

Re-writing history: André Brink's *An Act of Terror* (1991) and *On the Contrary* (1993)

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Abstract

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*This article analyses the two different approaches to history and its representation demonstrated in Brink's novels **An Act of Terror** (1991) and **On the Contrary** (1993) in terms of a response to the controversial influence of postmodernism on the historical novel in South Africa today. Although the first of these two novels, **An Act of Terror**, hints at the complexities of representation in historiography and fiction, it ultimately chooses against a postmodernist view of history, preferring to interpret and represent history in terms of an over-arching metanarrative and a stable subject because it facilitates effective political action. The article then argues that the second of these novels, **On the Contrary**, can be read as an affirmation of the postmodernist view of history, especially when seen as an example of that variant of postmodernist historical fiction called "uchronian fiction" (Wesseling, 1991). Because uchronian fiction (the result of a cross-fertilization between historical fiction and science fiction) reconstructs the past in such a way as to propose possibilities for the transformation of future societies, **On the Contrary** can also be read as a politically responsible novel, thus confirming the view that postmodernism has a political dimension.*

1. Introduction

An important aspect of the historical novel in South Africa today is the often contested, but nevertheless persistent influence of postmodernism on most of the issues involved like history, representation, language, subjectivity and narrative (see Viljoen, 1993). Postmodernist thought displaces total history that seeks to insert events into grand explanatory systems and linear processes with general history that favours discontinuity, foregrounds the similarities rather

than differences between history and literature, emphasises the density, opaqueness and mediacy of language and contests the possibility of transparency in any form of representation. Feminism has also played a role in this displacement and has taken it even further: by de-naturalizing the usual opposition between the private and the political or historical (Hutcheon, 1989:141-150), it has also confronted the patriarchal bias inherent in narrative (De Lauretis, 1984:103-157). Although postmodernism has been appropriated by opposing ends of the political spectrum (Hutcheon, 1991:111), it is often criticised for lacking "a theory of agency that enables a move in political action" (Hutcheon, 1989:3). While some interpret this presumed apolitical character of postmodernism as a "refusal of history" (Eagleton, 1983:141), others point out that postmodernist philosophers have re-inscribed history into the structuralist project by questioning History (Young, 1990:23). Some researchers have tried to displace the "negative" interpretation of postmodernist historical fiction as a denial of the epistemological distinction between fact and fiction with a positive reading that emphasises the politically responsible nature of these texts that often speculate about possibilities for shaping the future (Wesseling, 1991:196). Others have tried to demonstrate the presence of a political dimension in postmodernism through their analyses of postmodernist historical novels, showing them to be highly concerned and responsible works of literature (Ibsch, 1993).

In South Africa novelists have often been taken to task for choosing postmodernist strategies that problematize issues like representation and history, rather than strategies which produce a new kind of human subject that would be able to intervene in history (Chapman, 1988:328). The author André Brink has long had the reputation of being a writer who concerns himself with the political implications of representing history in his novels. Not only has he fictionalised remote historical periods (*An Instant in the Wind* and *The First Life of Adamastor*) and historical events (the Slave Rebellion of 1825 in *A Chain of Voices*), but also recent South African history by placing fictional characters in a clearly recognisable historical context (*Looking on Darkness*, *Rumours of Rain*, *A Dry White Season*, *The Wall of the Plague*). He has also theorised about the responsibility of the writer in a given politico-historical context (see Brink, 1983; 1987). According to several South African critics Brink's metafictional novel *States of Emergency* (1988) was neither truly deconstructive nor truly responsive to the crisis posed by the State of Emergency prevailing in South Africa in the eighties (Pakendorf, 1988; Olivier, 1988; De Jong, 1988). This article analyses the way in which Brink's novels *An Act of Terror* (1991) and *On the Contrary* (1993) respond to this criticism by taking two different approaches to history and its representation. The analysis will also try to demonstrate that the postmodernist rewriting of

history evident in *On the Contrary* does not necessarily imply a refusal of history or political responsibility.

