



# The many “faces” of history: *Manly Pursuits* and *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz* at the interface of confrontation and reconciliation

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## Abstract

The many “faces” of history: *Manly Pursuits* and *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz* at the interface of confrontation and reconciliation

Several English and Afrikaans novels written during the nineties focus on confrontation with the past by exposing past injustices and undermining various myths and legends constructed in support of ideological beliefs. This commitment has gradually assumed the proportions of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A comparison of two recent novels dealing with events preceding and during the Anglo-Boer War, **Manly Pursuits** by Ann Harries and **Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz** [*In search of General Mannetjies Mentz*] by Christoffel Coetzee provides an interesting angle to this debate. This article is an attempt to contextualise these novels within the larger framework of a contemporary South African reality; to acknowledge and reconcile, or assemble, disparate “faces” of a South African historical event at a specific moment in time. In **Manly Pursuits**, Ann Harries focuses on the arch imperialist, the “colossus of Africa”, Cecil John Rhodes, to expose the machinations behind the scenes in the “take over” of southern Africa, while in the Afrikaans novel, **Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz**, the General becomes the embodiment of collective guilt. Written within a postmodern paradigm, both texts problematize the relationship between history and fiction by revealing deviations from “historic data” suggesting alternate versions of such “documentation” and by juxtaposing the private lives of historical personages with their public images.

## 1. Contextualisation

This article is a comparison of two recent novels dealing with events preceding and during the Anglo-Boer War, *Manly Pursuits* (1999) by Ann Harries and *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz* (1998) [*In search of General Mannetjies Mentz*] by Christoffel Coetzee. It is an attempt to contextualise these novels within the framework of a contemporary South African reality; in other words, to acknowledge and reconcile, or *assemble*, disparate “faces” of a South African historical event at a specific moment in time. Written within a postmodern paradigm, these texts illustrate the problematic relationship between history/historiography and fiction, both discourses that aid us in making sense of everyday experience and the past. As Linda Hutcheon (1992:92) explains: “It is historiography’s explanatory and narrative emplotments of past *events* that construct what we consider historical *facts*.” Furthermore, these novels also conform to Hutcheon’s (1992:96) description of the “pluralist (and perhaps troubling) view of historiography as consisting of different but equally meaningful constructions of past reality – or rather, of the textualized remains (documents, archival evidence, witnesses’ testimony) of that past.” This plurality is attained in the novels either through deviations from “historic data” or by suggesting alternate versions in juxtaposing the private lives of historical personages with their public images.

It seems particularly apposite at present, when the forces of confrontation and reconciliation are manifestly at work in South African literature, to take stock of the negative and positive aspects of such a comparative process. If postcolonial literature is honest in its intention to include suppressed voices and give a more representative account of reality than provided by official history, we should perhaps also consider how effective counter narratives are and whether “rewriting” could degenerate into just another “one-sided testimony”. Such a discussion would of necessity, refer to the role of ideology in fictional discourse which is defined by Du Plooy (1990:216) as a system of values, ideas, motives and norms that strives to understand and interpret reality but also serves to shape and distort it by prioritising the specific goals of a community. Consequently, as Du Plooy (1990:224) points out, adherence to a single ideological perspective (or one-sided testimony) could impair and restrict the reading and interpretation of a text (Du Plooy, 1990:222).

Comparing two different versions of the same event in history enables us to obtain a more representative perspective or, as Wilson Harris (1983:xv) suggests, develop a “horizon of sensibility” on the past and its complexities and be able to “transform claustrophobic ritual by cross-cultural imaginations”. However, in view of the subversive nature of

literature and the historic implications of these novels, I shall attempt to play devil's advocate by reminding the reader that an exposé of the private lives of public figures and legendary folk heroes should also be read with the necessary circumspection and considered within the appropriate context. The significance of the two texts lies in the historical reality that they reflect/interpret and particularly in the ironic undertone informing both novels. The respective writers are aware of ideological influences underpinning the perceptions of these historic events and attempt to deconstruct certain myths and stereotypes. In fact, the novels seem to "speculate openly about historical displacement and its ideological consequences, about the way one writes about the past 'real', about what constitute 'the known facts' of any given event" (Hutcheon, 1992:94). This implicit awareness also allows the reader the freedom to consider other possibilities and to explore and unmask personal and cultural idiosyncracies that might have contributed to certain of his/her actions and beliefs in the past.

