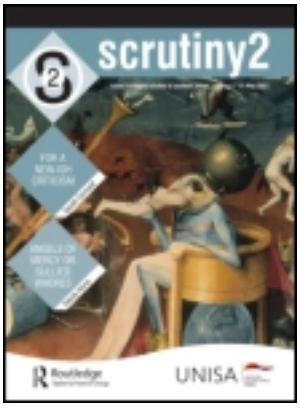

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First lives, first words: Camões, magical realism and the limits of invention

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First lives, first words: Camões, magical realism and the limits of invention

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Abstract

Beginning with André Brink's *The first life of Adamastor* (1988, trans. 1993) – a playful, postmodern "writing back" to the Portuguese epic *Os Lusíadas* – this article considers local experiments in that international strain of postcolonial literature known controversially but conveniently as "magical realism". Surveying Brink's post-apartheid literary output, it traces the shifts from weighty national allegories to more irreverent and fantastic re-imaginings of the past, going on to ask how successfully the flamboyant narrative procedures which he helped to import can survive in a South African context. It is an account borne of admiration for the sheer ambition of his attempt at *Reinventing a continent* (as a 1996 essay collection has it), but also from an unease that this purveyor of a prose, which strays into the realms of the postcolonial exotic, is regarded as such a major writer on the international stage (one who must be classed, according to the Vintage edition dust jackets, with García Márquez and Solzhenitsyn). More broadly, this opens an enquiry into the insistence on newness and naming the land in these various types of "world literature": what Derek Walcott has called the "elemental privilege of naming the New World" (1998: 41). It is a linguistic ambition and energy which informs both Camões' exploratory cantos and the twentieth-century classics of magical realism, yet which, I would argue, is uniquely tested in the case of southern Africa. Brink's rewritten Adamastor is one of several Cape Adams encountered as one begins to ask how such confidence to name the natural world might be earned and guaranteed, or else too easily assumed, and so forfeited, by the literary work.

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with the names of harbours, the names of capes, the names of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text …
Space as inventory, space as invention.

Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces* [1974], trans. John Sturrock, (1997), 13.

Witness then, experts in nomenclature
What wonders exist in unlettered Nature!

Luiz Vaz de Camões, *Os Lusíadas*, Canto V 22, [1572], trans. Landeg White, (2001), 102.

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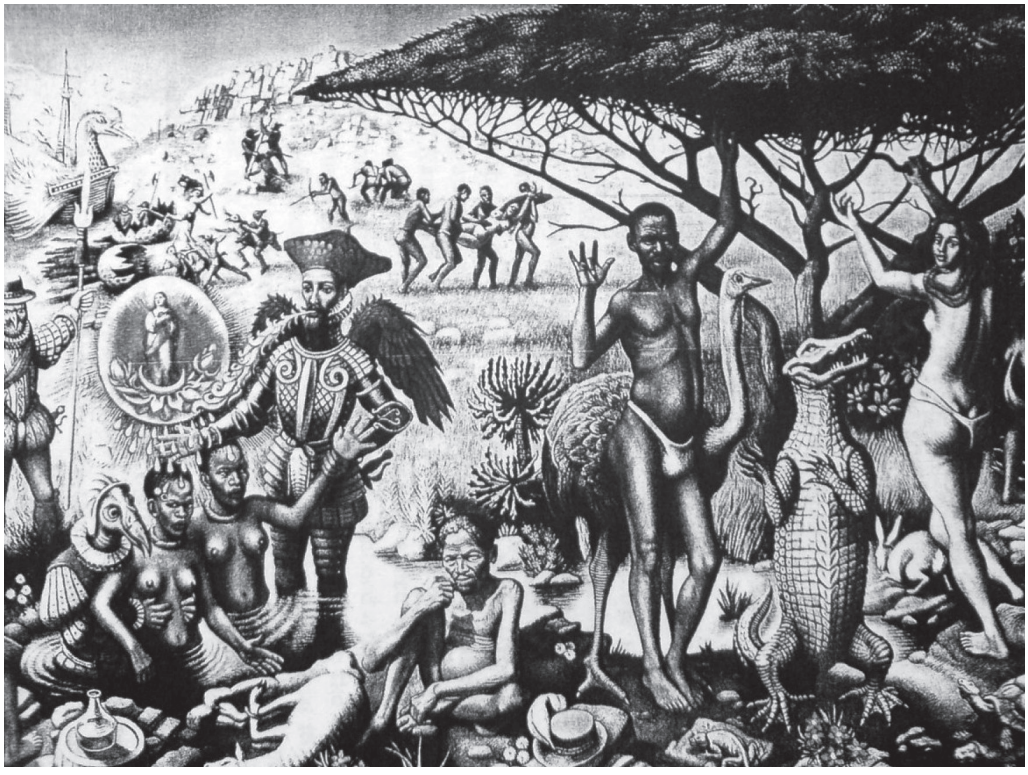

Cyril Coetzee, *T'kama-Adamastor* [detail].
Oil on canvas, 1999, 8,64 x 3,26 m.
William Cullen Library, University of the
Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

In his massive 1992 work *Frontiers*, Noël Mostert pauses to envisage the arrival of Portuguese caravels from the landward side: "What those Gouriqua or Outeniqua herdsmen thought of the strange billowing structures that suddenly floated into sight towards the beach as Bartolomeu Días came inshore to anchor and land can hardly be imagined" (36). Undaunted, the opening lines of André Brink's 1988 novella, *Die eerste lewe van Adamastor* (*The first life of Adamastor* 1993), attempt just this:

> Now that really was a sight to behold. From the sea, from the nesting-place of the sun, we could see two objects swimming towards us, looking for all the world like two enormous sea-birds with white feathers fluttering in a breeze that had newly sprung up … After a long time our eyes prised a third sea-bird loose from the horizon … Then a strange thing happened … the two birds in front began to lay eggs of a curious roundish shape, and brown in colour … What amazed us was that these eggs did not emerge, as one would expect, from the tail-end of the birds, but rather from under their wings; and soon the eggs came drifting towards us on the tide. They had hardly reached the shore when people started hatching from them, not one at a time, but whole bunches. (11)

The ostrich-like stiff-leggedness of the Europeans continues the bird metaphor; so too their puffed sleeves and colourful plumage, as Brink's prose attempts to reconstitute a sense of utter newness in this encounter. When we are told these figures "knew nothing resembling a

language", that the sounds they uttered were "quite meaningless, like the chattering of birds", a common Western complaint about the Khoikhoi is neatly inverted. The leader of the party may be Días or Da Gama, but the speaker cannot be entirely sure. He has seen paintings of the latter, "and that square man in his drapes and embroidery … does look familiar; but can one trust a painting, especially one made so long after the event?" (12–13)

The teller of this impossibly self-aware tale is a Khoi chief, T'Kama, who is also a more down-to-earth embodiment of the mythical giant Adamastor, intent on giving his version of the famous events and replacing the image of a brooding Cape Peninsula with a very different kind of creation myth. In a preface, Brink explains the fictional conceit of his short book: re-reading *The Lusiads*, he wondered from what raw material or *ur-text* the poet could have fashioned his typically sixteenth-century version of the story:

> Suppose there *were* an Adamastor, a model for the giant of Camões' fanciful history; and suppose that original creature, spirit, or whatever he may have been, had survived through the centuries in a series of disparate successive avatars in order to continue watching over the Cape of Storms: how would *he* look back, from the perspective of the late twentieth century, on that original experience? (1993a: 7)

In the Portuguese original, Adamastor explains how he was locked in stone as punishment for his pursuit of the daughter of the sea-gods Doris and Nereus, the pale nymph Thetis, who continues to tantalize him by swimming in the waves off the Cape. "What love of nymph could e'er suffice / To cope with that of giant of this size?" asks Camões, and here, in Brink's estimation, "our pretentious poet" is "blowing up, in a manner of speaking, out of all proportion a stumbling-block which might well have been overcome with some patience and considerable pleasure" (3). His T'kama-Adamastor is demythologized to the point where his legendary size refers to only a single part of his anatomy, and one which poses a problem as he attempts to consummate a relationship with a woman stranded after a skirmish between the Khoi and the European birds of passage.

