A Chain of Voices: The Prose Oeuvre of André Brink  
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And perhaps someone will hear us calling out, all these voices in the great silence,  
all of us together, each one for ever alone.  

A Chain of Voices

Prof Christie Roode described the late Prof André Philippus Brink as ‘something which appears on  
the horizon from time to time, illuminating the whole world around him… who causes other people  
to look at the world in a different way, challenging conventions and norms and simply refusing to  
go with the flow’ (Encounters p15).

Professor André Brink was a remarkable academic and scholar; he was a legendary  
university teacher; he significantly contributed to theatre and particularly to Afrikaans theatre; he  
made a monumental contribution to and changed the Afrikaans landscape of literary criticism; he  
was a relentless political activist fighting for the freedom of the individual; he was a prolific  
translator; he was a fiction writer of international stature; he was a Renaissance person in the true  
sense of the word… and he was a good and kind and considerate friend. I would have liked to  
interrogate each of these claims but the 50 min at my disposal clearly would make this possible. I  
have therefore chosen to pay tribute to a remarkable writer by allowing the chain of voices in his  
oeuvre to speak for themselves. And, unless I quote Prof André Brink from interviews, any  
references in this lecture refer to André Brink the “implied author” as defined by Booth (1961).

The Oeuvre

The late twentieth-century reader lives in a reader-centered world. In The Role of the Reader,  
Umberto Eco stresses the participation of the reader in the duplicitous textual project, particularly in  
the case of the “open text” (8). In “The Death of the Author” (1967), the poststructuralist Roland  
Barthes declares the author dead. Derrida takes this decentering of the author even further when he  
uses the French term différance to refer to the elusive nature of meaning in language which results  
in an endless postponement of presence (see Speech and Phenomena 129-60).

The decentering of the real author André Brink for the purpose of this lecture is, however,  
not merely dictated by some prominent twentieth-century literary theories. My analysis of the  
oeuvre will indicate that the Brink texts form a transtextual web in which the process of narration  
itself is foregrounded. The analysis will also indicate how the texts in this oeuvre are “scriptible” or  
“writerly” (Barthes S/Z 13) texts in which “language, that infinite storehouse of citations,  
repetitions, echoes and references, crosses and recrosses” (Selden 74) in the narrative process, and I  
shall indicate how a chain of postcolonial African voices is generated in the narrative process at  
work in the oeuvre as a whole.

Brink’s novels have been translated into at least thirty-three different languages. For arriving  
at an overview of the Brink oeuvre, this lecture will have to assume that the different language  
versions of the novels represent variations of the same text and the analysis will focus on the  
English texts, which should indeed be regarded as original texts and not as translations in the  
accepted sense. Brink, in an interview with Avril Herber had the following to say about the actual  
process of production of his novels: “Although I start writing my novels in Afrikaans, I prepare the  
final draft in English, which means that the novel is first finished in English” (qtd. in Herber14-15).

At the end of Brink’s novel The Wall of the Plague (1984), the writer, Paul, says the  
following about the origins of humankind and about creativity:

in order to evoke a response from the very core of a person’s humanity, one  
should appeal to either of these instincts that have shaped him. One can  
appeal to the hunting instinct, to the violence latent inside, the urge to
change and destroy what comes in its way to conquer; or to the imagination, to the human being’s ability to create (444)

In a lecture given in Göteborg, Sweden, Brink said that this narrative figure Paul “expresses much of my own doubt and agony and hope and faith about writing” (“Writing in a State of Siege”). The present analysis will point out that this “writerly” creativity is not only an impulse outside the oeuvre, but a major textual code. The belief in the magic power of the creative word is echoed in these lines from Brink’s States of Emergency (1988): “But if the postponement comes from the creating of character,” asks the interviewer, “how much you, Carlos Fuentes the novelist, are postponing your own death by writing novels? To which Fuentes replies: ‘That is what novels are about – a postponement of death’” (204-5).¹

Brink’s first novels appeared in Afrikaans only. These texts could be regarded as finger exercises, but in terms of the oeuvre as a whole, they are significant nevertheless.

The Modernist Existentialist Phase

Modernism enjoyed a period of vibrancy in Western literature between 1910 and 1930 (see Bradbury).

While this change of form and content in narrative texts was taking its course in Western literature, Afrikaans literature remained primarily a literature of realism. Then, in 1960, a group of young Afrikaans writers, almost suddenly, and certainly dramatically, moved away from realism to modernism and became known as the “Sestigers”. André Brink, the academic, became a major advocate for the group and edited a journal called Sestiger which became a mouthpiece for the movement.

