THE SOUTH AFRICAN NOVEL IN THE 1970S: SOME CONTEXTUAL MARKERS

by

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Andre Brink (1976) and J M Coetzee both wrote quest novels focussed on the historic problem of Afrikaner identity in the 1970s. In each case (Brink, An Instant in the Wind; Coetzee, Dusklands) the temporal setting is the early Cape, that geographic area created by the perceptions of whites, and in both books the fundamental test of identity is located in the relationship between white and coloured.

Coetzee's novel is the more complex exploration of the problem. It has two parts, apparently linked only by a very tenuous narrative device. The first section, **The Vietnam Project**, is the story of the disintegration into self-discovery of one Eugene Dawn, a "mythographer" working on a psychological warfare project to be implemnted in Vietnam; and the second, **Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee**, describes two journeys into the interior of the Cape - specifically, to Great Namaqualand - by an eighteenth-century Cape Dutch frontier farmer. Brinks's An Instant in the Wind, also set in the middle of the eighteenth century, tells of a Cape Dutch woman's adventures with a runaway slave after the failure of the scientific expedition she has undertaken with her newly wed husband, a Swedish savant.

I shall focus on the second part of Coetzee's novel and the whole of Brink's and use the analysis to shed light on some of the puzzles posed by the writers about Afrikaner identity. In both books the question of identity is focussed on the main characters, and each author first removes the conventional signs before going on to compose multi-layered, complex, and in the end incomplete attempts to provide stable identities.

In Dusklands, the first and most important complexity in **The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee** is the narrative technique. J M Coetzee's immediate aim is to establish a historic provenance for his attempt to chart Afrikaner identity, and to do this he links **The Narrative** through his choice of narrative method with the classic early attempt to analyse European identity through Europe's imperial relationship with Africa - Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1899). The notoriously complex narrative structure of Heart of Darkness includes two formal narrators, one of whom does little more than to mediate the main narrative to one of the book's two formal audiences, while the central narrator himself is in danger of splitting in two; this account does not include the authorial presence. In the main narrator, Marlowe, the division between the telling and the acting self is dangerously deep, and the act of telling, itself a perilous enterprise, is also an attempt at self-rescue, a therapeutic gamble that could easily fail (a situation parallelled in Coetzee, as we shall see, and with even less sanguine results).

For the purpose of immediate comparison, I want to propose a descriptive category for narrator and narrative, ranging over a continuum from "full" to "empty". Narrative "fullness" is a function of the closeness of a narrator to one or other of the assumed or real audiences of a text, while "emptiness" is characterized by uncertainty, doubt and scepticism. Any degree of emotion, from the driest of objectivity to raging passion, can operate at any point on this continuum.

The formal narrator of Heart of Darkness, one of Marlowe's companions aboard the yacht on the Thames where he tells the tale of his quest, is the standard for narrative fullness. He assumes complete closeness, uninterrupted continuity, with his invisible audience; he gives directives to it, through comments about his companions, Marlowe's immediate audience (of whom the narrator is one), thus making

a crucial distinction between the two levels of audience; also, at essential moments he gives the reader audience vital clues about Marlowe himself (such as the famous image of the quest hero as cross-legged Buddha statue). This narrator and both his audiences are culturally homogeneous; they have a shared essence, and this is why this level of narrative is "full". Marlowe's narration, on the other hand, moves steadily in the direction of "emptiness" until it constitutes a virtual vacuum of irony and scepticism, which almost swallows his own psyche and threatens to suck the reader down as well. Thus the formal narrator is a necessary defence to the reader audience, but in this capacity also becomes an ironic subversion of the "full" values of convention and respectability that he represents.

In **The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee**, another quest story of a white man's penetration of Africa, there are no fewer than five narrators, spanning the continuum from full to empty. In order of appearance, they are: first, the writer of the Translator's Preface which opens the book and stands immediately before the main action (he is called J M Coetzee and he is the son of Dr S J Coetzee); second, the narrator of the main action, Jacobus Coetzee, Janszoon; third, the "late Dr S J Coetzee", an academic historian responsible for the Afterword (the Introduction in previous editions, until his son's editorial intervention); fourth, "the burgher Jacobus Coetse, Janszoon" who gives an account to an official of the Dutch East India Company at the Castle in Cape Town of a journey he has undertaken in the land of the Great Namaquas (the same person as the other Jacobus Coetzee, and the same journey - but irreconcilably different); and, fifth, the pervasive but absent director of the scenario, with whom we never come face to face but inside whose skin we, the audience, may be said to live - someone also called J M Coetzee. (One could also argue narratorial status for the Company official who transcribes Jacobus Coetse's Deposition, and perhaps should).