In contrast with the rather onerous and recriminatory nature of some of the publications celebrating the centenary of the Anglo-Boer War, Harries's *Manly Pursuits* provides a refreshing glimpse on English and South African history and letters. Seen from a South African context, it also acts as an interesting foil to Christoffel Coetzee's novel, which occupies a different position on the social spectrum with regard to the writers' gender, language and cultural contexts. Yet, both are situated in South Africa and share the Anglo-Boer War as a common theme. Within this context, they are also both preoccupied with the role of ideology and power in the configuration of historical events, and the different concepts of betrayal. There seems to be a particularly ironic tone in both the titles referring to men. The title of the first novel, *Manly Pursuits*, gives the impression of female indulgence for the "games men play", but this tone is undercut by the content of the novel illustrating how games can lead to irresponsible actions of war. The second novel, *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz*, not only points to a search for identity, but also implicitly refers to a fruitless search for true male, or human heroism. The diminutive form for "man" (*mannetjie* in Afrikaans) also seems to imply an additional tongue-in-the-cheek image of an assumed posture of machismo.

## 2. History and fiction

Preoccupation with history is a major concern in postcolonial writing but also in literature in general. In fact, Aikant (2000:337) claims that "the most contentious aspect of what we call literature is its relationship to history". Yet, reference to the past is crucial because, as Walhout

(1987:41) firmly points out in response to Ryker's criticism of "the 'ritual slaying' of the past":

The movement to something new cannot take place except in relationship to what already exists, that is, to what is or becomes the past. Change implies difference, and to discover or shape something new requires both an evaluation of the past and a separation from it.

Contemporary South African novels, particularly those written during the nineties, are characterised by a quality of reassessment, of re-writing history. This manifestation is also notable in the literary "testimonies" of white writers, particularly Afrikaans ones (Van der Merwe, 1999:229) previously associated with colonisation, whose work could almost be deemed a literary truth and reconciliation "mission". Several recently published South African novels address this aspect. For instance, André Brink's indictment of an apartheid utopia in *Imaginings of Sand* (1996) and *Devil's Valley* (1998); J.M. Coetzee's implicit directive towards self-examination in *Disgrace* (1999); Anne Landsman's thought-provoking exposé of the past in *The Devil's Chimney* (1997); Christoffel Coetzee's discourse on rampant ideological bias in *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz* and finally, Ann Harries's ironic account of English colonial enterprise flawed by hidden personal agendas in *Manly Pursuits*.

This testimonial quality is, however, criticized by John (2000:43-44) because it depends largely on the unreliability of memory, which constitutes the mainspring of individual recollections from the past. On the one hand, his scepticism concerning the reliability of memory is justified (John, 2000:45) as it is selective and also subject to the "interpretation" of facts and event. On the other hand, this tendency for "confession" should perhaps be regarded as typical of the contemporary period of transition, of a new *Zeitgeist* (John, 2000:45) which cannot be denied if one takes into consideration the number of Afrikaans academics, critics and writers who seem to share this view (John, 2000:48). It would not serve any purpose to deny the emotions of individuals and communities by pointing to their ideological bias because they seem to need such an exercise. As Du Plooy (1990:227) points out, people continue doing things "gewoon omdat hulle sekere dinge glo".

If John's article could therefore be interpreted as an attempt to create an awareness of other perspectives or to advise on the danger of adhering to a single perception of historical reality (as this article attempts to do and as Du Plooy has convincingly proven in her article mentioned above) his criticism would be justified. He (John, 2000:50) is also justified in pointing out that various disciplines are indiscriminately engaged in this confrontation with the past. But, is it not this aspect of literature that

provides a safety valve for other more deeply embedded issues relating to sociology, religion, psychology and history?

It must be noted that the South African novels mentioned above all indicate a notable shift in emphasis away from the restrictive black-white racial polarities that Nicholas Visser (1997) perceives as the main preoccupation of South African postcolonial literature. The focus has gradually shifted from cause and confrontation to effects and intimations of reconstruction and reconciliation in the promotion of creating a better future. This change implies the recognition of other important factors that constitute a community and its history, such as the influence of ideologies that “shape” history and the various perceptions of identity. For instance, Samin (2000:26) correctly points out that a writer like Zakes Mda does not focus his attention exclusively on “reconciliation between victims and perpetrators” but concentrates on the black community and issues such as solidarity, that need to be addressed in that context. The two novels discussed in this paper also address much wider issues than the conventional black/white conflict depicted in literature.