It is a veering from an African sublime to the ridiculous that can be traced throughout Brink's long literary career. The weighty tomes about Afrikaner rebels and resisters caught up in apartheid emergencies have gradually been rivalled by a parallel strand of fantasy and fabulism where a more distant past is conceived as a tissue of overlapping fictions, unreliable narrators and colourful metaphors – *A chain of voices*, in the title of his 1982 work about a slave revolt in the Koue Bokkeveld which represented one of the first major attempts to bring the language (and violence) of the Cape archives into the domain of popular fiction. In the *First life,* the imprisoned Titan of *The Lusiads* has metamorphosed from its original epic proportions via the vexed romanticism of colonial English poets to become the stuff of postcolonial, postmodern farce, and one that finds great scope in the welter of myth and offshore speculation through which the southern coasts of Africa were written up by Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Reading across the wildly popular body of twentieth-century fiction known controversially but conveniently as "magical realism", it seems that the affinity between writings from the time of the early modern contact zones and those of the postcolonial aftermath is a profound one. Both, perhaps, transpire at historical cusps when discredited, old-fashioned representations of the Other are being abandoned; when ways of writing the historical disjunctions engendered by new technology are still coming into being through texts which have little truck with the kind of realism that creates what it claims only to

describe. "The articulated superposition of whole layers of the past within the present", Frederic Jameson suggests, "is the formal precondition for the emergence of this new narrative style"; as a formal mode it is then "constitutively dependent on a type of historical raw material in which this disjunction is structurally present" (1990: 138–139). And if the protean energies of Renaissance literature have increasingly been understood as a by-product of the voyages of discovery; then, following the dismantling of the colonial project in the late twentieth century, the proliferation of postcolonial migrant writing has become, as Elleke Boehmer remarks, almost inseparable from the runaway success of *lo real maravilloso*, to use the phrase which is imprecisely translated as "magical realism".[1] It forms a contested but internationally recognised body of fictional special effects through which writers with a view from the fringe of once dominant European cultures are able to present, in Elleke Boehmer's words, "a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement" (1995: 4).

Yet how successfully can such baroque narrative procedures be transplanted to this part of the world? Brink is after all only one of several post-apartheid fabulists: in their very different works, authors like Anne Landsman, Zakes Mda, and Etienne van Heerden have all refracted the various contact zones of Cape history through the prism of a fictional mode which has migrated from South America via India to the Caribbean and Australia before arriving (somewhat late in the day?) on these shores. Given South Africa's curiously staggered colonial history and its delayed decolonization, how might the debates about national allegory and lingering exoticism which have enveloped the work of authors like Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie play out here?

"Nuwe woorde, nuwe voorstellings en nuwe beelde …"

In a 2005 address on "Post-apartheid literature: a personal view", Brink remarks that the appellation "magical realism" is in fact an unfortunate one in a South African context: it inevitably brings to mind the fiction of the Latin American boom, whereas "Africa has had its own form of magical realism in the long tradition of oral narrative which spanned many centuries before it erupted in the work of writers as diverse as Amos Tutuola or Ben Okri" (2009: 16). Invoking Brenda Cooper's 1998 account of West African fiction, he goes on to say that what predominates in this tradition "is the foregrounding of ancestors who continue to intervene actively in the affairs of the present, an easy gliding between the worlds of the living and the dead" (17).

Peopled by disembodied avatars of colonial history and drawing increasingly on pre-colonial Khoi mythology, Brink's own recent work surely attempts to access and buttress an indigenous tradition of the marvellous even as it rides the currents of both early modern and postmodern "world literature". Like Mostert's encomiums to the original Khoisan place names of the Cape, in paying attention to these "First Peoples" it (like much post-apartheid, or post-anti-apartheid, writing) seeks to imagine a new, more inclusive way of re-naming a paradisal African landscape. And in doing so it surely holds in mind N. P. van Wyk Louw's grand conception of Afrikaans as the language able to act as a bridge between, and to draw strength from, both "the great lucid West and the magical Africa".[2] In the remarkable passage from his 1961 essay "Vernuwing in die prosa" ("Innovation in prose") now engraved on the Taalmonument (Language Monument) in Paarl, one sees how intimately literary openness co-exists with linguistic exclusion, natural expanse with nationalistic isolation, as this new African language evolves

to encompass "every ripple and fold" of the landmass:

> Afrikaans is die taal wat vir Wes-Europa en Afrika verbind; dit suig die krag uit dié twee bronne; dit vorm 'n brug tussen die groot helder Weste en die magiese Afrika – die soms nog so onhelder Afrika; hulle is albei groot magte, en wat daar groots aan hulle vereniging kan ontspruit – dit is miskien wat vir Afrikaans voorlê om te ontdek … Maar wat ons nooit moet vergeet nie, is dat hierdie verandering van land en landskap as't ware aan die nuwe woordende taal geslyp, geknee, gebrei het; nuwe woorde, nuwe voorstellings en nuwe beelde laat ontstaan het, ou woorde en voorstellings laat verdwyn het, oor elke riffel en vou van die nuwe wêreldbeeld kon sluit. En so het Akrikaans in staat geword om hierdie nuwe land uit te sê soos geen ander Europese taal nie. (13)

> Afrikaans is the language that links Western Europe and Africa; it draws its strength from these two sources; it forms a bridge between the huge bright West and magical Africa – an Africa that is sometimes still so dark; they are both great powers, and the splendid things that could arise from their union – perhaps that is what lies ahead for Afrikaans to discover…But what we should never forget is that this change of land and landscape honed, kneaded and shaped the new language in the making: gave rise to new words, new conceptions and new images, caused old words and conceptions to disappear, could cover every ridge and fold of the new scheme of things. And so Afrikaans became capable of expressing this new land like no other European language.[3]

Brink's rewritten Adamastor is one of many Cape Adams encountered when one reads to assess how such confidence to name the natural world might be earned and guaranteed, or else too easily assumed (and thereby forfeited), by the literary work. The Linnaean naturalist obsessively affixing labels to specimens; the transplanted Romantic poet seeking a language in which the African landmass might "naturally" reveal itself; the contemporary "nature writer" drawn to the litanies of place contained in the Khoisan oratures – each of these comprise a complex intermingling of real wonder at the exchange of world for word with a conspicuous, questionable innocence. And indeed the blurred etymology of Camões' creation (itself drawn from Rabelais) suggests how the tendency to collapse human history into inhuman wilderness is present from the very inception of writing the Cape: the Latin echo *Adamaster* yields an "imitative rival of Adam"; the Greek root *Adamastos* suggests "untamed" or "untameable". In the literature of colonial contact, then, the presence of the inanimate world, as it exceeds and threatens the biblical act of naming, all too easily becomes the maligned, mysterious Other. Such texts – in giving voice to coded, symbolically articulated threats to the colonial project while never dealing explicitly with the circumstances of indigenous resistance – then produce nature that does the work of culture.