It is conventional wisdom to say that the usual purpose of the fractured narrative technique employed by Conrad and Coetzee is to intensify the validity of narrative content by appearing to subvert it. Thus Conrad's Marlowe admits to having been very ill, and the pathogenesis of his mysterious malady, it is hinted, is not physiological. The mystery illness may seem to the reader to intensify doubts about Marlowe's reliability, but this reaction is merely to fall into the author's trap. In the end, Marlowe's "emptiness" is too much for the "full" narrator, who sits, so to speak, at the reader's elbow. Fullness is challenged by the vacuum of scepticism, and succumbs; the reader is sucked in, and shares Marlowe's malaise.

Similarly, in Coetzee's **The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee** the aim is (only a seeming paradox) full reliability, to be achieved through the subversion of accepted standards of reliability, which is achieved by splitting the narrative into five (or even perhaps six). How does Coetzee wield his technique in order to achieve his desired result?

He suggests the unreliability of any one part of the text unless it is read together with all available narrative viewpoints. For example, the reader may choose to "believe" or not to "believe" Jacobus Coetzee's version of events as he relates it in **The Narrative.** But his (the reader's) attitude is invariably modified by his encounter with the Afterword (Dr S J Coetzee), and again dramatically affected by reading the "official" narrative (the Deposition) of Jacobus Coetse. And he must know that his reception of the central tale would have been different had the Afterword stood first (as he is told it originally did) in the form of an Introduction.

In other words, Jacobus Coetzee's story alone is radically unreliable, though it may strike the reader as being entirely credible. When the reader includes all the other available narrative evidence, a new text emerges, and is entirely reliable because of its inclusiveness. The problem then lies in the extreme complexity of this "reliable" text.

Let us combine the notion of narrative "fullness" or "emptiness" with the problem of reliability, and see how the one bears on the other.

> Most frontiersmen have had experience of Bushman girls. They can be said to spoil one for one's own kind. (Dusklands, p 61)

The narrative point of view is that of the frontiersman; the tone of the rhetoric - its straightforwardness, matter-of-factness, lack of elevation or particular emphasis - all combine to produce the impression that narrator-Jacobus is very close both to the matter he is explaining and to his audience. There is no gap between teller and tale, no irony, no sense of hidden perspective, no uncertainty over meaning, no ambiguity. The narrator is "full" both in relation to the content of his story and in terms of his audience, with whom he appears to be perfectly at ease - in a word, continuous. Of course, Jacobus Coetzee elaborates on the above simple statement, and the effect is one of surplus fullness - the material from which myths are made.

> She has seen you kill the men who represented power to her, she has seen them shot down like dogs. You have become Power itself now and she is nothing, a rag you wipe yourself on and throw away. (Ibid., p 61)

I would suggest that even in the moments of the most intense existential panic Jacobus retains his fullness as narrator. But the author uses it as an instrument of internal subversion, so that there is a carefully graded range of narrative "fullness-emptiness" which functions as a major indicator of reliability. The two most notable narrative acts in the book, apart from Jacobus Coetzee's Narrative, are those performed by the Translator (J M Coetzee, son of Dr S J Coetzee) and S J Coetzee "himself".

In the Afterword, Dr S J Coetzee writes:

> To understand the life of this obscure farmer requires a positive act of the imagination. (p 109)

The sentence, in its structure (inverse, indirect), its vocabulary (demanding, abstract) and its tone (appealing, anxious) conveys imprecision and uncertainty. Its relationship with its audience is based on the likelihood of misunderstanding, loss of interest, breakdown. It raises doubts without offering rewards. It acknowledges lack of continuity between narrator and audience in its exhortation to the audience to "act". Thus the narrative of Dr S J Coetzee, the scientific historian whose apparent task is to provide a reliable reading to the text of the past, turns out to be empty, relative to the segment of the text it is intended to explain, in a slightly different sense, to "fill".

In the Translator's Preface, the narrator, the translator "J M Coetzee", is virtually absent. The tone is utterly self-effacing, though the one positive assertion, qualified as it is by a vocabulary of politeness, actually has a major influence on the ultimate status of the text in terms of reliability:

> ... which I have taken the liberty of placing after the text in the form an an Afterword. (p 55)

The mixture of diffidence and power marks the relationship between the translator, J M Coetzee, and his audience with suspicion and resentment. He does not even invite a spurious efforts towards continuity, as S J Coetzee does through in invocation of Afrikaner myth and sarcastic attacks on British counter-myth. So we see that lack of "fullness" cannot be confused with lack of power.

