s Valley are careful not to include the indigenous population in their narratives. This deliberate effacement of the black population runs parallel to the systematic subjugation of the women who, we are told, are not allowed to speak even in the church, except when praying to God. As part of the narrative reversal, Brink does not defend the apparent hypocrisy of the inhabitants of the Valley who are always in a hurry to locate evil/sin in the sub-human Other.

In spite of the prevailing incest, adulterous life, and truncated morality very much inconsistent with their Calvinist ethos, dishonesty remains, for them, a function of any illicit association with the outside world. Thus Isac Smous’ family “have always been too lazy to do an honest day’s work” (242), and the reason given for this is not that as business men/women they are entitled to generating some profit, but that they have “Jewish blood in them” (185). Isak Smous’ grandmother, ‘Bilah,’ is said to be Jewish, even though we later learn from Lukas Death that she was from the indigenous population of the Hottentots. There is, therefore, it does seem, an unwritten constitution among these settlers to phase out the existence of the black population from public memory. History becomes a lie, and the historian, a liar: and what emerges as South African history as narrated by the inhabitants of Devil’s Valley is the essentially monumental structures of white mythologies—history as written by white settlers—since the amaZulu, the amaXhosa, the baSotho (singular: moSotho) and the many indigenous black South Africans would have to reconstruct public memory by excavating hidden truths. Part of these truths, the crime reporter tells us, would involve the excavation of the numerous mass graves as evidence of the genocide committed against the indigenous peoples in the settlers’ hypocritical ambition to maintain racial purity.

It is through Brink’s authorial intrusiveness as a ventriloquist adorning the mask of a journalist, however, that basic questions about the representation of the black humanity, or the place of the indigenous population is narrated in Devil’s Valley. Myth is deployed, here, to offer a pseudo-scientific explanation for the deformity of Lukas Lermiet who had battled with, and conquered the Devil in an epic and memorable fight that lasted for a period none could remember. Yet, the family relishes his victory since there is a memento—“the black spot on the floor, from deep down where the Devil is still smothering away” (184). And in evoking Biblical mythologies to account for the absence of the black humanity in the narratives of the settler, the journalist prods his interlocutor, Lukas Death, to explain the sudden appearance of Biliah—a black woman—at the Valley. His response:

Why should that surprise you? The scriptures themselves do not give us every verse and chapter. For example, they don’t tell us about other people made by God at the time as Adam and Eve, but when Cain arrived in the land
of Nod he took himself a wife, so we know there must have been others around (185).

The latent interrogation of Biblical mythologies is to reveal several other historical realities and possibilities: the observation that Adam and Eve were the first human creations, and the fact that one of their sons, Cain, later returns from Nod to take a wife is indicative that there were human inhabitants in other parts of the globe about which the Bible is silent. The parallel, here, is as vocal as the many Afrikaner mythologies that picture South Africa as ‘a promised land’. Brink’s narrative flash, then, is the selective amnesia that conveniently defaces the existence of the indigenous population at the time of the Boer invasion in the mid-17th century. Flip Lochner, the crime reporter, is able to resolve this conflict in the mass graves at the local church’s cemetery, where children of the ‘wrong colour’ or ‘throwbacks’ were murdered and buried (185-6; 192; 228-230). Devil’s Valley, as a tale of marginal subjectivities, is even more assertive in the cultural battlefield of gender and power. As a narrative of the Afrikaner ‘closure’ and refusal to relate openly with the larger humanity in South Africa’s recent history, the novel is a metaphor for a social formation that is perennially sunk in the abyss of its stupidity, and yet celebrates this foolhardiness and primitivism through her inexplicable arrogance. Brink’s narrative intention in this allegory, it does seem, is to ridicule through irony and satire: a nation that clings so sentimentally to racial purity tries to sustain this sense of puritanism through a plethora— as noted earlier—of social aberrations that include incest, adultery, high profile hypocrisy, cultural repression of the womenfolk, and a blatant display of gerontocracy: the elder is assumed to be always ‘right’ in every aspect of the peoples’ lives, and the population is psychologically conditioned, through primitive superstition and fear, into believing that a humiliating death awaits any dissenter as punishment. Emma complains bitterly: “The old men have all the say in this place” (161), and to the question regarding their refusal to associate with the rest of humanity, she clarifies:

They think it’ll be the end of the Valley if people start coming and going as they want to. It’s a bit easier for the men. From time to time one of them even goes out to get married, and brings his wife back here. The women never, it’s out of the question. No outsider may lay a hand on their womenfolk. They are jealous of their possessions…. Can you imagine anyone being jealous in a place like this? (162).

Devil’s Valley proceeds from here to become a project of feminist protestations. As latent as it usually appears, there is a flood of resistance emanating from embittered women who try to find expression within a repressive white culture. Again, history is seen as having been appropriated by the chauvinist males, and there is need to locate the place of women’s immense achievements both in sustaining life in the Valley in the past and in the present.
Brink adopts an intriguing narrative style and, for a while, there is a distancing of the novelist and the reporter. Flip Lochner’s aggressive approach to investigative reporting is submerged, as he achieves little or no success in his attempts to excavate the past in *Devil’s Valley*. But the women soon gain confidence in him and decide to take the bull by the horns. Dalena, the wife of Lukas Death, proceeds to narrate aspects of the history with a feminist candour. She reveals to the journalist: “If I hadn’t come to you tonight they’d have stopped me again. They take everything. They took our whole history” (232 ff). It is through Dalena’s protestations that we are made aware of the many roles women played, and still play, in the stabilization of life in the Valley. The tribute is as compelling as the sheer size of the number of women who try to gain and assert their voice at the Valley: Mina, Sanna, Mooi-Janna—who uses her sexuality as a weapon in the battle for the control of the Valley (226 ff), Dalena, who later kills her husband—Lukas Death—for noble reasons, Maria, Emma, Annie, Talita Lightfoot, the mesmerizing dancer, Tant Poppie (Fullmoon)—the medical consultant—and Katarina Sweetmeat, among others. Protestations from the women equally find expression in their rejection of the responsibility that culture imposes on them, especially the function that defines the woman as a childbearing machine.