In an attempt to bridge or facilitate the deadlock between the past and the present, or the official and the personal, several writers such as André Brink (South Africa), and Wilson Harris (Guyana) have appropriated and fictionalised history. Brink (1996:19) in fact, exploits the subjective composition of history by equating his “stories” to “histories” while Harris, as Dominique Dubois (1998:37) points out in a fascinating article on the novelist, defines his unique perception of history as a process of “Infinite Rehearsal”. Similar to Alejo Carpentier’s idea of retracing the “lost steps” in his novel, *Los Pasos Perdidos* (1953), Harris proposes that “Modern man retrace his steps and revisit his past” (Dubois, 1998:39); he pleads for the exhumation of the “fossils” of the personal as well as the collective unconscious. This process of dis-interment constitutes the fabric of creative writing, of fictionalising history; it revitalises the past, enabling it to mesh with the present. In this sense, fiction, or for that matter fantasy, would represent the individual’s attempt to write herself into history by drawing attention to distinctive and personal moments in time. J.M. Coetzee (1988:4) also contends that history and the novel are both forms of discourse; that history should not be awarded primacy in such a comparison because it “is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other”. In fact, it is his main concern that people tend to view and appropriate history as an absolute. It is the actual dynamic quality of history, its dependence on the relevance of context that Walhout (1995:12) emphasises when he states: “The difference between history and the stories we tell is that the

story of history is always in process, never finished”. All the mentioned critics then seem to agree that history and stories have much in common but that the main problem lies in their interpretation.

Through the imagination a writer can either link disparate events to provide coherence, make sense of a fragmented reality (thus creating a story to interpret the past), or focus on individual experience to expose the gaps in documented history’s representation of an apparently seamless continuity between events. Walhout (1995:14) points out that, “The value of stories (literature) is in the final analysis that they help us to reflect on possible directions for our own actions in our own historical stories”. Yet, the presence of personal experience in fiction also enables the reader to identify and recognise the dominant ideologies, or “distortions and diffractions” as Scott (2001:303) implicitly refers to them, that inform the different historical contexts and contribute towards the construction of a social identity.

### 3. The role of ideology

In this article I am particularly concerned with the role of ideology in history and its different manifestations in the two novels mentioned above. I shall attempt to illustrate how the novels conform to Scott’s (2001:290) contention that historical events can only be structured into a semblance of artificial coherence by “effacing” the essential differences; by constructing “a fantasized narrative that imposes sequential order on otherwise chaotic and contingent occurrences”. Although she does not specify ideology, she notes that “political movements use history to solidify identity and thereby build constituencies across the boundaries of difference” and then astutely points out: “where there is evidence of what seems enduring and unchanging identity, there is a history that needs to be explored” (Scott, 2001:304).

In Hutcheon’s (1992:97) terms:

Historiographic metafiction self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning. And, even more basically, we only know of those past events through their discursive inscription, through their traces in the present.

In a recent article on history and memory, Copland (2000:138) gives an interesting example of such “fictionalisation” when he refers to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s hearings. He observes that despite its justifiability, “the exercise could produce neither certifiable truths nor palpable cross-racial or political reconciliation”. In fact, he claims that “its

own most important product” has been the TRC “narrative” (Copland, 2000:138) by which he implies that the disparate voices (and memories) have eventually been combined into “a single moral and political story”, effacing the internal conflicts and contesting testimonies in the interest of a univocal “official” story that consolidates ANC leadership. It is this “story” that John (2000:47) also questions because he maintains that the TRC neglects to differentiate between judicial and theological issues leading to a reduction of the complexity of historical reality. We are also reminded of Bowers’s (1993:10) contention about the reliability of memory and its propensity to view interpretations as objective facts. According to Bowers (1993:63) memory becomes an ideological tool unless it “includes the historical perspective that enables the individual to place issues in a broader context and to exercise a form of critical judgement that can hold accountable those who misrepresent the past in order to gain political advantage”.