Brink’s own novels Lobola vir die lewe (1962), Orgie (1965) and Miskien nooit (1967), like The Ambassador (1967), are conspicuously modernist in form and markedly existentialist in content. However, these three novels, unlike The Ambassador, were not published in English. While these texts, therefore, do not fall within the scope of a discussion of the corpus of English novels written by André Brink, they are, nevertheless, seminal in the context of the Brink oeuvre as a whole.

The Ambassador, first published in Afrikaans in 1963, marks the beginning of the corpus of prose texts in English by André Brink.

The story narrated in The Ambassador is simple: Paul van Heerden, South African ambassador in Paris, enters into a relationship with a young woman called Nicolette. The third secretary, also hankering after Nicolette, reports to Pretoria but the ambassador refuses to defend himself or even to comment on the accusations.

The Ambassador as a very complex narrative construction does not emphasize the storyline. It is the duplicitous web of the text that is emphasized or foregrounded. Les Whitten has the following to say about this text: “it flowers complexly enticing you back days later to explore allusions you just realized you missed. For beneath the unexceptional plot is a subconscious of literary, biblical and mythic ‘voices’ that Brink summons by reference and quotation” (PW 9).

The existential code which was central to Lobola vir die lewe is continued here. The ambassador literally embarks on a search for meaning and is left with himself only at the end.

The Phase of Littérature Engagée

Looking on Darkness (1974) heralded a totally new direction in the oeuvre. From this point onwards the Brink novels would become littérature engagée, committed to exploring and exploiting the South African political situation specifically in order to comment on its neocoloniality in a way which directly attempted to change it. In this regard the oeuvre enters into an alliance with Camus’ idea of universal revolt and Sartre’s concept of individual freedom.² The Afrikaans version, Kennis van die aand (1973) was the first Afrikaans novel to be banned in South Africa and Looking on Darkness (1974) was also banned. However, these texts, although specifically political, extend beyond socio-political issues, and the existential theme developed in earlier novels remains a central
code in the texts where the political situation becomes a metaphor for what Brink himself termed “the essential loneliness of people...trying to communicate” (qtd. in Herber 14). While the modernist texts in the oeuvre thus far register a chain of existential voices uttering a universal agonized scream, the texts from this point onwards generate a chain of specifically African voices foregrounding a recognizable South African reality and the texts specifically position themselves as part of a postcolonial anti-hegemonic discourse.

*Looking on Darkness* rests on and enters into a dialogue with hundreds of years of prison-memoires from Augustine, Abelard, and Bunyan to a modern-day exponent like Solzhenitsyn. In *Looking on Darkness*, Josef Malan, awaiting execution in a South African prison, narrates the story of his own life, and in this process, the novel generates a political code exposing the injustices of an apartheid neo-colonial society. Consistent with its postcolonial project, which would resist any new master narrative, Josef Malan in the text destroys the manuscript as the writing proceeds, and finally the text also deconstructs its own picture of colonial gloom.

Never, before Josef Malan’s memoires, had the consequences of a racist South African society been narratologically registered with such outrage and anger in Afrikaans literature. And yet, the narration ends with a glimpse of hope: “On the contrary notwithstanding” (394). In this way *Looking on Darkness* becomes part of the body of postcolonial texts which, according to Harris “consume” their “own biases” (127) while deconstructing the colonial discourse.

*An Instant in the Wind* (1976) represents a high point in the Brink oeuvre. First published in Afrikaans as ‘*n Oomblik in die wind* in 1975, the narrative commences with references to the imagined history of Elizabeth who, in the eighteenth-century, accompanied her husband Larsson, an explorer and scientist, to the African interior. After Larsson’s death a runaway-slave, Adam, having escaped from Robben Island, turns up and accompanies Elizabeth on her long journey back to the Cape. An intense love relationship develops between them. This relationship further explores the notion I/other; coloniser/colonised which *Looking on Darkness* initiates and which becomes central in later novels such as *On the Contrary* (1993) and *Imaginings of Sand* (1996). However, this union between black and white is a “world provisionally without end” (109) because at the end of the novel, Elizabeth succumbs to the oppressive social structures and betrays Adam.

In both form and content this text epitomizes the Brink novels of the era. In terms of content, the existential problem once again forms a central code in the text, and during their long journey to the Cape, an existential journey from person to person as well as a journey into the Self takes place. The political code which originates in *Looking on Darkness* is further explored and developed in this novel and particularly the narration of Adam’s life becomes a register of centuries of colonial injustices.