By presenting his series of Coetzee-narrators, each with his particular degree of "fullness" and influence on the reliability of the text, the author creates an identity possessing considerable duration and variation in time. Behind the varied Coetzee identities - ruffian adventurer, tormented explorer, chauvinistic historian, passionless, pedantic translator-editor - lies a unified but very complex statement of Afrikaner identity.

If we accept that the major part of that statement is located in Jacobus Coetzee's Narrative, we see at once that that narrative is surrounded by two very different devices - the Translator's Preface and the Afterword: the former almost "empty", cut off from any emotional contact with its audience, yet authoritative - "cool", to use a different idiom; and the latter passionate, anxious, over-engaged with its audience - the opposite of cool, perhaps! The Translator offers no opinion about the Narrative, though his unemotional tone clearly masks strong feeling about his father's Introduction, which he dislodges from its original primacy in the text and changes in other ways (significantly, by "restoring" passages - an implicit accusation against his father of mutilation). His father "the late Dr S J Coetzee", on the other hand, beats the drums of ideology with vigour, exhorting the reader on how to read the Narrative, making the act of reading it "appropriately" a sign of wholeness, of possessing Afrikanerness. So the reader is pulled in two directions by the parentheses surrounding the main body of the text - the "story". Then, as if that were not enough, he encounters what translator-Coetzee calls "Coetzee's official 1790 deposition". The reader has already been warned off one interpretation of the deposition:

> The account hitherto received as definitive is the work of another man, a Castle hack who heard out Coetzee's story with the impatience of a bureaucrat and jotted down a hasty precis for the Governor's desk. It records only such information as might be thought to have value to the Company, which is to say information about mineral ore deposits and about the potential of the tribes of the interior as sources of supply. We can be sure that it was only commercial second nature in the Company's scribe that led him to note down for our eyes the story on which Coetzee's slight fame subsists, the story of people 'of tawny or yellow appearance with long heads of hair and linen clothes' living in the north.

The economic factor is dismissed as unimportant and distasteful - Boer penetration of the north had a nobler meaning. And Dr S J Coetzee goes on to mythologize Jacobus Coetzee and his adventures into an archetypal figure of Afrikaner identity.

> We picture him in his rough year-round working clothes and lionskin shoes, with his round-brimmed hat on his head and his whip sleeping in the crook of his arm, standing with watchful eye beside his wagon or on his stoep ready to welcome the traveller with hospitality which, in the estimation of Dominicus, was rivalled only by that of the ancient Germani. Or we picture him in a tableau on which Barrow spat much contempt but which to innocent eyes has its own pastoral beauty: seated of an evening with his family about a water-basin having the sweat of a day's toil washed from his feet preparatory to evening prayers and connubium. Or dropping from his saddle, first the right foot then the left, beside the carcase of a freshly killed gemsbok, the cobalt smoke from the muzzle of his gun perhaps by now wholly mingled with the lighter blue of the sky. In all these scenes he strikes us as a silent man. We have no contemporary portrait. Doubtless he was bearded.
>
> The Company was interested in easy profit. ...
>
> The Company was interested in easy profit, but only as long as it did not bring added responsibilities. (pp 109-110)

The passage deserves full quotation because of its ironically subversive baring of the process of icon-making. The writer sits near the heart of the myth-structure and his writing expands into a signification of the sacred and the permanent. Naturally, he is unconscious of this process. The elements of the icon include energy, power harnessed to intellect ("his whip sleeping in the crook of his arm"), alertness, closeness to nature combined with mastery over it, piety combined with domesticity, control of technology without using it to violate the natural order (the gunsmoke "wholly mingled with the lighter blue of the sky"). The iconographer also provides a historic dimension: the picture's provenance includes the hospitality of the Germani (noble Aryan forebears) and is to be understood within the aesthetic convention of European romantic pastoral. And as the Germans are praised, the British (Barrow) are rejected as corrupt.

The juxtaposition of the icon with two consecutive paragraphs beginning with the words "The Company was interested in easy profit" enforces an ideological dichotomy between the innocent pastoral of the frontier farmer, an organic part of his chosen environment, and the corrupt, greedy bureaucracy of the Cape. It also stresses the apparent downgrading of economics in the process of nationalist myth-making, in the necessary structuring of a group's self-perception (i.e. Boer frontier farmer = innocence, closer to Eden or man in his original state vs urban bureaucrat = trader, corrupt, greedy, fallen. There is another dimension that parallels this one: the town, and hence townspeople, impose and accept restrictions to their freedom; the frontier boer treks because he will neither accept restrictions nor impose them on others).