Faced with this difficult encounter between what might be called postcolonial and ecocritical impulses in the act of reading, one might take Brink as representative of one pole in late twentieth-century South African writing as it treats the various contact zones at the Cape: a literature of abundance and novelty, violent yet exuberant, ready to experiment with new forms of literary genesis. The other pole, perhaps, is represented in the much more cautious recovery of historical specificity by the archivist turned novelist Dan Sleigh (whose *Eilande* was translated by Brink, 2002), or the sparse and self-aware *oeuvre* of J. M. Coetzee: a stringent artistic economy which turns away from the lush garden of Judaeo-Christian myth (or pre-colonial African mythology) towards the self-contained island of the Crusoe figure. As both inaugural English novel and archetypal text of colonialism in the New World, "Crusoe's journal" is, in Derek Walcott's poem, "our first book, our profane genesis"; the castaway is "the second Adam since the fall" (1998: 69, 92).[4] Yet equally, as Coetzee once remarked, this vision of marooning, solitary creation and self-sufficiency is perhaps the "only story",

in which the act of writing becomes not one of untrammelled invention but rather an inventory of salvaged fragments.

"The sheer excess, the inspired bad taste"

In his 1988 anthology, *Shades of Adamastor*, Malvern van Wyk Smith writes that "although the Cape of Good Hope was not known to Europeans 'till the Portingales of late began their navigation on the back-side of Africa', as George Abbott put it in 1599", the southern extremity of the continent was "effectively invented before it was discovered" (8).[5] He shows how it had existed as symbol in the European imaginary since antiquity: "an ancient text under revision" which veered sharply between visions of paradise and purgatory, refreshment and desolation, fabled Christian empires and hazardous torrid zones.[6] One can trace this instability on maps and mariners' charts where attempts to reconcile Classical speculation and real geography produce some extraordinary shapes: Africa stretched, distended, split in two or joined to the bottom of the world in order to accommodate conflicting surveys and superimposed myths. Unintentionally "discovered" when Días is blown around it in 1488 and tacks East to find no land, the Cape is doubled again in receiving two names: Cape of Storms from Días, Cape of Good Hope from his sovereign, although most chroniclers agree the mariner coined both, and that *Cabo de Boa Esperanza* was attributed to King João II in the interests of loyal politeness and imperial propaganda.[7]

If this residue of the marvellous is a matter of frustration and hazard for navigators and investors, for a poet like Camões, immortalizing Da Gama's voyage of 1497, it yields a massive linguistic and descriptive payload. In the words of the poem's most recent, acclaimed translator, Landeg White:

> Camões was – for the point bears repeating – the first major European artist to visit the tropics and the Orient. He was thus the first to face the challenge of finding a language and form to give expression to such experiences. Da Gama's voyage of exploration becomes an extended metaphor for his own explorations in the "craft" of poetry.[8]

As the fifth canto tacks around the bulge of Africa, "christening" headlands and crossing the "burning line" into the southern hemisphere, the octavos are famously sensitive to the wonders of "unlettered nature" that are being unlocked by this rendering of the Portuguese sea-borne empire (100).[9] White's rendering brings into fine focus the "Lion mountains" of Africa's coastline, the mouth of the Zaire "immense and brimming", the violence of electrical storms and the appearance of new constellations overhead (100). In one of the poem's most celebrated moments, the phenomenon of the waterspout enters Western literature for the first time, growing from a slender tube – "A little vapour and subtle smoke / Rotating a little from the wind's drag" – into a swollen, threatening parasite: "As a purple leech may be seen swelling / On the lips of some beast … The more it sucks the bigger it grows / Gorging itself to bursting point" (102).

The image captures a mixture of wonder and grossness that is present throughout the poem, and the shift from expansive horizons to parasitic possession rendered in microcosm here foreshadows the larger, structural modulation into a different, darker key signalled by the rounding of the Cape. Yet even as Adamastor materializes in a similar process out of inanimate matter and the night air – "hair grizzled and matted with clay, / Its mouth coal black, teeth yellow with decay" – there still is an unmistakeably literary sense of staking out new poetic territory. We are seeing – the poet tells us – what ancient geographers had no conception of, and in a charged verse

form that can only truly resound as it should in the open vowels of the original Portuguese:

Eu sou aquele oculto e grande Cabo
A quem chamois vós outros Tormentório,
Que nunca a Ptolomeu, Pompónio, Estrabo,
Plínio, e quantos passaram fui notório.

I am that vast, secret promontory
You Portuguese call the Cape of Storms,
Which neither Ptolemy, Pompey, Strabo,
Pliny, nor any authors knew of.

Camões, (1973: 121). Trans. White, (2001: 180).

Following the Renaissance figurative practice of imitative *contaminatio*, Camões concentrates and distils a wide variety of Classical myths and literary antecedents into a single figure: allusions to Homer's Polyphemus and the comic genealogies of Rabelais combine with shifting Greek and Latin etymologies, engendering a clayey African Adam as well as complex play of recognition and imaginative transposition in the reading process which is largely lost to us today.[10] What can still be sensed though, setting *The Lusiads* apart from the historical chronicles on which it is based and ensuring its place in world literature, is the poised temporal perspective enabled by the literary work. Using the Adamastor encounter as an epigraph to *Frontiers,* Mostert remarks on the complex mood where dynamism coexists with an "acknowledgement of the price of connecting the hemispheres with regular, predatory passage, a sadness … a stigma and burden for releasing so vast a proportion of the diverse fates of humankind during the last five hundred years" (1992: 7).

Writing in the mid-sixteenth century, having witnessed corruption and cruelties in the East, lost an eye, survived bankruptcy, shipwreck and (so the legend goes) swum to shore in present-day Cambodia with only the sodden manuscript of *The Lusiads* clutched to his chest, Camões recreates Da Gama's voyage from a vantage point much later in the trajectory of the Portuguese empire. In cursing the mariners, Adamastor foretells in coded poetic terms the death of Días in a hurricane in 1500 off the Cape, the massacre of the Viceroy D'Almeida in 1510 on the shores of Table Bay and the wreck of the São João in 1552, the earliest extant and most famous of all the *História Trágico-Marítima*: bestselling tales of maritime disaster and marooning printed as pamphlets and chapbooks in sixteenth-century Lisbon.

Whether this overdetermined, densely literary encounter "inscribes future disaster at the very origin of the Portuguese imperial venture" (Livingston 2003: 260), or whether it is better described as "a tautological voice which predicts the consequences of the Portuguese voyages while assuming their success" (Banks 2000: 4), there is certainly a sense of a poetics tested to its limit. To read *The Lusiads* today is to be reminded of the ability of Renaissance literature to ingest so much disparate material, the "reach and stretch" (in Puttenham's phrase) which admitted so many different phenomena, generic forms and peoples. A literary rediscovery of "unlettered Nature" and the newness of things that energizes the language of Cervantes, Rabelais and Montaigne, such linguistic ambition finds an appreciative twentieth-century audience in authors like García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Milan Kundera and Salman Rushdie, all of whom have acknowledged their debt to these early modern minds. In his essay on "Gabriel García Márquez and the invention of America", Fuentes writes that such invention is "indistinguishable from the naming of America", and that this in turn is inextricable from a sense of its "imaginary newness":

For it is this sense of total newness, of primeval appearance, that gives its true tone to names and words in America. The urgency of naming and describing the

> New World – of naming and describing in the New World – is intimately related to this newness, which is, in effect, the most ancient trait of the New World. (Fuentes 1988: 187)

The "marvellous testimonies to Nature's youth" in Canto V of *The Lusiads* (102) then find a distant echo in the famous opening lines of *Cien años de soledad* (1967), where "the world was so recent that many things lacked names" (García Márquez, 1970: 1); and one might note in passing that Rushdie's hybrid of modern India and medieval Iberia in *The moor's last sigh* (1995) includes a character named Camoens. In turn, an essay in Kundera's *Testaments betrayed* (1993) moves from Rabelais to Rushdie in positing the existence of "the *novel from below the thirty-fifth parallel,* the *novel of the South:* a great new novelistic culture characterised by an extraordinary sense of the real coupled with an untrammelled imagination that breaks every rule of plausibility" (1995: 30).