2. *An Act of Terror*

An Act of Terror relates the story of an Afrikaner activist, Thomas Landman, who belongs to a resistance movement called the "Organisation". He is involved in a failed attempt on the State President's life in which a number of innocent bystanders die. While attempting to flee South Africa after the assault, his accomplice Nina Jordaan is shot and killed by the security police on Jan Smuts airport. Thomas is consequently forced to go underground while he waits for the opportune moment to leave the country. He seeks shelter with Lisa Lombard, a casual acquaintance he met on a plane trip. After it has become known that he is the "terrorist" involved in the attempt on the President's life, she flees with him up the West Coast in the direction of the Botswana border. Lisa dies in the confrontation with the security police when they finally try to cross the border, but the heavily wounded Thomas succeeds in escaping into Botswana. The novel also includes a supplement in which Thomas records the history of thirteen generations of Landmans while recuperating in Lusaka. The mixture of fact and fiction rarely oversteps the constraints within which the traditional historical novel operates. It does not radically change recorded historical fact, flaunt anachronisms or indulge in historical fantasy as is often the case in postmodernist historical fiction (McHale, 1987:90). Although references to factual historical events abound, the specific events and figures that feature in the novel are fictional. It has been pointed out in reviews that characters in the novel are modelled on factual figures: the Afrikaner terrorist is probably based on Hein Grosskopf (Gultig, 1992:7) while secondary figures like Siphon and Noni have been associated by certain readers with Thabo Mbeki and Barbara Masekela (Willemsse, 1992:29).

The "act of terror" around which the novel revolves, presupposes a strong sense of political commitment which circumvents possible accusations about the lack of a clear political agenda and the "political double-talk" (Hutcheon, 1988:201) associated with postmodernism. It may even be argued that Brink's subject-matter cannot accommodate a narrative that is "politically unmarked" and which problematizes rather than synthesises (Hutcheon, 1988:205). It is therefore not surprising that Thomas views historical events in terms of essence and presence, rather than Derridean absence. According to him the ultimate goal of their act of terror is that moment in which political fugitives and exiles will stream back from all over the world to South Africa. He describes it as a moment in which all of African history converges to achieve a moment of pure essence: "On that resplendent future day all the history and prehistory of Africa would converge, beams of light bent inward through a burning-glass to a single

searing point where it erupts in fire" (31). This apocalyptic moment is seen as the convergence of history to a moment of pure undifferentiated presence, here almost mystically reinforced by the reference to light and fire. In what seems like a conscious reference to the deconstructionist use of the terms presence and absence, presence is linked to (political) responsibility while it is implied that absence leads to an uncommitted distance.

"Everything has become abstract, disembodied. What used to be immediate and original loses its meaning in distance and indeterminacy. If I whisper 'Two birds in a tree' in someone's ear, I need not take responsibility if it emerges at the other side as 'Who heard the scream?' That is the way we expect it to be. We *bank* on disembodiment and abstraction. The very finger that presses the red button in an ultimate war has been absolved of responsibility in advance, as all it does is execute some anonymous decision or instruction, unleashing a war that takes place at a distance ... No one is *present* any more. No message is ever fresh, or immediate, or innocent" (122), Thomas declares.

It is clear that Thomas rebels against absence, mediacy and the loss of innocence, because it implies an immoral lack of responsibility for actions taken. He also gives the urge to be "present", to be "there" (122) as the ultimate reason for his act of terror although he acknowledges that they "were already out of reach when the explosion came ... *not* there, not on the spot" concluding: "Something, I fear, will remain forever incomplete" (122).

The structure of the novel and its supplement as well as overt references by Thomas suggests that history is seen as continuous and teleological, rather than discontinuous and contingent. The idea of historical continuity is especially apparent in Thomas' feeling of connectedness with his ancestors whose history he traces in the historical chronicle that makes up the supplement to the novel. His language strongly suggests that he sees history as developing towards a culmination point in the here and now. Again in what seems like a deliberate contradiction of postmodernist terminology, he sees this point as a centre: "Circle upon circle the different layers of my existence are finally drawn in towards me, like a kaross, here, now" (611). Thomas does not only trace his existence back to the thirteen generations of Landmans he chronicles in his supplement ("How many of them have gone into the shaping of myself: Hollander, French Huguenot, English, a wandering Jew, black African, Khoikhoin" – 611), he even takes it back to the "first humanoids, the inhabitants of Taung three million years ago" (611). This feeling of historical continuity leads to a responsibility which Thomas translates into political terms: he feels responsible to his ancestors to strive for a "world more worthy and free than the one we have", because "*not* to believe in it, *not* to be prepared

to give one's life for it if necessary, would be the final insult to the skeleton of Taung" (613). This sense of historical continuity implies that Thomas also shares responsibility for the wrongs done by his forefathers; he therefore shares their guilt and must pay for the sins of the fathers. This is symbolised by the hunting scene in which Thomas kills a buck wounded by someone else and carries it on his shoulders:

In the late sunlight, into the sunset, into the falling dusk, I walked back. It felt as if I was walking back through time, through years and centuries, through at least thirteen generations: gathering as I went on, at every step, all the accumulated blood and violence and death (583).