But the icon is cracked and all the potent process of myth-making is abruptly displaced by the Deposition. The displacement radically reshapes the reader's experience, mainly through the force of surprise. The rhetoric also makes an appeal through the logic of realism. Forced to contemplate this rude intrusion into the ornate structure he has been duped into inhabiting, the reader realises that the likelihood of a "real" Coetzee being both illiterate and of a down-to-earth, practical turn of mind is very considerable. This cracks not only Dr S J Coetzee's nationalist icon. It also subverts the "main plot", Jacobus Coetzee's full-length narrative. And, finally, the deposition has the last word - rhetorically, a matter of decisive importance. Perhaps Coetzee's meaning is based on economic forces, after all? Is Afrikaner nationalism with its Calvinist dynamo of a chosen people, a special relationship to a particular land and to God, just the product of the banal combination of European imperial competition for trade routes plus a little local land hunger and entrepreneuralism underpinned by a superior technology?

The reader is immediately aware that he must relate to two versions of the text. This is made uncompromisingly clear on the book's first page, in the Translator's Preface. The first, or "dream", version starts with the Afterword (as Introduction) and goes on with Jacobus Coetzee's story, minus "two or three brief passages"; its Nama words are transliterated rather arbitrarily. The second, or "real", version begins with the Translator's Preface, goes on to Jacobus Coetzee's Narrative (complete with the previously omitted passages), then the (original) Introduction now transformed into Afterword, and ends with an Appendix, "Coetzee's official 1760 deposition". This opposition between "dream" and "real" text perhaps parallels a similar clash between "dream" and "real" versions of Afrikaner identity. The conflict between the two, since it is, among other things, generational, also illustrates that there is no finality - identity is a changing reality.

How does the official deposition affect the longer version, Jacobus Coetzee's Narrative? Or, to put the question in another way, how does the relationship between the two, expressed immediately as a violent collision, affect the final statement about Afrikaner identity? The Narrative appears to maintain its rhetorical charcteristic of "fullness" throughout, even where the narrator undergoes privation or seems near to despair.

> On this day I would return as a storm-cloud casting the shadow of my justice over a small patch of the earth. But this abject, treacherous rabble was telling me that here and everywhere else on this

> continent there would be no resistance to my power and no limit to its projection. My despair was despair at the undifferentiated plenum, which is after all nothing but the void dressed up as being.
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> ... There was nothing that could be impressed on these bodies, nothing that could be torn from them or forced through their orifices, that would be commensurate with the desolate infinity of my power over them. ... I was undergoing nothing less than a failure of imagination before the void. I was sick at heart. (pp 101-02)

What happens here is that Jacobus Coetzee's perceptions become the sole defining criterion of reality. His despair is a despair of solipsism. "Full" is all very well until it comes to occupy the entire plenum He has no objective standard to define the real or to mark off where he ends and the rest of the world begins. The political correlative of his despair is the ideological force energizing imperialism. The images of extreme force and violence on the persons of the Hottentots become a metaphor for the total take-over of reality that is the aim of imperialism. But the end of imperialism is the abolition of all boundaries between self and other ("no resistance to my power and no limit to its projection"). The conclusion is despair, but it is a despair born of conviction, a despair of fullness. The Afrikaner self-perception includes this fullness of subjectivity. What Coetzee seems to suggest is that the Afrikaner knows himself to be "full", to be charged with Divinity or special purpose, just as he knows the "others" to be empty. This sets up an intolerable imbalance between perceiver and perceived, between self and world. The perceiver's reaction is violent, as he tries forcibly to stuff the world with some of his grace. The objective world reacts disappointingly: it stays objective. This leads to more despair, more violence. And so on. When the perceiver turns his gaze upon himself, he "sees" first the apparatus of myth with which he has surrounded himself. This is initially comforting since it means the expectation and the experience are identical, but it soon becomes very confusing because he finds it difficult to disentangle self from myth, and this brings into doubt the very existence of self. This explains the strained rhetoric and the exhortation to imaginative action in Dr S J Coetzee's Introduction/Afterword. In the end the perceiver, though he may seem to have come to terms with the absence he has found at the self's core, and reduced to apathy (or pedantry of the Translator) by it, will, despite this, go on making violent rearrangements to his environment (as we see the Translator does, in his Preface).