Brink too has confessed a distinctly European taste for the evolving, experimental and unruly literature of the early modern period, so different to the Robinson Crusoe of the eighteenth century who seeks to assure us that his creation of a fiefdom for himself on a distant, non-European island is a "just History of Fact" (1972: 1). *The Lusiad, or Portugals historicall poem* was introduced to the English-speaking world by Richard Fanshawe's version of 1655. For over a hundred years this remained the only translation, until British expansion in the East called forth no less than eight versions by the end of the nineteenth century, most of whose authors were dismissive of their high-spirited predecessor. "Nor had he the least idea of the dignity of the epic style", wrote William Mickle in 1776, "He can never have enough of conceits, low allusions and expressions" (xxxi–xxxxii). Richard Burton complained of his taking "improper liberties with his author: his inversions and parentheses, wheel within wheel, often make him more Camões than Camões, – not in a praiseworthy sense … He exaggerates whatever strikes him, with the jovial rollicking manner of the Carolians."[11]

Yet for Camões' most recent translator, it is Fanshawe's rendering that remains most faithful to the larger architecture of the original, to its "sweetness and … bustling, grotesque energy" (2001: xi). Even as he taps various reservoirs of pre-colonial southern African mythology for his short work, Brink relishes precisely this, remarking that the version he worked from – J. J. Aubertin's of 1884 – retains "something of the great original melodrama" of Camões, a quality which even finds a physical analogue in the architecture of Portugal's over-committed imperial capital: "as baroque and exaggerated as the arches and architraves, the sheer excess, the inspired bad taste of the Manueline churches and cloisters in Lisbon or Oporto" (1993a: 6).

Paying tribute to this multi-lingual Renaissance man on the occasion of his seventieth birthday in 2005, the poet Antjie Krog referred to the "awesome amplitude" of his *oeuvre*, its ambitions to assimilate and represent the total experience of the subcontinent. In terms of bulk, *The first life of Adamastor* is very slight, almost a five-finger exercise compared with many other books in the Brink canon. In an essay he confesses that it was conceived as only the first chapter in a planned work of thirteen afterlives which never came to be. Instead these found their way into the brick-sized 1991 thriller *An act of terror*, but in a curious, truncated appendix where the shades of Adamastor are used to explore the generations of an Afrikaans family, the Landsmans. It is a work cast resolutely in the other, older mould: a press photographer of the 1980s awakes to his historical predicament and plots to assassinate the State President outside the gates of the Castle. As he tours the Cape Peninsula one last time with his girlfriend, in between the customary Brinkian scenes

of sex *al fresco* they read Camões – neither Fanshawe nor Aubertin but "a charmingly old-fashioned prose translation" (presumably the 1952 version by Atkinson) – and feel some obscure affinity with the angry defensiveness of Adamastor, wondering if they as anti-apartheid revolutionaries can claim some kind of kinship with him. "I'd much rather think of us as the children of Adamastor, Thomas, not his victims", says his partner. In a nod to Black Consciousness, he replies: "I think it's up to him to decide whether he wants to accept us or not" (2000a: 29).[12]

"*An act of terror* belongs to that small group of novels embracing a country's ethos and history in one panoptic vision," according to a dustjacket which equates it with Peter Carey and García Márquez. As in much of his corpus, Brink writes against the grain of apartheid's narrowly defined nationalism, seeking to access a tradition of independence and resistance to authority: Van Wyk Louw's *lojale verset* (loyal resistance), or *The adversary within*, as in the title of Jack Cope's 1982 account of dissident writers in Afrikaans. Yet as the novel struggles to take in South Africa's multiple, asymmetrical experiences of colonial administration and anti-colonial struggle, the strain of all this earnest myth-making begins to show. In tone and structure it is entirely unlike *Cien años de soledad*, where the sense of universality is created not by panoptic overview but rather by carefully proscribed limit. Surrounded by swamps, the village of Macondo is at several ironic removes from being located in a straightforward allegory of Colombian history. The family tree of the Buendías is so replete with Aurelianos and Arcadios that the process of divining any kind of coherent data from linear, causal flows and inherited traits is dissolved in a world of endless recurrence and gloriously overburdened signifiers.

Brink remarks that he abandoned his original project of afterlives since he "could not resolve the question of whether there should be a genealogical link between the various reincarnations of Adamastor, or whether their relationship should be random" (2000b: 52). In *An act of terror,* the genealogical option imbues the Landsmans with an importance they can hardly bear, and as the couple reach Cape Point, the superhuman symbolism of the topography proves irresistible:

> Today, he thought, today they'd reached an extremity: a moral cape as ultimate as this horn which Africa gaffs into the southern seas … Mechanically, more from habit than from any conscious decision, he took a few photographs of Adamastor, blue on blue. (2000a: 29–31)

Here surely it is the use of the psychologically charged Cape itself that is mechanical and habitual, a reflex gesture on the part of an overstretched writer. "Africa was still Africa", Thomas muses, "No longer romantic or virginal, but a wild subconscious in the mind of the world" (28). Providing a vision of implacable history etched into portentous geography, this is an ossified, discredited, yet still extraordinarily current way writing about the continent that, like many a second-rate poetic rehashing of Camões, threatens to collapse the human drama of southern Africa – both the facts of colonial violence and possibilities of anti-colonial resistance – into a blind force of nature.[13] This is Africa as setting and backdrop, noted by Chinua Achebe when exploring the "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery" which so annoyed F. R. Leavis in Conrad's *Heart of darkness* (1948: 177): "Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognisable humanity … Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind?" (1988: 8).