The continuity of history also implies the possibility of progress. That is clearly part of Thomas' agenda as a political activist striving for a better South Africa and his demand to be more than just the "result of (his) own history" (826). According to him one can go beyond that: "One is also a reaction to it, a rebellion against it; in the process of amplifying or testing it, trying to corroborate it, one also rejects and replaces it" (826). The end of the novel makes it clear that this process is still in progress because Thomas urges his reader: "Do not believe it. Not yet" (827).

Apart from being represented by the novelist as a character interacting with history, Thomas himself practises historiography when he writes the chronicle of his family. It is in this section that the novel appropriates certain post-modern strategies as Thomas self-consciously reflects on his procedures. He is fully cognizant of the fact that his representation of history is an interpretative and totalizing procedure, admitting that he falls prey to the "urge to impose patterns and sense on random events, to shape a life into a chain of cause and effect" (666). He also refers to the fact that imagination plays an important role in his reconstruction of past events (323, 623, 640), conceding that he has to guard against romanticizing (641, 645) and sentimentalizing (705) the past. He acknowledges the role that fantasy (657), intuition (651), suspicion (654), guesswork (726) and invention (671) play in the writing of this historical chronicle, thereby echoing postmodern sentiments about the mediacy and opaqueness of representation. Breaking out of the conventionally linear mode of thinking about historiography, he plays with the idea that his ancestors have invented him and that he is now re-inventing and reconstructing their lives in his chronicle (659). In this "curious symbiosis" (659) the past can be retroactively influenced by the present.

The links between historiography and novel-writing are also explored in ways reminiscent of the "boundary-testing" practices of postmodernism (Hutcheon, 1988:228). On the one hand Thomas is at pains to validate the historical

veracity of his chronicle with remarks like “for the purposes of writing history I must regretfully discard most of this” (725) and “fallow earth for the novelist, not for the historian I am trying to be” (752). On the other hand he admits that he was hooked on the story of his past by the two storytellers or mythographers in his family tree, his Jewish ancestor Yitshak Kirschbaum and his grandfather Pieter Landman (797). Kirschbaum was “the first of (the) tribe wholly to invent himself by turning history into story” (797) and Thomas’ grandfather followed his example. It is therefore not surprising that Thomas’ reconstruction of the family history owes a lot to literary and mythological models in imitation of Yitshak and his grandfather’s more extravagant practices: it runs in his genes (797). Thomas’ account of the life of Fransoois reminds one of Noah; the battle between Diederik and his daughter Anna seem to be based on the characters and plot of the Greek tragedy *Antigone*; the story of Jan-Jonas’ Khoi wife Toas and their son Benjamin has distant echoes of Hagar and Ishmael; the latter part of the story about David and his wife Tommie reminds one of Bartha Smit’s *Moeder Hanna*.

The coexistence of Thomas the representer of facts with Thomas the weaver of fictions is foregrounded by his endeavours as a photographer because the problematics of representation and the tension between fact and fiction also exist in the field of photography. As a young student Thomas views photography as a creative construction (“Not a simple registering of whatever I have previously caught in the sensitive silver bromide, but a completely new world coming into being right here, now, before my eyes” – 10), rather than “a mere mechanical recording of what has been observed by the lens” (237). He is, however, at this early stage already aware of “an uneasiness, an irritation, a dissatisfaction, however vague and unformulated still, with a notion of art as something essentially disconnected from the very world it relies on” (238). Later when he becomes involved in the Struggle his view of photography seems to change. He begins to see it as a form of direct, almost unmediated representation saying on one occasion: “A camera doesn’t lie” (110). He also calls it a way of “registering” (178) or “recording” (386) events, of “gathering evidence” (386) and of “assuring that people won’t forget” (501). As such it is an invaluable tool in the political struggle. His use of the metaphors of hunting (240), battle (386) and sexual penetration (386) for photography does, however, show that he himself is implicated in the patriarchal discourses prevalent in South Africa.