One might argue that the absence of the subjective from the Deposition marks it off decisively from the all-encompassing subjectivity of the Narrative. But the contrast is less important than the continuity. The Deposition is, of course, filtered through to the reader by yet another narrator-figure, O M Bergh, a Company bureaucrat, and the prosaic officialese in which it is couched signals this. But the continuity between it and the Narrative lies in the substance of what is reported. What does Coetzee find in the Land of the Great Namaquas? A "kind of flat and lush region" (p 123), natives who are duly impressed by the technology of firearms (124), "cattle and sheep of excellent quality because of the lush grassland and various flowing streams" (124); a mythical white tribe; "heavy trees, the heart or innermost wood being of an uncommon deep red hue and the branches clothed in large cover-leaves and yellow flowers" (p 125); "divers as yet unknown copper mountains" and "a mountain covered all over in a glittering yellow ore" (p 125). The continuity between the two documents is the natural continuity that flows in all perceptual acts from inner to outer. The outer, in the Deposition, is not only concrete. It is also exceedingly rich and tempting. But it is also the template on to which Jacobus Coetzee and his descendants will stamp the sign of their overweening fullness. His failure to make the critical distinction between inner and outer dooms him to an increasingly destructive relationship with his natural surroundings. This seems to be J M Coetzee the writer's statewment about Afrikaner identity.

Coetzee begins with one of the central myths of imperialism: man as explorer. This projection is part of a system of defences in white South Africa's perceptual apparatus; its function is to empty the self-image of the real and fill it with the desirable. In other words, it enables the perceiver (the explorer himself, continuous with his whole society) to see himself in attractive, even heroically disinterested, terms, and to ignore sordid motives for his actions, such as extending the area of his own back yard or engaging in "beads-for-freedom" barter. In An Instant in the Wind (1976), Andre Brink uses the same myth to frame his tale of a white Dutch woman from Cape Town and a runaway, part Malagasy, part Javanese, half Hottentot slave who travel together through the untracked interior. As in Coetzee's novel, Brink's narrative system depends on a pseudo-scholarly apparatus, on a document discovered "quite by accident" in "the headquarters of the London Missionary Society" (p 12) which contains the woman's full and "subjective" account of her experiences and transforms the known material.

Instead of writing conventional historical novels, then, both Brink and Coetzee imitate historians as an essential feature of their narrative systems in these two books. Coetzee's superscription to the second part of Dusklands (The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee), taken from Flaubert, runs: "What is important is the philosophy of history." And at the end of the first chapter of An Instant in the Wind Brink provides his own superscription to the main action with a peroration on the significance of history:

> Who are they? The Memoir and the Journals are presently being prepared for publication in annotated editions, the latter subject to final permission from the LMS. Then history will claim them for itself. But history as such is irrelevant. What is important is that phrase, This no one can take away from us ... Or those words, Such a long journey ...
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> It is to this end that the crust of history must be scraped off. Not simply to retell it but to utterly expose it and to set it in motion again. To travel through that lone landscape and back, back to the high mountain above the town of a thousand houses exposed to the sea and the wind. Back through that wild and empty land - Who are you? Who am I? without knowing what to expect, when all the instruments have been destroyed by the wind and all the journals abandoned to the wind, when nothing else remains but to continue. It is not a question of imagination, but of faith. (An Instant in the Wind, pp 14-15)

Both novels deal with the central mythic element in Afrikaner self-perception: the trek story. The writers are both concerned to confront the myth, which they correctly locate within Afrikaner historiography itself, and to allow the results to become part of the evolutionary process of Afrikaner self-perception. The choice of a pseudo-historiographical narrative framework is made as part of the strategic assault on historiography as a fortress of nationalist myth, and partly because Afrikaner culture values learning and the academy, expecting institutions associated with learning to play an appropriate role in the national epic. Thus Coetzee's use of the historian as narrator is subversive in that it taps the mythic power of the man of learning as guardian of the tribe to undercut the tribe's own sacred evaluation of its historic personality. Brink's aim is similar, but his execution is more passionate on the surface, and less controlled.