This vision of a brooding, mystified, undifferentiated natural world as the receptacle

for a poetry of "agonised self-appraisal" (Van Wyk Smith, 2012; n.p.), absence and psychological crisis represents everything that a valid ecocriticism in southern Africa would not be interested in, and everything that it would try to separate itself from. Yet equally it seems necessary to acknowledge just how tenacious such figuration is. "Speaking rationally about Africa is not something that has ever come naturally", writes Achille Mbembe in his *Notes provisoires sur la postcolonie* (1992), updating Achebe's famous essay even while admitting (in a metaphor that echoes Coetzee's invocation of Gordimer's *The conservationist*) that any amount of intellectual critique seems to make little difference to everyday usage: "the corpse obstinately persists in getting up again every time it is buried" (2001: 1, 3). There is, he continues, "hardly ever any discourse about Africa for itself"; the "grotesque dramatisation" of the continent (and here he could be talking directly of Adamastor) as "a great, soft, fantastic body", powerless and self-destructive, is always the pretext for discussion of something else, some other place, some other people. It inevitably becomes "the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give the public account of its subjectivity" (3). In an exasperated, parodic paragraph Mbembe attempts to enter into and mimic the "closed glory" of this prior imaginary:

> Terrible movements, laws that underpin and organise tragedy and genocide, gods that present themselves in the guise of death and destitution, monsters lying in wait, corpses coming and going on the tide, infernal powers, threats of all sorts, abandonments, events without response, monstrous couplings, blind waves, impossible paths, terrible forces that every day tear human beings, animals, plants, and things from their sphere of life and condemn them to death ... . (1992: 8)

Perhaps, as Binyavanga Wainaina suggests, the only strategy left to the African writer *is* that of parody. Opening his set of instructions on how to write about the continent, he advises: "Always use the word 'Africa' or 'Darkness' or 'Safari' in your title. Subtitles may include the words 'Zanzibar', 'Masai', 'Zulu', 'Zambezi', 'Congo', 'Nile', 'Big', 'Sky', 'Shadow', 'Drum', 'Sun' or 'Bygone'... Readers will be put off if you don't mention the light in Africa … Wide empty spaces and game are critical – Africa is the Land of Wide Empty Spaces" (2005: 91). His tongue-in-cheek dictums suggest how the image of a gaudy, violent Africa forms a lineage running from the "Shades of Adamastor" via the imperial romance of Rider Haggard and the mystified aboriginals of Laurens van der Post to the bestselling exoticism of Wilbur Smith – those writers, that is, who have played perhaps the greatest role in shaping southern Africa in the global imaginary during the last century.[14]

Magical seams, metaphor, metamorphosis

It is here that the satirical charge, or as Chris Warnes puts it, "irreverence" of magical realism seems to provide an attractive means of invading and dismantling such time-worn images of Africa. Tracing a genealogy of the term, Warnes (2005: 5) shows its dual allegiance: on the one hand *lo real maravilloso Americano* emerges from an "aggressive assertion of Latin America's ontological difference from Europe" which receives one of its earliest expressions in Alejo Carpentier's 1949 preface to *El Reino de Este Mundo* (*The kingdom of this world*): "But what is the history of America if not a chronicle of the marvellous in the real?" (1990: n.p.). On the other hand, there is the very different precursor, Jorge Luis Borges (honoured, perhaps, in García Márquez's figure of the author-gypsy Melquiades), a "world writer" if ever there was one, entirely unconcerned with narrow cultural nationalisms and claiming that the Latin American artist in fact had a greater right to European culture than did Europeans:

"we can handle all European themes, handle them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences" (2000: 218).

Exploring the different *oeuvres* of Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie as testing the claims of "faith" and "irreverence", respectively, Warnes suggests that while the former "seeks to interpret the 'magic' in magical realism culturally, as an expression of particular belief systems or ways of seeing the world", the latter has more in common with postmodern, unaffiliated literary projects, providing "a form of epistemological scepticism, a productive fictional mode that points towards a possible re-enchantment of Western modernity" (8). (That there is no absolute division between the two impulses is shown perhaps by how closely Mbembe's grotesque parody comes to resemble the prose of a work like Okri's *The famished road* (1991).) Yet the irreverent dimension of Brink's writing is readily apparent in his work of the 1990s, the tone of *The first life of Adamastor* is entirely, refreshingly different to that of *An act of terror*. Like the swollen nose of Saleem Sinai or the "inconceivable masculinity" of Aureliano Babilonia, it begins with a metaphor made all too literal, and follows wherever it may lead, engendering a contemporary strain of *contaminatio* where the writing is able to range across different historical sites, mythologies and timescales. Written while Brink was in Grahamstown, the novella drew inspiration from the discovery of new archaeological sites and shell middens at Algoa Bay, prompting him to shift the action away from the Cape Peninsula and east along the coast towards São Bras (Mossel Bay) and present-day Port Elizabeth, where Días and Da Gama made their landfalls.

Camões' Adamastor was imprisoned in the Cape Peninsula, but T'kama's hazy geography enables Brink to conflate several different historical encounters and to explore more freely what Mostert has called (with a characteristic flourish) the "hemispheric seam", a "frontier of consciousness" where the terrestrial odyssey of Africa encountered the maritime endeavour of Europe: "Nowhere else offers such an amazing confluence of human venture and its many frontiers, across time, upon the oceans and between the continents" (1992: xv). A boundary between regions of summer and winter rainfall, the eastern Cape marked the southerly limit of African pastoralism, and the Xhosa that T'kama's band come into contact with regale him with early Ndebele oral narratives about "us" and "them" as an awareness of the multiple frontiers of South African historiography is combined with a mix-and-match approach to oral traditions: "In the mysterious ways of the writing process … these images conjured up others, many of them not immediately or rationally linked" (2000c: 46). Here then is the "faith" asked of us by such writing, where pre-capitalist, pre-colonial modes become, in Cooper's reframing of the metaphor, "the seam that is mined for the magical raw material itself" (1998: 16). And how, one wonders, might such faith be tested in the act of reading?

"I fill the day with names …"

In a suitably literal realization of the literary, the T'kama who claims to have seen paintings of Da Gama in one of his many afterlives can today be found gazing in the direction of the navigator as he receives the banner of Portugal from his sovereign. In 2002 an enormous canvas inspired by Brink's novella was completed by Cyril Coetzee and hung in the William Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.[15] Here it completes a triptych that includes two other massive, mural-like works – Colin Gill's "Colonists 1826" (1934) and John Henry Amshewitz's "Vasco da Gama – Departure for the Cape" (1935) – forming a dialogue which,

just like the novella itself, cuts across space, time and tradition.

In a book which charts the progress of the commission, a lavish visual essay by the artist describes how he elaborated narrative kernels in the novella by drawing on several diverse traditions of Renaissance iconography (see Vladislavić 2000). The birdlike ships and human eggs with which Brink seeks to create a radical newness from the landward perspective can be traced back to innumerable sources within the European tradition: the phantasmagorias of Hieronymous Bosch, sketches of Leda and the Swan after Da Vinci, the winged images of saints often found in colonial territories where Catholic influence predominated. Every bit as self-aware as its source material, the painting is peppered with motifs drawn from lithographs and engravings of wild animals in texts now shelved in the immediate vicinity, even reproducing the floral and faunal errors found in these early natural histories.

At the centre of the picture are the figures of T'kama and Khois under a flat-topped acacia, a tableau of an African Adam and Eve which draws on William Blake's *Adam naming the beasts*. Yet instead of the raised fingers of benediction which signal the trinity in Blake, T'kama makes a hand gesture which, according to Cyril Coetzee, signals "presence of giraffe" in sign language used by San hunters. This focal point draws on a passage by Brink in which T'kama joins the singing of the earth around him in an incantatory, trance-like celebration of attachment to his native soil:

> I sing my land, in my tongue and throat I give it sound, I name it. I say: wood, and turn to wood. I say: mountain, hill, rock, river, sea, and become each of them in turn … I say lion, jackal, mocking-bird, partridge, *kiewiet*, I say *kombro*, I say *dagga*, I say *kierie* and *kaross*, I say *khuseti*, I say *t'gau*, I say *k'hrab*, I say *k'arakup* … I fill the day with names, I inscribe the plains like a sheet of paper … I say gazelles in a calabash and ostriches in curdled milk, I say falling stars and chameleons and hares with split upper lips and lice carrying messages from the waning moon and water-snakes devouring themselves and fat-tailed sheep sailing upside-down through the sky, I say everything which is still to happen and everything no one has ever thought up, I say a terrible I and a fearsome you, and in the sound of my shout I walk into the day that breaks open before me like an egg from which impossible new words are hatched. (46)