The gaps that exist in historical documentation are then often justified or ignored for the sake of fictional creativity, with the result that facts become identified with values. This analogy is evident in historical interpretation and fictional representation when facts concerning historical figures are manipulated to express certain preconceived ideas (that is, when they conform to traditional perceptions of patriotism) or suggest implicit reservations about revered historical events and personages (in other words, when certain historical “facts” are questioned). Fictional and legendary heroes or patriots could then be elevated to assume historical significance or authenticity out of proportion to reality or be demoted to insignificance. In the two novels, *Manly Pursuits* and *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz*, the question of “white accountability” as Samin (2000:19) describes it, or British perversion and Afrikaner guilt in this case, is exaggerated to such an extent that both versions assume unrealistic proportions – consciously or unconsciously. It is then my contention that the novels should also be read as expositions of the discrepancies between public figures and private lives.

#### 4. Private lives and public heroes

The publication and subsequent reception of *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz*, at a politically sensitive moment in time (Anglo-Boer War centenary in 1999), has provided an interesting example of viewing history as an absolute construct. The novel has either been praised for its subversive quality or criticised for its “distortion” of historical facts. The critic and historicist, Fransjohan Pretorius’s (1999) attempt to compare the novel with authentic data on the war, proves to be an interesting case in point. In an attempt to determine the historical veracity of General

Mentz’s movements and escapades during the Anglo-Boer war by comparing documented historical events and locations with identical ones described in the novel, he finds that the data do not correspond with the fictional account. Consequently, he (Pretorius, 1999:16) suggests that Coetzee might have manipulated or distorted the facts and have used Mentz as the embodiment of collective guilt. Although it seems justified to compare a novel with its historical context, his attempt to verify the historical incidents and places mentioned in the novel fails to take into account the basic dialectic between history and fiction and the ironic quality of the text. The fact that Mentz is both the perpetrator of inhuman deeds and victim of the Anglo-Boer War, constitutes an additional element of irony which further problematizes the complex relationship between perpetrator and victim. In the final instance, it is not important whether such a person as Mannetjies Mentz existed or whether his feats or crimes (depending on perspective) actually occurred at the locations and times stated, but whether such a man could have existed! One should recognise the fact that Coetzee is deconstructing the Afrikaner heroic myth, which he explicitly indicates in the “editorial” section preceding the three “historical” accounts of the war (p. 27).

## 5. *Manly Pursuits*

In *Manly Pursuits*, Ann Harries provides a glimpse into the private life of the arch-imperialist, the “Colossus”, Cecil Rhodes, to expose the machinations and misinterpretations behind the scenes that resulted in the Anglo-Boer War and the eventual “take over” of southern Africa. The narrator, Prof. Francis Wills, who is a professor of ornithology from Oxford, introduces the reader to the events directly preceding the Anglo-Boer War. His presence in the Cape at this time in history is explained by Rhodes’s passion for nightingale song. Wills had been instructed by Rhodes to import and introduce nightingales, blackbirds and starlings into the conifer forests (p. 5) on the slopes behind The Great Granary (or Groote Schuur, as it is commonly called in South Africa). Rhodes’s attempt to introduce foreign fauna and flora into the South African context and his seemingly innocuous remark to Wills about bird song as “nothing less than the song of civilization” (p. 13), manifest his determination to colonise and anglicise the colonies. It is of course ironic that birds usually sing to establish their territory (p. 17) but that Will’s imported birds remain mute in the Cape due to their confusion related to the change in seasons. This “bird foible” is further accentuated by elevating it to equal importance as the talks on war and subjugation of the recalcitrant Boers. All these images represent an implicit critique on colonisation which is further extended in the rest of the novel.



The fact that the novel is divided into two main parts could be seen as a structural emphasis on Wills's dual personality: his preference for male company and his avoidance of contact with females (p. 48). In the first part, Wills's present situation is alternated with retrospective reflections on the past: his eccentric childhood (p. 112), his studies at Oxford and involvement with and relationship to famous historical personages such as Oscar Wilde, Charles Dodgson (alias Lewis Carroll), John Ruskin, Rudyard Kipling, Lord Arthur Milner, Leander Starr Jameson and Cecil John Rhodes. However, in this process of retrospection, he not only exposes their "scandalous" private lives but also reveals his own vulnerability and prejudice to the reader. This subtle and unconscious self-critique or exposure constitutes a part of the novel's appeal. It could be compared to the achievements of that unsurpassable South African raconteur of fireside tales, Herman Charles Bosman, whose critique of innate prejudice is masterfully exposed in his famous narrator, Oom Schalk Lourens.