The quest in literature is essentially a pseudo-historic form, and in the Christian tradition is an expression of optimism over redemption in the face of the world's hardships. As the quest merges with the liberal tradition in nineteenth-century bourgeois literature, it expresses the secular meliorism characteristic of that tradition. But Coetzee and Brink diverge here: Coetzee's Jacobus says:

> How do I know that Johannes Plaatje, or even Adonis, not to speak of the Hottentot dead, was not an immense world of delight closed off to my senses? May I not have killed something of inestimable value?
>
> I am an explorer. My essence is to open what is closed, to bring light to what is dark. If the Hottentots comprise an immense world of delight, it is an impenetrable world, impenetrable to men like me, who must either skirt it, which is to evade our mission, or clear it out of the way. As for my servants, rootless people lost forever to their own culture and dressed now in nothing but the rags of their masters, I know with certainty that their life held nothing but anxiety, resentment and debauch. They died in a storm of terror, understanding nothing. They were people of limited intellect and limited being. They died the day I cast them out of my head. (Dusklands, p 106)

Coetzee's explicit denial of one of the classic loci of the radical-liberal tradition in literature, William Blake's fundamental rejection of what he perceived as the Newtonian scientific spirit of the Enlightenment, is a clear marker of Coetzee's lack of faith in liberal standards.

> When I came home: on the abyss of the five senses, where a flat sided steep frowns over the present world, I saw a mighty Devil folded in black clouds, hovering on the side of the rock: with corroding fires he wrote the following sentence now perceived (sic) by the minds of men, & read by them on earth: How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?

To Blake, Newton stood for the measuring spirit: the entire universe, inner and outer, including the human spirit, was subject to finite systems of measure. Coetzee's rejection of Blake's rejection of Newton signals Coetzee's own despair in Western liberalism, and knots the two halves of Dusklands tightly together, with super-pragmatist Coetzee, the head of **The Vietnam Project**, and his subordinate, Eugene Dawn, working out of a monument to a dead liberalism: the basement of the Harry S Truman library at the Kennedy Institute. The fortress of learning has degenerated to a mere bunker in a war of imperialism. The ultimate expression of the Newtonian ideal comes out of this bunker:

> We cannot know until we can measure. But in the political air-war there is no easy measure like the body-count. Therefore we use probability measures (I apologise for repeating what is in the books, but I cannot afford not to be complete). When we strike at a target, we define the probability of a success as
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> $$P1 = aX^{-3/4} = (bX-c)Y$$
>
> where X measures release altitude, Y measures ground fire intensity, and a, b, c are constants ...
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> I sit in the depths of the Harry Truman library, walled round with earth, steel, concrete and mile after mile of compressed paper from which impregnable stronghold of the intellect I send forth this winged dream of assault upon the mothering earth herself. (Dusklands, p 28)

Coetzee's hero, ensconced in his Newtonian bunker, appalled by the consequences of liberalism, declares dedicated war on the infinite and reduces human transactions to a formula of destruction.

What appals seems to be the expansion of possibility and awareness demanded by liberal ideology: it leads to the surplus fullness of Jacobus Coetzee, and man comes to imagine himself one with the universe. This puzzling and ultimately terrifying experience threatens his very sense of being, and to recover that he must destroy the infinite.

> What did the deaths of all these people achieve?
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> Through their deaths I, who after they had expelled me had wandered the desert like a pallid symbol, again asserted my reality. (Dusklands, p 106)

Liberalism becomes imperialism at the point where its processes lead to a breakdown in the ability to distinguish between self and other. Imperialism, Coetzee says, is the historic degeneration of liberalism, itself engendered out of the contradictory doctrines of the Enlightenment: that man is infinite, but the universe subject to newly discovered rules of measure. In this degenerative process the loss of distinction between self and other produces a situation in which all relationships are exploitative and dictated by power - Jacobus Coetzee's relationship with "his" Hottentots, the Americans with the Vietnamese. For Jacobus Coetzee, the Hottentots exist only as projections of himself - of all the impulses to humanity he fears in himself. This, says J M Coetzee, is also true of the US in its relationship with Vietnam. Jacobus and the US are terrified of the infinite (especially when located within themselves), so they both deny it and kill it because it resists subjection to measurement.

Brink's position is more conventional: he writes within the liberal tradition, and eschews the post-modernist; he starts with the classic liberal questions **Who are you? Who am I?** (An Instant in the Wind, p 15). In other words, his characters may still establish the I-other distinction, though the way to it is hard and the successful conclusion not predetermined.