Reminiscent again of the first lines of *One hundred years of solitude* – where a river of clear water runs along "a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs" (1) – this outpouring of verbal energy resonates with many other attempts to voice a pre-verbal, primal attachment to one's native land. Brink acknowledges a transatlantic debt to Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), while there is also much in common with both Whitman's ecstatic catalogues and Bruce Chatwin's seductive vision of the Australian continent being sung into existence by its Aboriginal myth cycles. Calabashes, chameleons and swallowing monsters call forth the motifs of Nguni oratures, while the imagery of "hares with split lips" alludes to what is perhaps the earliest recorded indigenous narrative of southern Africa – the fable explaining the origin of death among mankind – and one of the most compelling suggestions that a pan-Khoisan myth complex once extended throughout the region.[16] In a performance which goes on for the better part of two pages, the language of literary theory ("inscribe") combines with the superimposed menageries of southern African rock art. It culminates in an onomatopoeic bringing forth of indigenous Khoi sounds, sending one to a glossary that, in its selection of trading goods, salient topographical features and prime deities, is not unlike the earliest word lists compiled by seventeenth-century sailors calling at the Cape.

Yet reading this lavish, generous kind of prose and looking at this gaudy visual fantasia inspired by it, one is tempted to ask: for all the energy, intricacy and ingenuity, can it really find a place here? Having traced the satirical, irreverent possibilities of a South African magical realism thus far, one comes to consider, when confronted with passage like this, what the limits of its invention might be, and whether its claims are made (to adapt Rushdie's defence of his most controversial work) "in good faith". So clearly linked to the newly released energies of South Africa's pending 1990s transition, can it really be mapped onto the scant archaeological and textual remains of the historical period in which it is (at least partly) set? Or rather, to pose a narrower, more technical question: in terms of a range of fictional options and techniques, how successful are these at allowing submerged elements of the deep southern African past to surface?

This is not to level the (weak) accusation that Brink cannot step outside of a European tradition even as he tries to render it alien; such a realization is, after all, amply explored in his playfully self-aware work which causes the universal signifier "bird" to expand, uncontrollably, in all directions. Nor is it to repeat the astute questions which Warnes raises about the "anthropological" dimension of magical realism, and its claims to enter into the pre-capitalist or pre-colonial world.[17] Dispensing with any prior, moralistic strictures on narrative ethics and the complex debates surrounding the matter of "speaking for" the Other, Rushdie argued persuasively (as did Oscar Wilde before him) that the literary work either justifies itself and convinces one of its "improper liberties" or it does not. Following this for the moment, one might ask of Brink's work (and all the other vaguely magical realist texts that have emerged since apartheid's demise): ultimately, how much weight can one give to these words, so unfettered and abundant? How is such a poetics earned? What can guarantee or underwrite it?

The crowded, mannerist, minutely explicated canvas by Cyril Coetzee serves as a reminder of the impatience and even exhaustion which can attend the reading of magical realism and associated genres, of that moment where one can no longer bring oneself to believe in the novel's signs or invest further in its restless imaginative proliferation. In the great works of the genre, perhaps, this emptying of meaning is staged explicitly: in *Midnight's children* it becomes the descent into "the historyless anonymity of the rainforests" (2003: 260); in *One hundred years of solitude* the plague of insomnia and amnesia where the affected villagers try "all kinds of methods of exhausting themselves" and Aureliano Buendía, far from singing the world into existence, is forced to label the most banal, everyday phenomena as the links between language and the world are eroded – *table, chair, clock, wall, bed*: "At the beginning of the road into the swamp they put up a sign that said MACONDO and another larger one on the main street that said GOD EXISTS" (47).

In the hands of less skilled practitioners, though, the unrestrained arabesques of magical realist technique can seem a way of dodging the challenge to make writing equal to a subject in all its historical breadth, "the way of fantasy and extravagance" which V. S. Naipaul equated with formal (and therefore moral) collapse: "It is safe … empty, morally and intellectually; it makes writing an aspect of the corruption of the countries out of which it emerges" (1987: 22). One might ignore the typically reactionary second half of that sentence and yet still feel the force of the accusation that such writing is safe: too easy, too plentiful or (to borrow from Karl Popper) too unfalsifiable (1963: 33–39). Perhaps the successes in the genre are a product of a particular juncture in a national or regional literary history, even a distinctly personal

moment when an author comes into full voice, and that this moment is quick to pass. Three years after Rushdie's 1981 "Booker of Bookers", the irascible narrator of Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's parrot* was already calling for a quota system on South American fiction (or what Kundera (1995: 30) called "*the tropicalisation of the novel"*)[18] in order "to curb the spread of package-tour baroque and heavy irony":

> Ah, the daiquiri bird which incubates its eggs on the wing; ah, the freedonna tree whose roots grow at the tips of its branches, and whose fibres assist the hunchback to impregnate by telepathy the haughty wife of the hacienda owner; ah, the opera house now overgrown by jungle. Permit me to rap on the table and murmur "Pass!" Novels set in the Arctic and the Antarctic will receive a development grant. (1984: 99)

As a short work, spared the perils of a dilated narrative middle, *The first life of Adamastor* succeeds as a gloss in the margin of a huge supporting text, a fable underwritten by Camões which makes great play of its mixed literary ancestry and, quite appropriately, poses more questions than it answers. Its casualness with regard to detail draws one back not just to *The Lusiads*, but also the historical record, to neglected South African precursors and into a wide variety of contemporary dialogues across the Atlantic and Indian oceans. It assumes the right to expand within the "shadowlands between myth and history", a realm to which Brink returns in his more recent work, *Praying mantis* (2005).[19]

Offered as a tribute to his readers on his seventieth birthday, it is focalized through the historical figure of Kupido Kakkerlak (Cupido Cockroach), the first Khoi missionary ordained at the Cape of Good Hope. In taking as its epigraph Barrow's remark that "The name of Hottentot will be forgotten or remembered only as that of a deceased person of little note", it suggests again how Brink envisions literature as a work of collaboration and collective redress. Written over a period of twenty years and enriched by a wide variety of historical sources listed in the afterword, it is one of his most controlled and convincing performances, also comprising a reprise of favourite motifs from his *oeuvre*. The release of fireflies during the ecstatic coupling of Cupido and Anna Vigilant surely rewrites a scene from *Imaginings of sand* (1996). And again, as the Khoi preacher drifts between the influence of the London Missionary Society and that of the indigenous deity Heitsi-Eibib, we have a work structured by a succession of dream-like journeys through the interior, "often lured purely by the names":

> Vlermuislaagte and Makukukwe
> Gemsbok, Bloubospan
> and on to Heuningkrans or Honey Cliff, to Pramberg or Tit Mountain
> to Denkbeeld, which means Image
> and Grootgewaag, or Risked-a-Lot
> to Vuilnek, Dirty-Neck, and Omvrede, Peace-All-Round
> (2005: 234)