The political code is broadened when the text also develops feminist concerns as a central code. Elizabeth’s life of oppression, from a feminist perspective, demonstrates how the personal is inevitably political and the novel occupies a central position in South and Southern African feminist literature. *An Instant in the Wind* is a significant forerunner of the overtly eco-centric novel *On the Contrary* (1993) which appeared seventeen years later. The political and feminist intentions of *An Instant in the Wind* are inextricably linked to the ecological concerns registered in the text. It is only in the natural environment of an African interior, totally isolated from the civilization of the Cape that Elizabeth and Adam can manage to transcend white supremacist and male chauvinist norms and rules and escape from the “disorientated, deranged social structures” which are referred to in one of the mottoes of the text. But those who want to escape from (this kind of) civilization are hunted like an animal: “For now I have become a wild beast...” (35). The ecological implications of the text are extended when their idyll is destroyed by “[t]he coming of the hunters” (130) because “[i]t is only people from the Cape who slaughter like this” (131).

The political engagement directed at racism in the preceding *Looking on Darkness*, in *An Instant in the Wind* develops towards a broader“critique of domination” (Wellerby 235). The novel moves the postcoloniality in the Brink oeuvre in the direction of so-called “deep ecology”, the protagonists of which “consider their concerns to subsume the egalitarian concerns associated for example, with feminism...Marxism, anti-racism and anti-imperialism” (Fox 8).
From *An Instant in the Wind* onwards, every novel in the Brink oeuvre forms part of a general critique of colonising domination and every voice registered in the corpus of texts becomes part of a massive chorus raging against oppression in its manifold guises.

In terms of narrative form this is a very significant text. Modernism with its emphasis on techniques and devices is translated into a postmodernist text with the emphasis on textuality and writing itself. The entire novel is presented as a subjunctive exploration of what might have happened in the life of Elizabeth and Adam.

In *Rumours of Rain* (1978), published as *Gerugte van reën* (1978) in Afrikaans, the political code is central, once again. References to the Soweto unrest of 1976 and to a figure called Franken who seems to reflect many of the attributes of the South African political activist Bram Fisher, as well as the rumours of rain and disaster as metaphors for the South African political apocalypse, made the novel, at the time of publication, as topical and immediate as the daily newspaper.

In *A Dry White Season* (1979), published as *’n Droë wit seisoen* (1979) in Afrikaans, the political references are even more specific and the narrative situation considerably more complex than the situation in *Rumours of Rain*. Ben du Toit unintentionally becomes involved in the case of two black people who died in detention. He does not accept the official explanation and begins to investigate the case himself. After intimidation, threats, police action, etc. he dies as the result of a contrived accident. These events are narrated in the novel by a friend of du Toit’s whose direct quotations from du Toit’s diary serve to lend authenticity to the third person narrative.

References to real incidents, such as the death of the Black Consciousness activist Steve Biko, make this text perhaps the Brink novel most directly concerned with the South African political situation. The last paragraph of the text summarizes the very nature of the engaged texts in the oeuvre: “Perhaps all one can really hope for, all I am entitled to, is no more than this: to write it down. To report what I know. So that it will not be possible for any man to say again: I knew nothing about it” (316).

The first phase of political novels culminates in *A Chain of Voices* (1982). The novel is based on the historical Bokkeveld uprising of slaves in 1825. The English version, published as *A Chain of Voices* (1982), postmodernistically foregrounds the act of telling: the narrativity of the text. The Afrikaans version *Houd-den-bek* (1982), with its emphasis on the narrative aspect space, in turn accentuates the terrible tyranny of a racist-chauvinist-patriarchal colonial milieu. As such it registers what Barker in *World View* called “the universality of oppression and the equally ubiquitous striving for freedom” (17). Ma-Rose, one of the narrative voices in this text, verbalizes this aspect of the novel when she says: “And perhaps someone will hear us calling out, all these voices in the great silence, all of us together, each one for ever alone” (441). Brink himself summarized the colonial enslavement registered in the text in an interview as follows: “All the characters are slaves of the situation, whites and blacks alike – slaves of history, slaves of the land, slaves of their condition” (Anon. “Interview with André Brink” 18).

The French weekly *Canard Enchainé*, which has a readership of three million people, gave *A Chain of Voices* a sought-after accolade when it carried a very positive review. This review stated: “The book is profoundly anti-apartheid but thanks to its quality of writing and finesse in its observations...it is a great novel of morals and customs” (qtd. in Anon. “French Praise” 6)

The Postmodernist Phase

In this phase in the oeuvre, the postcolonial political commitment is generated in terms of postmodern textual strategies.