The main narrative content is a strongly conventional love story: a woman is rescued from a desperate situation by a man who is socially her inferior; her initial rejection of him, arrogant in the extreme, is gradually tempered by his pride, self-sufficiency, competence and honourable refusal to take advantage of her defencelessness; her growing acknowledgement of her complete dependence upon him softens her behaviour towards him, and she falls in love with him. For his part, the hero, stung by her initial contempt, treats her with chivalry and consideration, protecting her through many hardships as the two make their way towards civilization. He comes to reciprocate her love and they consummate their relationship, the path of which is studded with many extremely conventional signs: the Discovery, the Attack by Wild Beasts, the Storm, the Flood, the Idyllic Interlude, Separation, Reunion, and so forth. In short, the signification of this plot is identical with many a serial in popular women's magazines. This signification is partly, though not entirely, subverted by the temporal and spatial setting: 1749 to 1751, in the interior of the Cape of Good Hope. The facts that the hero is an escaped slave and the heroine wife (widow) of a Swedish explorer and daughter of a solidly bourgeois Cape Dutch burgher merely intensify the convention of the social gap between the lovers. The general convention of this kind of story allows amply for unhappy endings. So in this respect, too, the setting fails to subvert entirely the convention. Within its social context, the story breaks certain taboos (though not unprecedentedly). One of these is the depiction of consummated love between a white woman and a coloured man (a configuration always especially problematic to the racist imagination) - though in this respect William Plomer went further in Turbott Wolfe (1926). Another is the fact that the white woman willingly bears the coloured slave's child - though this is scarcely startling in the context of the wide acceptance of mythic or real mixed ancestries in white Afrikanerdom.

In fact, the subversive nature of Brink's plot lies in its very conventionality - in a word, in its universality. Through its very banality, and the almost total non-exceptionality of his characters, he implants the apparently highly specific South African complex of myths and taboos into the matrix of a universal myth - the "love story". In doing so, he attacks the "special grace" doctrinal view Afrikaner culture has of itself. His narrative strategy is identical with Coetzee's in **The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee**. He relies on an anonymous narrator who describes in a more or less academic tone the documentary evidence for the story about to be told. But there are significant departures from this mode towards the end of the brief opening chapter:

> There is an unfortunate lack of explicit detail, and some of the experiences which, judging from the urgency of the tone, were most specific to her, remain distressingly cryptic. But there are occasional remarks in which one suddenly glimpses an existence beyond history.
>
> Such a long journey ahead for you and me. Oh God, oh God.
>
> (An Instant in the Wind, p 14)

The passage shifts suddenly from the pompously academic to the urgent: it fills suddenly with feeling and leads via this emotional and tonal disjunction to a minor prefigurative climax. The phrase "existence beyond history" distances the narrator from a conception of the overriding power of the national historic experience to impose its form and meaning on to the lives and feelings of individuals. This distancing becomes decisive in the next passage, which following immediately after:

> Who are they? The Memoir and the Journals are presently being prepared for publication in annotated editions, the latter subject to final permission from the LMS. Then history will claim them for itself. But history as such is irrelevant. What is important is that phrase, This no one can take away from us ... Or those other words, Such a long journey ...
>
> It is to this end that the crust of history must be scraped off. (pp 14-15)

Brink, apparently unlike Coetzee, then goes on to present his highly conventional tale which sits comfortably within the area of the orthodox, pre-modernist, realistic novel (despite its mildly unusual narrative structure). This also means that the pervasive ideology is that of bourgeois liberalism, and that the reader must negotiate with literary-ideological conventions such as moral growth, the development of insight, the ethical primacy of personal relations and the centrality of the love bond.

Here, in the midst of his highly conventional and rather old fashioned discourse, is the radical thrust of Brink's enterprise. By shifting history aside brutally in favour of the discourse of liberal fiction, Brink rejects the evaluative mechanisms of Afrikaner ideology, which is firmly based in historicism. He subjects Afrikaner identity to the classic tests of liberalism, thereby "universalizing" (from a liberal point of view) the Afrikaner experience. In placing this experience in a new context, Brink hopes to force new meaning out of it: to bring about a revision in Afrikaner self-perception.

Let us list the similarities between Brink's and Coetzee's enterprises in these two novels. Each chooses the quest as formal framework; each uses a fractured narrative system; each writes an "historical" novel, complete with devices suggesting scholarly accuracy; in each, the existence of a crucial part of the narrative depends on a "special" document, endowed with mythic qualities or somehow magically discovered.

There are fundamental similarities of purpose: each considers the problem of Afrikaner identity, and they both tackle the problem by examining the mythic components of the way Afrikaners perceive themselves. Each in his different way attacks one or other of these component myths. And both insist on universalizing the Afrikaner experience, though in different ways.

Four further similarities exist, all important enough to bear scrutiny. One is the two texts' closeness in date of publication (Coetzee, 1974; Brink, 1976). The second is the fact that they were written in English, though their common subject is Afrikaner identity. The third is that both writers attack historiography, both explicitly and by using narrative devices calculated to suggest the unreliability of academic historiographical procedures. And the fourth is that, while both Brink and Coetzee try to re-evaluate Afrikaner identity by juxtaposing Afrikaners with members of other, non-white groups, neither incorporates a black African character into his plot.