The difficulties of representing history are also demonstrated by the fact that Thomas’ historical chronicle is contrasted with the one his father has written about the same events. Thomas’ rebellion against his father’s historiographic practice can also be read in terms of an oedipal confrontation with the Law of

the Father. He is much less forgiving of his father than of his more distant forebears. His father's version of their family history is in line with the official versions of South African history as written from the perspective of the Afrikaner. He sees this history in terms of a grand narrative, "a divinely inspired tale of a people elected by God, a new Israel led from the house of bondage to their own new Canaan" (770). In this process of mythologisation he exaggerates certain events and omits others that do not fit into this narrative (for instance the existence of the ancestor who married the slave girl Catharijn, Diederik who drove his own son to his death, Jan-Jonas who fathered their ancestor by the Khoi woman Toas, Jan-Jacobus who did not join the Groot Trek). Thomas counters this deliberate forgetfulness by an insistence on remembering, revealing his confidence in the transparent recoverability of historical events:

Perhaps the whole reason for the chronicle I have been driven for so long to write and which I am now ready, at last, to embark on, is this very need to record, to thwart forgetfulness, to grasp at that truth which is not so much the opposite of the lie as of forgetting. *A-letheia* (625).

In the process he re-inscribes the discredited, the neglected and the marginalised who have been deliberately erased from the official, canonised version of their family history. It is interesting to note that Thomas' father eventually comes around to his son's reading of history. He revises his interpretation of the family history in an interior monologue that takes place after he has had a stroke and can no longer speak or write. He concedes that he wanted to change the family history into a "sanctuary" (488) or "support system" (423). He admits the omissions ("We have written them out of our history" – 490) and the mythologisations, finally calling his chronicle "an entire history ... of errors" (490). Although Thomas never knows about this Damascus-experience of his father, it is clear that his own reading of history is vindicated and implied to be more "true" than that of his father.

Although the novel hints at the complexities of representation in historiography and fiction, the choice is ultimately for a stable subject, presence and transparency because it facilitates effective political action. An important point of criticism that can be leveled at Thomas' historical chronicle is that it does not succeed in breaking the patriarchal narrative mould so strongly imposed on South African discourse. Even though Thomas records the fact that his mother is critical of the patriarchal bias reflected in his chronicle based on the traditional family tree (she calls it "all this male business about who begat whom" – 638), he does not succeed in rehabilitating his project. In the last instance Thomas' chronicle, as well as the novel in which it is incorporated,

still sees history as a teleological project firmly in the hands of men, replacing one master narrative with another.

3. *On the Contrary*

Whereas *An Act of Terror* was conceived and written in the oppressive eighties, *On the Contrary* was written against the background of the changed political scenario of the early nineties. It concerns the life of an historical figure, Estienne Barbier, who was born in France in 1699 and arrived in the Cape in 1734 as a soldier in the service of the Dutch East India Company. His short career in the Cape was marked by several clashes with the colonial authorities. He is perhaps best remembered for representing a group of white colonists, voicing their grievances against the government in a number of letters and other documents. The most important of these documents was the "Avis of Great Importance" which Barbier affixed to the door of a church in Drakenstein (in itself an unlawful act) on the 1st of March 1739, following which he was proclaimed an outlaw. Barbier succeeded in avoiding arrest for a while because he was given shelter by colonists loyal to him, but was finally arrested on the 10th of September 1739. He was sentenced to death and barbarously executed on the 14th of November 1739, his head and right hand cut off, his body quartered and the sections impaled and displayed next to the busiest roads in the colony (Penn, 1988:1). Brink's novel about the life of Estienne Barbier not only demonstrates and reflects on the difficulties encountered in the *writing* of history; it also engages in a further type of self-reflexivity that comments on the *making* of history as indicated by the invention of alternatives to official history. Although the novel does not contradict any of the known historical facts about Barbier, it investigates the "dark areas" in Barbier's life with an imaginative vigour that reminds one of the "alternate histories" identified as an important characteristic of postmodernist historical fiction. These "alternate histories" are invented when novelists turn to the past in order to look for the unrealized possibilities that inhered in historical situations and subsequently imagine what history would have looked like if unrealized sequences of events and courses of action had come about. When these divergences from established historical facts are not entirely random, they envisage possibilities for the future transformation of society from a standpoint in the past (Wesseling, 1991:13-14). This "future-oriented interest in the past" (Wesseling, 1991:169) indicates the political commitment inherent in postmodernist historical fiction. This bears out the statement that postmodernist historical novels can be "highly concerned and responsible works of literature" (Ibsch, 1993:192).