Although the narrator, Wills, maintains a tongue-in-the-cheek stance, he displays narcissistic traits and emerges as an arch hypochondriac ("stretched on the rack of chronic dyspepsia" (p. 5)); a recluse with a predilection for little girls (the nude pictures he takes of Maria (p. 334)) that disqualifies him in the eyes of society as a "reliable or even normal" individual and also places him squarely in the same class as men such as Wilde, Rhodes and Dodgson (with regard to their sexual preferences). His interest in birds (helpless animals – "to slit open the throat of a nightingale" (p. 94)), passion for classification (p. 115) and vivisection, as well as his enthusiasm for photography (second-hand physical evidence of experience (p. 7)) identify him as an impotent, emotionless outsider, a voyeur, who becomes an onlooker on life. He seems to be a repository of worthless information and a dried-up specimen of humanity reminiscent of his father's moth collection (p. 117).

Whereas the first part focuses on his relationships with colleagues and former male college friends such as Wilde and Rhodes, the second part elaborates on his friendship with little Maria van den Berg, depicts an amiable relationship with Mrs. Kipling as well as an aloof kind of rapport with the eccentric personality of Olive Schreiner. The second half also reveals a more spontaneous part of his reclusive personality. This is especially evident in the conclusion when, in a letter to Olive Schreiner, he reveals an ironic perspective on the part he played in the events that preceded the war. He also subtly hints at the irony that Jameson, as the mastermind behind and main precipitant of the Anglo-Boer War, had been considered for knighthood while a person like Schreiner, who had

gone to considerable lengths to prevent it, has receded into historical oblivion.

Critics seem to differ about the basic themes underlying the novel. While Merrington (1999:266) identifies the idea of disgrace as one of the main themes in the novel, Weideman (2000:11) places the focus on the symbolism associated with “voëls en diere wat fladder”. Although their interpretations seem valid, I would argue that there seems to be an even more elemental theme embedded in the imagery: an implicit theme related to different concepts of freedom and imprisonment/inhibition.

Maria’s role provides the catalyst for developing an implicit contrast between freedom and incarceration and repression: her presence, her task to emulate bird song on her clay pipe, and her free roaming of the mountain slopes, form a strong contrast with the caged and mute birds at the Great Granary and by implication, to Will’s inability to relate to women. This implicit critique could also be extended to Victorian society’s emphasis on social restrictions, respectability and the resultant repression of sexuality that dictated secrecy and forced men like Wilde, Rhodes and Wills to become introverts and outsiders. Indirectly, it also relates to the grasping tentacles of imperialism as exemplified in Rhodes’s ventures to appropriate new land for the British throne and his efforts to impose English culture on the indigenous populations. Thus, repression, oppression and colonization are illustrated on the personal, social and political levels. Finally, although he might not have intended it in such a universal way, Merrington’s (1999:266) statement about “the grand self-images of the English imperial patriarchy” also ironically highlights women’s lack of freedom in that exclusive male world of Victorian respectability.

## **6. *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz***

The setting for *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz* is the eastern Free State where the legendary General Mannetjies Mentz performed his heroic feats, or rather, “committed” his escapades and crimes (p. 3) during the Anglo-Boer War. The main narrator who regards himself as an amateur psychologist (p. 18), attempts to trace and piece together the legendary – and disreputable – career of the General, and to determine the extent to which his own family, the Naudés, had been involved or complicit in the General’s deeds.

In the process of unravelling the past, which also assumes the character of a search for personal and national identity, one of the narrators questions the veracity of historical documentation with regard to the existence of Mentz. He realises that there is little factual evidence to

support the General's legendary operations; that he might have been authentic but could have operated under a different name; that he could have become the scapegoat for dastardly deeds fabricated by the true perpetrators to avoid responsibility; or, that his feats might be regarded in the same light as Baron Von Munchausen's (p. 14-16). The narrator is, however, careful to point out that the absence of Mentz's name from historical documentation does not imply that he never existed, both because history is told selectively and because Mentz had such an unremarkable presence that seemed to merge with the background in a large company of people (p. 20).