First, the question of proximity in time: the perspective is too short for definite judgements, but it is significant that both books were written before the 1976 Soweto uprising, at a time when black resistance was only beginning to recover (the strikes of 1972-73) from the crushing blows of the 1960s, and Afrikaner hegemony looked secure.

Second: the fact that these two important novels about Afrikaner identity were written in the enemy language may be explained in a number of ways, but the real issue is the result. The question of Afrikaner identity and political destiny had hitherto been largely confined within the walls of Afrikaner culture. It was a closely guarded family dispute, conducted amid the secretive conclaves of a closed group well known for its proclivity (and vulnerability) to the power of secrecy and secret societies. What Brink and Coetzee did in these novels was not only rescue the whole question of Afrikaner identity from its exclusivity. They also placed it within the universal discourse of the literary tradition of a world language. This act in itself transforms the nature of the issue and creates new perspectives towards understanding South African society.

Third: the joint attack on academic history may be read in a number of ways. First, there is the perception that the practice of historiography is a mythic activity (though one may argue about the levels of consciousness involved): in societies where myths about the value of objectivity prevail, historiography will be put to work very hard to enhance the power of those myths. In many overtly ideologized situations, historiography is found in the forefront of the promotion of the dominant ideology. Afrikaner historiography was fully harnessed to the defensive machinery of the Afrikaner state. As such, its role in relation to the identities of all groups within that state could only be one of concealment rather than revelation (and in so far as Afrikaner society subscribed to the Western bourgeois myth of "objectivity", one of its tasks was to create a false objectivity for Afrikanerdom). The distrust of historiography was so strong in both Brink and Coetzee that neither was able to write a straightforward historical novel. Each felt obliged, instead, first to incorporate within his text and then to reject what he perceived as the current practice of historiography, as tending demonstrably away from truth.

Each actually proposes an alternative historic framework for understanding the Afrikaner phenomenon, though these differ sharply. Coetzee is overtly pessimistic. His Eugene Dawn is a "mythographer", implicitly defined by the text as one who uses history to inflict pain. By identifying the Afrikaner's relation to his surroundings with that of the US in Vietnam, he denies historic discourse the possibility of its usual binary "true-false" play. (In fact, he expropriates this for his exclusive use.) Like many post-modernist artists and thinkers, he is profoundly pessimistic about the status of the self, and (in a contradictorily historicist way) he attacks the Enlightenment, making Newtonian measurement the root of man's present evil state (and Afrikanerdom's confusion). All this leaves Brink far behind: though his attack on the discipline of history is more overt than Coetzee's, it is also far less weighty, and his alternative proposal, embedded in the text of a conventional bourgoeis liberal fiction, is to try to squeeze Afrikaner identity into the ethical framework of liberal humanism.

Finally: the problem of the status of black characters in "white" fiction in South Africa is, of course, at the core of my discourse. How do white South Africans perceive blacks? What do the details of these acts of perception tell us about the perceivers? I have shown elsewhere how the iconography of the black in "white" fiction is a function of the white myth structure and (as a dialectical opposition) of intermittent attempts by white writers to bring components of that myth structure to consciousness, or to challenge the structure itself.

The absence of black characters in these two novels rings out loudly, compelling attention. Of course, it may be objected that the novels are set in the Cape, that Afrikaners and black Africans had had little contact up to the time of the stories' settings, and so forth. But Coetzee and Brink are both dealing with contemporary South African reality. Afrikaner identity includes a crucial element of awareness of blackness and a great deal that follows from that awareness - fear, sexual attraction, repulsion, competitiveness, and many other emotions. The writers' choice not to involve themselves with this level perhaps suggests an area of failure for each in the personal quest denoted by the novels. Perhaps the Afrikaner remains baffled by the "otherness" of the black - plainly a creature he has had no part in creating. In terms of Jacobus Coetzee's narration, it is possible to see the black as the defining experience lacking, the absence that brings the narrator to the brink of breakdown. This absence implies a dangerous corresponding absence in the Afrikaner's perception of himself. The next step for J M Coetzee in his quest for an inclusive statement of meanings about South Africa is to invite the black guest to the feast. Brink, of course, has managed this in his later work, though, significantly, the crucial encounter (in The Wall of the Plague, published in 1985) takes place in France, of all places.

Both books present the Afrikaner as an incomplete person, raging or suffering for completion. This seems impossible to achieve unless and until he manages to incorporate the black into his sense of self.

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