The substance conventionally associated with historical fact is eroded from the outset of Brink's novel by the fact that it takes the form of a letter Barbier addresses to the slave woman Rosette while imprisoned in the Dark Hole in the

Castle at the Cape before his execution. The circumstances of Barbier's imprisonment in the Dark Hole dictate that the letter and therefore the text that one is about to read, do not exist: he has neither pen nor paper, and if he had, it would be too dark to see anything. "I am dead: you cannot read: this will (therefore) not have been a letter" (3), his introductory words read. This direct reference to the first sentence of Derrida's "Outwork" in *Dissemination* (1981: 3) indicates that the novel will be deconstructing the presence of written fiction as well as historical documents. The use of Barbier's signature at the conclusion of the novel that seems to affirm his existence as historical fact has therefore already been deconstructed in advance by his initial confession: "I am absent from myself. I am absence. All I may have had, is this story" (4). These explicit references to absence almost seem like a conscious response to the quest for presence portrayed in *An Act of Terror*.

The slave woman Rosette is only briefly mentioned in the historical documents concerning Barbier. Sworn statements by three soldiers refer to the fact that Barbier kept her in his room for a night after which he locked her up with the prisoners under his care, before helping her to escape (Pheiffer, 1976:16). This incident is pivotal in Brink's reconstruction of Barbier's history; it is also central to the way in which the novel depicts the raising of his political and historical consciousness. To demonstrate the difficulty and uncertainties surrounding such reconstruction, Brink makes Barbier give two versions of this incident in the novel. In the one version he tells how he used Rosette because she is his inferior as woman and slave, employing various sexual stereotypes about woman. According to the other version she passes the night with the drunkenly impotent Barbier by telling him stories. The fact that he addresses his letter (the novel we are reading) to this slave woman results from his overwhelming feeling of guilt towards her. That he addresses a woman and a slave at all is indicative of the fact that this novel tries to correct the exclusion of minorities and other subordinate groups from historical records as well as fiction.

The opaqueness and unreliability of fiction, as well as the historical documents on which it is based in this case, is demonstrated by the choice of Barbier as narrator. Described in the subtitle of the novel as a liar, he is presented as a charming rogue who often admits that he has deceived his reader in the course of his narrative, someone who indulges in flights of fantasy about spectacular revenges on his enemies and who constantly re-invents his life in the stories he fabricates about his past (see Burger, 1995). This side of his character introduces a certain lightness into the interwoven subjects of historiography and novelwriting, marking a distinct difference with the solemnity of Thomas Landman in *An Act of Terror*. The irony of having the liar Barbier defend truth

against the corrupt authorities and uttering one of the novel's mottos, "Those who speak the truth find no shelter in this land", adds to the novel's unsettling play with concepts like truth. The lie also has an effect on the reality of Barbier as subject, showing him to be a construction rather than a reality. On the one hand he is the construct of his own lies or fabulation, on the other hand he is the construct of the author's lies or fictionalisation. He is also aware of the fact that he is being imagined or re-imagined by an author somewhere in the future, again hinting at the constructedness of fiction as well as historical fact. He gets the sensation "not of writing, but of being written, not of observing, but of being observed – and from a great distance, a distance both of time and space, from a century as yet undawned" (183). The inclusion of Jeanne d'Arc as travel companion who inspires and admonishes Barbier also demonstrates the ability to fuse fact with fiction: the reader only gradually realises that Jeanne is not a real person, but only exists in his imagination as a dialogic counter for his ideas. A reference to his other faithful companion, namely a copy of *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, demonstrates that he is conscious of the fact that the status of his story may be affected by his status as convicted criminal, imagining his novel in prison: "Why does one read the accounts of the convicts as lies, but Don Quixote's inventions as something altogether different?" (122). By using Barbier as narrator, the novelist makes use of the discredited and illegitimate knowledges usually disqualified in the writing of official history thereby hinting at the legitimating force of political power in establishing "historical fact".