In his *Travels in Southern Africa in the years 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806,* Hinrich Lichtenstein, despite writing largely as an apologist for the Boers, disparages "the poverty and corruption in the expression of abstract ideas which is now universal among colonists". The "conciseness and naïveté" of Dutch place names, he remarks, "borders on the figurative language of oriental poetry" (1812: 132–3).[20] Yet for Brink, Krog and many others to follow, it is precisely such simple descriptors and designations of place which compel fascination and incantatory repetition, becoming mere vocables and fricatives strung together again and again in a litany of wishful but infinitely deferred belonging. The impossible innocence of the names must, it seems, be countered by the ongoing, endless act of naming – "Circles and lines criss-crossing through the land, going everywhere, going nowhere" (235). Yet

equally, as these mantras are translated *in situ* by Brink, one also begins to wonder how and why it is that even such basic linguistic tags signify so differently when moving between the languages. Something is being lost here: but who can say what it is?

across the Jakkals and Dwyka and Gamka Rivers
past Vyevlei, or Fig Valley, along the course of the Sand River
over Droëberg, the Dry Mountain, and Witberg, the White Mountain,
up the Droëkloofberge, that is, the Dry Kloof Range,
to Bakoondlaagte, Oven Plain, and Groenpoort, Green Gateway
past Kwaggapoel, the Quagga Pool, and Rietkuil, the Reed Hollow
past Eensaam, which is Loneliness …
drawn by names like Kootjieskolk and Wagendrift and Windheuwel
that is, Kootjie's Flood and Wagon Ford and Windy Hill …
responding to the lure of the Blomfonteinsberge, the Flower-Fountain Mountains
and Nardousberg, down to Aavoëlberg, Vulture Mountain,
or Slechtgenoeg, Badenough, and Goedgegund, Wellbestowed …
Paardefontein, Blinkfontein, Vlakfontein, Boesmanfontein
– and that is where they make a halt. (57)

"… so lightly that they seemed birds"

Before leaving this generous, almost utopian kind of writing, one might make some final remarks on the curious mixture of abundance and exhaustion here; how a poetics premised on virtually unlimited imaginative space risks remaining entrapped in what Abiola Irele has described as "the prison of the mythopoetic imagination" (1991: 217). In a sceptical reading it becomes a compulsive recourse to a pre-colonial African world, inevitably constructed as a site of wish fulfilment for the contemporary writer. Whereas, when the material fact of imprisonment and confinement reassert themselves, in the /Xam narratives of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection for example, one is party to a language event of such suggestiveness and "natural surrealism" that in comparison, the imported, deliberately irrational elements of magical realism can only seem laboured (Watson 1991: 16). Moreover, as a genre the latter can never be wholly separated from the much larger category of fantastic literature, and it is in the work of a prison poet like Breyten Breytenbach, or Pollsmoor's oral mythology of "The number" (as documented by Jonny Steinberg) that one finds a genuinely local and horrifying version of the fantastic.

"The grotesque is a South African speciality," remarks Ivan Vladislavić, registering his debt to writers such as Breytenbach and Etienne Leroux for capturing the profound absurdity of race politics in twentieth century South Africa (2001: 60). In 1988, the quincentenary of Días's arrival at Mossel Bay was re-enacted as three white actors in a rowing boat landed on a "whites-only" beach to be welcomed by seven more whites wearing curly wigs and painted black, the entire proceeding watched by P. W. Botha in full presidential regalia. It was, as Dennis Walder remarks, a demonstration of apartheid as the *reductio ad absurdum* of colonialism, that extreme case in which (following Frantz Fanon) "it is the 'settler' who thinks he (and it is 'he') makes history, while the 'native' does not":

Worse: it is as if the colonised are outside the imaginable, the settlers appropriating for themselves the identity of "native" too; whence the laughable sight of whites embracing whites as a representation of European arrival upon the alien shore. (1998: 204–5)

It is a diagnosis which goes to the heart of the conflicting claims of Afrikaans and English literary traditions with regard to writing the land.

Yet always more inclined to the notion of language as possibility rather than limit – and fired by the sense that "There is always a new discovery in the retelling" (1993a: 16) – Brink remarks that sheer imaginative abundance of *The Lusiads* produced in Adamastor a figure which invites rather than resists understanding: "It is the genius of Camões that even in setting up the Other as hideous and terrifying, he suggests a subjectivity which transcends easy categorisation" (2000c: 45). That this is "no fancy postcolonial reading" of the text, he continues, is borne out by the way in which Camões describes the continuation of Da Gama's voyage, the landfall at São Bras where they encounter a far more placid scene which combines the alien literary convention of Renaissance pastoral with what seems like authentic detail:

Their wives, black as polished ebony,
Were perched on gently lumbering oxen,
Beasts which, of all prize cattle
Are the ones they prize the most.
They sang pastoral songs in their own
Tongue, sweetly and in harmony,
Whether rhymed or in prose, we could not gauge
But like the pipes of Virgil's golden age. (110)

Enlarging on his historical sources, Camões the poet is drawn to an encounter which remains vital today: the boundary between the oral and the written. For Stephen Gray, it is a fundamental moment in southern African literature, and a truer starting point than the overworked literary Cape further along the coast: "a Western poet composing an epic poem which, if only distantly, relies on oral rhetorical formulations, pausing to take note of the techniques of other oral praise-singers who, like himself, codify and store a nation's history, its brave deeds and its way of life in their poetry" (1979: 24).

For all the liberties he takes elsewhere, Fanshawe is faithful to the original here in calling the welcoming party "the people that this country did possess" ("A gente que esta terra possuía") (1973: 123). For Mickle in the eighteenth century, they are "the tenants of the coast"; for Atkinson in his 1952 prose translation, "the natives here" and for Guy Butler, "the nation", "as though Da Gama was welcomed on the beach by a delegation from the ANC".[21] If the "hemispheric seam" of this coastline is plainly the site of multiple translations and retrospective abductions of meaning, for Brink the question of speaking for the Other is it seems less a matter of political ethics than harnessing the energies latent in language itself, the only tool with which to prise loose from a distant mental horizon the ships that are indeed "looking for all the world".

Yet as the literature of the New World shows again and again, the move from wonder to violence, from the marvellous to the murderous, is ever a rapid one (Greenblatt 1991). As Barros tells it, Días never did go ashore in 1488 but simply fired cannon and (in some sources) a crossbow. In 1497, according to the *Roteiro,* relations soon soured when the Portuguese stayed for thirteen days, helping themselves to more and more fresh water, and Da Gama employed the same technique (Mostert 1992: 38–9). The volley cleared the shoreline, but when the ships set sail again, a group of Khoi knocked down the *padrão* and the marker beacon that had been carried ashore. It was one of a string of skirmishes which led the Portuguese to turn away from the coasts of southern Africa, culminating in the D'Almeida massacre foretold by Adamastor as an atonement for the destruction which Camões had witnessed first-hand in the East: "bloody crimes, the massacre / Of Kilwa, the levelling of Mombasa" (107). In 1510, one of the punitive expeditions against unsuspecting villages which were habitually written up by Portuguese chroniclers as deeds of great valour came undone entirely when a party led by the Viceroy D'Almeida seized children and

livestock from a kraal close to the centre of the modern Cape Town (Mostert 1992: 86–7).