It is instructive to note, here, that while a woman might love her children as a natural obligation, she is not necessarily happy to be a mother, *Devil’s Valley* seems to suggest. At the death of her husband, Alwyn, Annie becomes hysterical and cannot hide her frustration with and anger at the society’s definition of the woman as a daughter, wife and mother. She complains: “It’s always others who take the decisions and give the orders in this place. What must be done, who must do it, why, when, where. Who must live, who must die. And all I’m expected to do is to scrape and bow and praise God, my Lord and Master!” (293-5). The constraints against female self-definition are severe within the confines of the Valley’s white culture, and progress for the woman is systematically stifled by their denial of educational advancement (296-7; 354-6; 359). There is an intolerable level of child molestation through the enforcement of a patriarchal policy where, we are told: “Women are not allowed to speak in church, except to address the lord in prayer” (256). The sheer display of the women in challenging aspects of these socially constricting values (357- 362) is summarized by Jurg Water’s wife’s insistence that “The only thing that suffering has taught me is the uselessness of suffering. And now I’ve had enough” (359).

In the final analysis, however, it is not necessarily Brink’s interest in marginal subjectivities that gives *Devil’s Valley* its enthralling quality. It is in his marvellous juggling of realism and supernaturalism, of history and story, of truths and deceptions in a united narrative mode of the fantastical. In this form, place and temporality find location in the bizarre, just as character and characterization oscillate between the mundane and the lycan-
thropic. For all its patriarchal arrogance, ‘Devil’s Valley’ is one stupendous mass of a very unnatural environment where there are no birds; adultery is permissible as long as the perpetrators are never caught. For bringing pregnancy from ‘outside,’ María is stoned to death; yet, Jurg Water and the rest of the revered old men often engage in incestuous liaisons with their own daughters; for refusing to comply with the sexual advances of some odd and randy characters like Hans Magic and Ben Owl, and especially for being a child of María, Emma is subjected to all kinds of psychological trauma: she is afraid that she, too, like her mother, might be stoned to death. She is said to be cursed, of having “the devil’s mark.”

The magicality of the narrative, like in Imaginings of Sand, finds assertion in the macabre and the incredible. Through the course of the narration, there is an intermingling of the dead amongst the living: Lukas (Seer) Lermiet died over a century ago, yet he constantly participates in most of the important decision-takings in the Valley, especially at the Prayer meetings—the Nagmaal; Ouma Lisbet Prune was buried, but she waits for Flip in the upper chamber of her building where the angels will take her to heaven; Little-Lukas too: Flip Lochner sees him while trying to hand over ‘the ash’ to his mother, Dalena. As Dalena leaves with the ‘ash box,’ Flip sees Little Lukas walking by her side. Even as a dead young man, Little Lukas tries to make love to Emma. She leaves Little Lukas’ room to join Flip in the larger ‘Coffin’. She confides in him: “You don’t understand Flip. Little Lukas is in there. He wanted to get into bed with me all the time. He never pestered me like that when he was still alive, but he isn’t shy any longer” (371).

The reference to the ‘coffin’ as a wedding present for the couple, and the revelation that the consummation of every marriage is to be done in a coffin re-echoes this theme as we find in Ouma Kristina’s narrative in Imaginings of Sand. Tales of this form, it would seem, appear dominant in the narrative, and every character is linked in one way or the other. This sense of magicality and mythopoeia is as explicit in the present with Hans magic invoking his powers over Brother Holy and Ben owl, as it was in the past with Katarina Sweet-Meat, “The one who married Lukas Bigballs and who changed into a white nanny goat when the moon was full” (241), and later gave birth to a baby with “two goat’s feet” (243). For a crime reporter who at 59 is already counting his disappointments and failures as a journalist, husband, and father, it is not much of a surprise that the sheer incredibility of Flip Lochner’s excavations of the archives of a demented people in an unnatural location would sustain his recourse to the use of gutter language and unnecessary vulgarity—in spite of his sworn determination to “[make] a contribution.”

At a moment of multiculturalism and globalism, then, an insistence on segregation, racial separatism, or ‘apartheid’ in its most known description is an implicit embrace of the kind of primitivism, spiritual blindness, social anomy and psychological deformity that would only take humankind to the spiritual and social abyss of the Devil’s abode. In other words, to present an
agenda of segregationalism, as the ideological and pragmatic condition for racial puritanism, is tantamount to constructing an unnatural abode—a ‘Valley’ presided over by ‘Devils’. The architects of apartheid, and the agents deployed to ensure its continuation, therefore, need more spiritual redemption than they might be prepared to concede. For, indeed, only a lunatic of an irremediable order would be comfortable with the social anomy of incestuous mannerisms just to ‘protect’ its racial belonging. While ‘history,’ or indeed ‘herstory’ is a major fascination for Brink at the moment, the allegorical projections of Devil’s Valley leave statements as germane to the present as they are to future South Africa: namely, the aesthetic proclamation that a white historiography of the past so provenly demonic in its execution, must not be replaced with a black historiography so desperate for vengeance with its new sense of domination.

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