The problematic status of historical documents is illustrated by Barbier's shortlived experience as scribe on an expedition into the interior led by Allemann, the man who later became his sworn enemy. The impossibility of finally verifying such documents is further emphasised by the fact that this journey by Barbier and his appointment as scribe is a fantasy (or "lie") produced by the author Brink: although figures like Allemann and Mentzel are founded in historical fact, Barbier's participation in the journey is fictional. According to Barbier the test for the recording of any observation in his official journal is the sanction of their leader and what was judged acceptable to possible readers (26), demonstrating the way in which historical documents can be "locations of power" (Belsey, 1988:405). After refusing to omit certain events from his journal, Barbier is replaced as a scribe by Otto Mentzel, Alleman's protégé, whom he calls a "liar and turd" (37). It is interesting to know that Mentzel's biased account of Barbier in his biography of Allemann is one of the few sources of information about Barbier that readers refer to today (Penn, 1988:4). One can also compare the deconstructive strategies in Brink's historical novel about Barbier with the objectives Mentzel set for himself when

writing Allemann's biography in 1781, revealing something of the "history of historiography":

I earnestly assure my readers, in the name of all that an honourable man holds sacred, that in my whole narrative, not a circumstance, not a single word even, has been exaggerated; I need hardly say nothing fictitious has been introduced. I am not the sort of man who writes books for the profit of a publisher; still less would I seek to entertain the public with fictitious tales (Mentzel, 1919).

According to the novel, Barbier himself is convinced that the representation of historical facts can be aided by the judicious use of the lie:

It is not difficult to show that the constitution of a man frequently betrays him into a falsehood. And yet the curious thing is that were it not for this latitude allowed the author, this permissibility of falsehood in the individual, no apprehension of the truth may be imaginable at all. It is only by allowing the possibility of the lie that we can grope, as I am groping in this dark hole, towards what really happened, is happening, may yet happen (27).

In imagining his letter to Rosette, he comments on the usefulness of the lie in getting closer to the truth: "all that remains is to imagine the real, to improve on what has seemed like truth, to find or invent the shaded meanings of it ... the truth is environed by the lie, accessible only through the adventures of trying to tell it" (200). In spite of Barbier's predilection for the lie he is incensed when he finds out that the transcriptions of records of a court case he was involved in are, in his words, "a concoction of errors, omissions, additions and downright lies" (205; cf. also Pfeiffer, 1976:25). Again these are the documents partly responsible for our and the author's knowledge about Barbier, demonstrating "the problematic nature of the past as an object of knowledge for us in the present" (Hutcheon, 1988:92).

The novel's alternative to documented history mainly concerns the three journeys into the interior that Barbier undertakes for which no historical evidence can be found. Barbier's participation in the first two of these journeys can be considered plausible although unconfirmed; the third journey described in the novel is pure fantasy, overstepping both logical and chronological constraints. On the first journey into the interior accompanying Allemann's expedition, Barbier is the condescending European, who sees himself as representative of a civilising force in a dark continent: "a precarious yet invincible trickle of civilisation and noble aspirations moving through a dark interior, rewarding it with conscience and history" (18). He regards the Khoi people as a "nation of stammerers" and considers their language a "monster" (22). According to the novel he also undertakes a second journey into the

interior, this time accompanying the colonists he would later represent in their fight against the authorities on a bartering expedition into Namaqualand. This journey is portrayed as a vicious plundering of the interior during which sheep and cattle were often robbed from the different tribes. In his account of this journey Barbier tells how they discovered Monomotapa with its golden palace and throngs of naked women, only to confess later that it was a fantasy (no doubt echoing the European coloniser's ultimate fantasy about Africa). The injustices perpetrated on these journeys make it necessary for Barbier to imagine a third journey into the interior while in prison. He describes it as a redemptive journey: "A necessary journey to redeem myself. For this I have to reach to those we expelled, and scattered, and attacked, and insulted" (350). It is also a journey in search of the slave Rosette from whom he seeks absolution for his abuse of her, but also for his disparagement of everyone of her race, class and gender. He apologises to the Khoikhoi for the use of the pejorative name "Hottentot" (358) and asks forgiveness for his condescending attitude towards their language (354). He undergoes the retribution which he invites by confessing his guilt with equanimity, saying: "This is my necessary purging on behalf of all of us who have invaded this space to subjugate it with our presumption and visit it with our devastation" (359). He also strives for an immediate, mystical experience of Rosette who gradually comes to symbolise Africa in its physicality and orality. He finally reaches her in the symbolically rich navel of a mountain where she sits telling stories next to a spring that breaks from the earth (365). The moment that he tries to affirm this mystical moment of presence by embracing Rosette, she disintegrates and disappears (366), again deconstructing presence and confirming the sense of absence with which the novel starts.