The novel is divided into four sections. The first section relates to the narrator's own data and editorial notes, which act as a *raison d'être* for writing the novel. The sections are in chronological order according to the dates they were recorded, ranging from the most recent to the oldest data. However, at the same time, their order also represents the least verifiable evidence first, and the most acceptable, officially documented information, last. The latter order ironically underscores the question of the reliability of evidence because although Ounooi's recording is the most recent, it is also dependent on the least reliable source: the memories of a child during the events described (thus the third-hand information he refers to in the introduction, p. 3).

The second and third sections of the novel are "authentic" sources that the narrator has discovered in the backyard of his own family history and they constitute the main body of the text. The second represents the "storyline": It is his grandmother, Ounooi's, recollections from her childhood recorded on tape during her old age. Here she recounts her childhood experience of the war while concealed in the mountains with her mother and siblings and how Mentz's role during that time had impacted on her family. In particular, the death of the British soldier, Charlie White, made an indelible impression on her. He had been the lover of her aunt Anne and had been killed in a grotesque and inhuman manner by Mentz's evil accomplice, Niemann.

The third section gives Blink Frans's version of events in the form of memoirs, interspersed with personal letters to his sister Ounooi in justification of his actions and decisions. He recounts the events that induced him to accompany General Mentz on his escapades for nine years and touches on the personal and social repercussions and implications of the "revenge" commando operated by Mentz. Mentz, a type of megalomaniac and disciplinarian, who suffered from excruciating festering wounds on his back inflicted by an unknown enemy, selected his own company of reliable soldiers who swore allegiance to him (somewhat a reverse type of Robin Hood). They wreaked vengeance on

British soldiers as well as soldiers defecting from the hard-pressed Boer forces (called “hands-uppers”) alike. They operated by ambushing and “persuading” the Boer soldiers, who had surrendered and were being conducted by British troops to prisoner of war camps, to return to the Boer lines. When they refused, they suffered a slow death by torture.

Frans tells the “inside” story from his position as a lonely, disillusioned and guilt-ridden alcoholic who is forced to confront his past in order to live with himself and his conscience. He describes his affiliation with Mentz and his guilt at his defection from Mentz’s company in German-East-Africa where he had settled with his retinue after the war. However, his worst regret is his subsequent failure to deliver a letter from Mentz to his sister Soph – because Mentz had been addicted to morphine and Frans had not wanted his sister to start an ill-fated relationship with him. His tale thus becomes a form of exploration and expiation for personal and national betrayal. He is at the mercy of his memories and he quotes the General as saying: “Herinnering ... is ’n soort wysheid wat sy eie foute uit die verlede reg skep waar ons hier en nou lewe. Op hierdie manier het herinnering te doen met oorlewing” (p. 246). Frans adds his own interpretation by saying: “Ons is opgestel teenoor ’n verlede buite ons begrip. Nou dobber ons ankerloos” (p. 246).

Although Frans is acutely aware of his ideological interpretation of the truth, he insists that it is *his* “truth” (p. 185) and he also refers, ironically, to the element of causality when he claims that

Die hede, verlede en toekoms veronderstel ’n oorsaaklikheid in die opeenvolging van insidente. ... Maar ek sal nooit kan agterkom hóé hierdie relaas se ‘verloop’ verander van die weergawe wat ek môre op my stoep mag gee nie. Die bietjies verloop wat geïsoleerde voorvalle bind, val bloot uiteen in aparte insidente waaraan ek self ’n opeenvolging moet afdruk. Daar is nie ’n opeenvolging in die gebeure self nie, of die mins moontlike opeenvolging denkbaar (p. 184).

What Frans (and indirectly, Coetzee) is intimating here, is that there are different ways of telling stories, of beginnings and endings, and that fact determines the plot and the slant of the story or the novel.

The fourth and final section of the novel consists of facts derived from fictive documentation by General Coen Brits (dating from his visit to Mentz in German East Africa, 1916-1917). This is also, in my opinion, the weak link in the novel. It would almost seem as if Brits’s account of Mentz’s physical suffering and drug addiction should in some way exonerate him from culpability and responsibility, whereas the main

thrust of this book seems to be directed towards the recognition of responsibility.