Even in his attempt at conferring a tragic dignity on the events, Barros reveals the nakedness and nightmarish inertia of the Portuguese when stripped of their superior technologies on the wet sand, victims of their own contempt in venturing to shore with neither armour nor firearms. The agility and energy displayed by the Khoi here is entirely different from the image constructed over the coming centuries, which emphasizes their idleness and passivity, while the picturesque oxen of Camões' African pastoral have become deadly instruments of war:

> And although some of our folk began to let the children go … the blacks came on so furiously that they … came into the body of our men, taking back the oxen; and by whistling to these and making other signs (since they are trained to this warlike device), they made them surround our men … like a defensive wall, from behind which came so many fire-hardened sticks that some of us began to fall wounded or trodden by the cattle. And since few of our men were in armour, and for weapons had only lances and swords, they could do little harm to the blacks in that manner of warfare … in the meantime a heavy sea had risen, which made him take the boats near to the ships, for safety … And when they began to reach the sands of the shore they became altogether unable to take a step, whereas the blacks went over the sand so lightly that they seemed birds …[22]

"So the history of South Africa literally turned in the wind", writes Allister Sparks, remarking that for all the grim record of Spanish and Portuguese slavery, there were differences of nuance and degree between Catholic and Protestant colonial powers that left a lasting imprint on the societies they touched: "a mineral rich Republica de Boa Esperance might have evolved into another Brazil perhaps, a society noted for its degree of racial integration rather than as a world symbol of segregation" (1990: 23). Perhaps one could develop this speculative counter-history in terms of a literary poetics to suggest why Brink's imagining of the encounter between Catholic and Khoisan works, but why fabulism and narrative indulgence cannot be so easily grafted onto the Cape after 1652.

Thus far the seam has been taken to signify an epic colonial encounter, or a source of pre-colonial riches to be mined by the magical realist author. Yet in searching for a metaphor that moves beyond isolated archipelagos and overwritten myths of origin, Leon de Kock has developed Mostert's phrase – the "hemispheric seam" – in terms of a painful, unavoidable crisis of representation. Considering South African literature in the light of its several historical frontiers and many language barriers, he imagines the sharp point of the nib as "a stitching instrument that seeks to suture the incommensurate", and suggests that the writing evinces and explores this troubling conceptual "ridge or furrow", "the site of a joining together that also bears the mark of the suture":

> The suture marked by the seam – the representational 'translation' of difference, or its denial – flattens out the incommensurate only by virtue of the strain that the ridge of the seam marks and continues to mark for as long as the suture holds. (2004: 11)

The passage has been an influential one in re-conceptualizing the South African literary field, although, as De Kock remarks, "*field* is a problematic metaphor here, like almost every other metaphor one cares to use" (1). Nonetheless, with its connotations of strain, scarring and a compulsive return to the traces of that wounding, it seems a more apt paradigm through which to consider the work of writers less inclined to imaginative elaboration within the lacunae of the archive.

For as the sixteenth century progressed and the contours, coastline and peoples of the Cape slowly emerged from centuries of speculation about Mount Purgatory, Ethiopia

and Monomotapa, this was a place that could not be absorbed into the paradisal visions of the Americas brought back by the Renaissance voyagers, nor into the rich and sensual Orient, whose lure led to the formation of the Dutch and English East India Companies in the early seventeenth century, following the decline of the Portuguese sea-borne empire. In his depiction of the first fifty years of the Dutch station, Dan Sleigh allows literary invention to displace the curt, commercial diction of the VOC archive. In both his fiction and his criticism, J. M. Coetzee stringently disallows the possibility of an Adamic naming of the African landscape, "a language in which there is no split between signifier and signified, and things are their names" (1988: 9). For both writers, prose becomes a medium of paring down rather than hyperbolic inflation, since the arrival of Calvinism and the Company's post-human economy of scale at the Cape would seem to demand a different way of writing the past: less fantastic, more flatly violent. In a judgement which may have more to do with his guarded literary style than the objective testimony of the archive, Coetzee writes that the Cape of the seventeenth century, "[w]alled in by oceans and an unexplored northern wilderness, belonged 'not to the New World but to the farthest extremity of the Old'" (2).

Notes

1 The term *lo real maravilloso* appears in Alejo Carpentier's famous preface to *El Reino de Este Mundo* [1949], *The kingdom of this world*, trans. Harriet de Onís (1990: n.p.).

2 N. P. Van Wyk Louw, "Vernuwing in die prosa" [1961] quoted in "Prysvraag: Taalmonument te Paarl," *South African architectural record* (May 1996), 13. Own translation. Reprinted in Vladislavić and Judin (1999: n.p.).

3 This translation in Vladislavić and Judin (1999: n.p.).

4 Derek Walcott, "Crusoe's island" and "Crusoe's journal" in *The castaway and other poems*, [1965] rep. in *Collected poems* (1988: 69, 92).

5 In the substitution of "invention" for "discovery" he is surely adapting the thesis of the Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman in his classic work, *The invention of America* (1961), who, like Brink, draws on Michel de Montaigne: "Our continent has just invented another". Cited in Brink (1996: 230).

6 See Van Wyk Smith (2000).

7 See Axelson (1973: 149).

8 Luiz Vaz de Camões, *The Lusiads*, trans. with intro by Landeg White, (2001: xvii–xviii). All quotations are from this edition unless otherwise stated.

9 The phrase which White translates as "experts in nomenclature" (used as the epigraph to this chapter) appears as in the original as *sábios na escritura*: i.e. "those who are wise from reading rather than from observation of nature". See Luis de Camões, *Os Lusíadas* [1572], Canto V 22, ed. with intro by Frank Pierce, (1973: n.114).

10 Cronin even suggests that with his clayey pallor and matted hair, Adamastor "is invested partly with Khoisan features" (1984: 75).

11 Sir Richard Burton, *Camões: his life and his Lusiads*, (1881: 141). Cited by Roger Walker in Davidson (1999: 587).

12 As with many of Brink's works, the Afrikaans title of *An act of terror* [1991] is better: *Die kreef raak gewoond daaraan* (The crayfish gets used to it).

13 See in particular Cronin's account of Campbell, (1984: 65–78).

14 In his 1965 introduction to William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* [1925], Van der Post writes of Adamastor: "Here, in the form of a poetic intuition and parable, is the history of Africa" (51).

15 A colour reproduction of the canvas can be viewed online at the artist's website: http://www.cyrilcoetzee.co.za/narrative.html.

16 See the 1779 *Berigt* of Hendrik Jacob Wikar for perhaps the earliest rendering of a narrative which has been recorded in over seventy variants throughout southern Africa. Rep. and trans. in Mossop (1935).

17 Considering the work of Miguel Ángel Asturias, he asks: "Who can say for certain where surrealist automatic writing ends and the Mayan world view begins in *Men of maize*, for example? Is Okri's perspective in *The famished road* Yoruba, or Igbo, or New Age?" (2005: 11).

18 I am grateful to Gerald Gaylard (2005) for drawing my attention to this phrase.

19 The phrase appears on the dust jacket.

20 Inevitably though, Lichtenstein displaces the primitivism of the colonial naming of the land onto its indigenous peoples: "The first Europeans who settled in Southern Africa, when they were obliged to teach their language to the savages, might probably by way of facilitating the task to their scholars as much as possible, convey their instruction through the medium of sensible objects. Thus they called every hill a *back*, every point of a mountain a *head*, a Hottentot village, from its resemblance to a necklace, a *kraal*, all sorts of fire-arms *reeds*, horned cattle *beasts*, the whole family of the antelopes *boks*, &c. &c" (1812: 132–3).

21 See White, introd. *The Lusiads*, (Camões 2001: xii).

22 Barros, *Da Ásia*…, trans. and abridged in R. Raven-Hart, (1967: 10–11), which gives details of the variations between the accounts of Barros, Faria y Sousa, Correa, Castanheda and De Goes. The texts can all be found in Theal's nine volume compilation of the Portuguese *Records of S. E. Africa* (1898), but Raven-Hart adds that the translations are not always reliable.

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