*The Wall of the Plague* (1984), published as *Die muur van die pes* (1984) in Afrikaans, the first novel in this phase, while extending the political codes developed in previous texts, confirms a new postmodernist phase in the oeuvre. In this way it represents the culmination, not only of codes generated in *An Instant in the Wind*, but it also represents the culmination of the postmodernist “writerly” basis laid in that text. *The Wall of the Plague* is an engaged text in the sense that it deals
with the South African political situation in specific detail. It does not, however, provide clear-cut answers. The text, at most, generates what Roland Barthes called “flickerings of meaning” (S/Z 19).

In Part One of The Wall of the Plague Andrea, a so-called coloured woman, narrates the facts of her life. In Part Two Paul, a white man, is the central figure, and retrospectively it becomes clear that he reconstructed Part One based on notes and a letter. This emphasis on uncertainty and relativity provides a key to the entire text. Eventually the text becomes a meta-text of the novel, which Paul had always wanted to write.

The following comment by Harari concerning the notion of texts generally could be used to describe the process at work in The Wall of the Plague: “by way of its supplementary logic, it self-deconstructs in the very act of constituting itself” (38). In a complex and dynamic process of narration, meanings are generated only to be deconstructed by a new series of meanings: everything in the text is in a state of flux and uncertainty. Every signifiant calls up a signifié only, in turn, to be turned into a new signifiant.

States of Emergency (1988), which appeared in English only, is a fascinating postmodernist construction. The narrative situation is extremely complex and the duplicitousness is further generated by the fact that the narration implicitly and/or explicitly refers to the literary theories and texts of Barthes, Foucault, Kundera, Kristeva and Derrida with which the text constantly enters into a transtextual discourse.

The narrator in the text is a writer who, in a violent state of emergency, has only the word – writing – at his disposal by means of which death could be postponed. He attempts to write the love story of a university professor and his assistant while the country around him is literally in flames. Juxtaposed with this text is the manuscript of another love story dealing with a relationship between Jane Ferguson and an activist medical doctor. Paradoxically everything, which is narrated – and the narration itself – is shaped by the political neo-colonial violence in the state of emergency.

Finally, the text is permeated with Derridean traces (see “Living On” 83). Jane’s narrative remains absent in this text, and the letter from her lover, the impulse for her narration, is only scantily and partly presented. All certainty fades away and the writer in the text can do no more than compiling notes towards a love story which never materialises and which, narratologically, signifies that mere stories cannot lift states of emergency and finally bring down colonial rule. And yet, while the text constantly deconstructs itself, the very fact of its being, in a sense, affirms the creative power of the word. The very “open endedness, the endlessness” (1) of the text hints, in the final words of the novel, towards political and textual possibilities, i.e. towards a post-colonial state: “a country for which the future is still possible, a love not yet circumscribed, a story not yet written” (244).

The existential and political codes generated in States of Emergency and in previous texts, as well as the postmodernist textual explorations in this and earlier texts culminate in The First Life of Adamastor (1993), which first appeared in Afrikaans as Die eerste lewe van Adamastor in 1988.

The novel is profoundly postmodern in its textual strategies and overtly postcolonial in terms of its context. Adamastor is the mythological phenomenon represented in the sixteenth-century Portuguese text Os Luciadas by Camões. The Eurocentric idea developed in that text is literally Africanized in Brink’s novel when it is suggested that Adamastor’s first life was that of a Khoi called T’kama.

The First Life of Adamastor generates a fascinating, at times delightfully funny, and captivating story, regarding a, at times, bizarre relationship between Khois and T’kama. However, at a different level, it becomes an allegorical record of a traumatic quest for love and the text echoes all the love stories generating existential codes in previous novels in the oeuvre. At the end of the narration, Adamastor concludes: “How dangerous it is to love” (133).

The South American author and Nobel prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa has high praise for this novel and uses the phrase “great success”. The narrator sets his hopes on the child born of the union between T’kama and Khois and the text ends on a note of affirmation when it suggests the possibility that the child might transcend racial restrictions and prejudices. This child registers Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity. (see “The location of culture 38). “All I had ever had ran
from my empty hands. All of it. Except this: somewhere, in the land, I knew, somewhere behind the thickets of euphorbia and burning aloes and undergrowth, was the child. He would live on. They could not kill me” (133). These closing words are as much a reflection on The First Life of Adamastor as it is a commentary on the form and the content of the oeuvre as a whole.