## 7. Conclusion

As both novels are related by the male narrator/protagonists (in Coetzee's novel, the focalization is through a male perspective) of questionable repute, the validity and credibility of personal experience seems to be as "tainted" with bias as the relevant official histories are assumed to be.

Similar to Coetzee, Ann Harries also exposes personal agendas and ideological fetishes in *Manly Pursuits*. The fact that her critique is presented in a tongue-in-the-cheek fashion, dabbling with historical facts, suppositions and speculations, prompts Merrington (1999:265) to describe the novel as "an elegant historical diversion". Yet, such an interpretation would obscure the underlying symbolism and implicit critique that touches on elemental questions of identity and the freedom of choice.

Coetzee also undermines the credibility of supposedly revered and respected public figures and national heroes but in a much more heavy-handed fashion. Whereas Harries raises universal questions about the freedom of the individual and the restrictive influences of social conventions and the greed for power, Coetzee cuts closer to the bone of South Africa's past. Although his novel operates within the dialectic between history and fiction, creating a broader scope of reference than the mere South African scenario, his suppositions and speculations provoke the reader to serious reflection and even doubt about South Africa's recent past (for example, the war in Angola during the 80s and the injustices of apartheid). Thus, from a South African perspective, *In Search of General Marnetjies Mentz* assumes the proportions of a projection or a possible re-enactment of the past. This impression is subtly corroborated by the narrator's footnote (p. 27) explaining how his data collection and processing evolved into a history/story about Mentz and his historical image. In effect, he creates a parody of historical documentation as fiction, when he claims that the wide range of material on Mentz's existence has eliminated coincidence and imagination and has made his existence a distinct possibility, a reality which he associates with necessity:

Noodsaak(likheid) val breedweg gesproke saam met 'werklikheid', en staan teenoor 'terloopse' of 'toevallige' ooreenkoms met die werklikheid (p. 27).

If the adage that "truth is stranger than fiction" can be believed, the heinous crimes committed in the novel *could have been possible* in the previous dispensation. Consequently, the novel presents a frightening glimpse into the obsession with power and the belief that the end justifies the means.

What Coetzee manages to achieve is twofold. He depicts (perhaps exaggerates) the legacy of the Anglo-Boer War, its aftermath and the different stories to be told and digested; but he also acknowledges that some events and memories are not easily erased, by either victims or perpetrators (just like the scars on Mentz's back that keep festering). This fact is illustrated by the image of a handkerchief tied into knots (as a reminder of something important) which, when the knots are untied one by one, is left with such creases in the material that no amount of smoothing can erase them (p. 143). It is this recurrent aspect of guilt pinpointed by László Földényi (1999) in his article on the question of German guilt that could perhaps also be applicable to the South African situation.

To conclude, my purpose in this paper was to point out that both novels provide a glimpse behind the scenes of a history that has been cosmetically "prepared" for public consumption. They represent the "shadow" side of history. However, it remains the reader's prerogative to determine his/her own interpretation of events and personal complicity or lack of guilt, because ultimately, as Schick (1999:21) asserts:

... narrative plays a central role in the constitution and preservation of identity. It is a carrier of meaning, the channel through which an individual tells him/herself and others the tale of his/her place in the world.

It would also be prudent to keep in mind that a fine demarcation exists between facts and values. Failure to refer to, or acknowledge the valid contributions that historical persons have made to history and Western civilization could diminish the value of their accomplishments and distort the re-construction of a possible, more representative picture of reality/history. Thus we need to be aware of the importance of context in the interpretation of history.

Perhaps the most significant aspect in a comparison of these two novels is the creation of an awareness that "truth can at best be relative, not absolute" (Dubois, 1998:42). In this sense, Ann Harries and Christoffel Coetzee have attempted to make their own contribution towards resolving the differences of the past by engaging in a dialogue with history. Similar to Harris, their attempt will hopefully, offer "a solution that

will allow our modern, guilt-ridden, polarised world to move from the colonial past to a truly plural postcolonial future" (Dubois, 1998:45).

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**Key concepts:**

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**Kernbegrippe:**

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