Throughout the novel one is conscious of the presence of a twentieth century sensibility, sometimes even traces of the author Brink, in the eighteenth century Barbier. This difference is revealed rather than concealed (as for instance in the "Acknowledgements" by the author), foregrounding the logical impossibility of this alternate history that Brink constructs around Barbier. Barbier is for example made to speak with the words of contemporary philosopher Derrida, he is extremely attached to a text admired and often cited by Brink namely Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, he resembles several other Brink heroes in his rising awareness of social injustice, he displays the social consciousness of a twentieth century person in reacting to colonialism's effect on indigenous peoples and ecosystems and he is aware of the necessity of the peaceful coexistence of different groups of people, using the words of an appeal by a member of the PLO to the Israeli delegation during their peace talks in 1991 (375) in a speech to the Khoikhoi.

Brink's construction of an alternate history around Barbier can perhaps most fruitfully be read in terms of that variant of postmodernist historical fiction called "uchronian fiction". Viewing some forms of postmodernist historical fiction as the result of a cross-fertilization between historical fiction and science fiction with its strongly utopian leanings, Wesseling (1991:101) defines uchronian fiction as "the type of counterfactual fantasy which devises alternatives within the confines of documented history". The term *uchronian* suggests that this kind of fiction is counterfactual, utopian and that it relates to time rather than place (Wesseling, 1991:102). Jeanne d'Arc's words, which are meant to inspire Barbier to action, can therefore also be applied to the author's attempt to write an uchronian fiction in this novel: "Chronology is our challenge ... Break the chain" (228) and "interfere with history" (229), she says. Brink does indeed break the chain of chronology and interfere with history in denaturalizing the historical facts about Barbier and fantasising an alternative to the official records about him. The politically committed nature of this re-writing of the past is already implied by the utopian element incorporated in the term uchronian fiction. The author's visit to the past in this novel is clearly constructed so as to propose possibilities for the transformation of future societies. Barbier's history, in which he develops from condescension to contrition, is fantasised in such a way that it indicates a growth towards the kind of political consciousness appropriate for the South African context today. The title of the novel (*On the Contrary*) can therefore be read as an indication that history must constantly be contradicted and re-written in an attempt not only to change the past but also the future. Brink's reconstruction of Barbier's history in a manner that addresses past imbalances of power, becomes a form of retrospective affirmative action with implications for contemporary and future situations. In this respect the novel can be compared to the texts of writers like Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*), Reed (*Mumbo Jumbo*), Pynchon (*V*), Doctorow (*Ragtime*), Wolf (*Kassandra*), Coover (*The Public Burning*) and Grass (*Der Butt*) who revisit the past in order to compensate for the major defects of Western history: ethnocentrism, androcentrism and imperialism (Wesselin, 1991:165). Because it imagines the past from the perspective of a loser in history like Barbier and rewrites that past in the interest of the marginalised and the repressed, Brink's novel can be said to be informed by the "emancipating political ethos" identified in many examples of postmodernist historical fiction (Wesseling, 1991:113). As such the novel constitutes a meaningful political act, albeit not an act of terror.

4. Conclusion

A comparison of these two novels by Brink demonstrates that *On the Contrary* (strongly influenced by postmodernist ideas in its rewriting of history) is as

concerned and politically committed as *An Act of Terror* (which overtly engages with the political situation in South Africa at the time of its writing). An analysis of *On the Contrary* shows that a politically responsible re-writing of history does not preclude the use of postmodernist strategies. It is precisely these strategies which enable the author to establish a political ethos that addresses problems like ethnocentrism, androcentrism and imperialism in past as well as contemporary South African society while writing the (hi)story of eighteenth century Barbier. Finally the novel about Barbier affirms that post-modernism does not necessarily imply a refusal of either history or political responsibility.

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