An Act of Terror (1991), published as Die kreef raak gewoond daaraan (1991) in Afrikaans, extends the cycle of political novels. This text, comprising more than eight hundred pages, reflects many if not all the codes generated in the oeuvre thus far.

Despite the possible overt impression of a good, old-fashioned detective story concerning an aborted attempt to kill a South African state president and the consequent reflection on the act and the nature of violence, followed by an equally gripping ‘supplement’ narrating the history of thirteen generations of the Landman family in colonial Africa. This text manifesting a massive process of narrative polyphonic thinking concerns itself with what Malan described as the totality of the discourse of violence in the South African society (see “Ernstige vrae oorgeweld” 100).

In sharp contrast to some negative opinions expressed regarding the Afrikaans versions of the text, the English version was generally very positively received by critics. Hugh Barnes in The Times said: “The shifts of viewpoint are thrilling and significant and deeply honouring to the profession of literature” (27). Glyn Hughes had the following to say in The Guardian: “Outside Dostoyevsky I have rarely come across the mentality of the hunter and the hunted – especially that of the hunted – so eerily described” (26). Holger Ruppert, in a Danish newspaper, called An Act of Terror one of the great relevant novels of our time (see 15), while Tone Bratteli in Norway, was of the opinion that Brink is fast approaching the top position amongst contemporary writers (see 20). Dimensions of Brink’s novels reminded him of Dostoyevsky and Camus. Publishers’ Weekly called An Act of Terror “the Great South African Novel” (Anon. 15 Nov. 1991, 62).

On the Contrary (Inteendeel in Afrikaans, both 1993) represents a climax of his oeuvre. Writing in New Statesmen and Society, Marek Kohn describes this text as “infernally beautiful” and hints at the narrative complexity of a singularly semiotically saturated text by saying: “Adamastor was the overture; On the Contrary is the whole opera in all its might” (37).

From the “Dark Hole of the Castle” Estienne Barbier, the central figure in On the Contrary, narrates the story of his life, being, according to the title page of the novel, “the life of a famous rebel, soldier, traveller, explorer, reader, builder, scribe, Latinist lover and liar”. Sentenced to death and awaiting crucifixion, Barbier constructs a narrative in 300 a-chronological fragments in a letter to Rosette, a slave woman. However, the narration consisting of excessive exaggerations, lies and confusing correctives, does not purport to be historically reliable: “This is just a story. I am not even sure that I am telling it” (4). From the very outset the narrative deconstructs itself: “I am dead: you cannot read: this will (therefore) not have been a letter” (1). When the narrator states: “I am, Rosette… responsible to the future for the otherwise unremembered past” (7). Barbier reinventing the past says: “There is always a new discovery in the retelling” (8).

The postcolonial code in the oeuvre is extended in this text. Barbier’s life story reveals the horrors and excesses of racism and colonialism. In the end, Barbier reaches the following insight: “But how unforgivable is it that I should not have recognized our true allies, the people of this land, who suffer everything” (370).

The feminist concerns in the oeuvre logically culminate in Rosette who signifies both a colonised black person and an oppressed woman: “I insulted you even in setting you free, I was being merely selfish. I did not think about you, woman, slave” (370).

However, On the Contrary does not merely echo the political and feminist engagement of previous texts. As part of a broad postcolonial critique of domination in the oeuvre, the desire to “acquire, to conquer, to have, to possess” (On the Contrary 236) assumes a specifically ecological guise in this text: “we annihilate kraals and villages and settlements of hostile or indifferent natives, with the single purpose of leaving on that virgin barren place the scrawl of our progress” (ibid.).

In terms of an all-encompassing appeal for an ecological counter colonial egalitarianism, On the Contrary occupies a key position in South African ecocentric literature. Barbier, in a perspective
coinciding with ecofeminism, realizes that Rosette and the land are one: “But the you now forever secreted in the empty hollow of the land” (235).

Once Barbier the arch possessor has purged himself, the text ends on an ecologically positive note when colonist and colony are reconciled: “I learn the intricate sign-language of trees and rocks and water of dust devils and the rain; I learn the dance of the sun, of the moon, of the hills and plains” (359). Finally, in *On the Contrary* the voice of a (pre-colonial) Mother Africa itself can be heard as part of the chain of African voices in this postcolonial discourse.

Brink’s next novel, *Imaginings of Sand* (1996), was published as *Sandkastele* (1995) in Afrikaans. Its protagonist, Kristien Muller, an exile, returns to South Africa after her grandmother, Ouma Kristina, the mater familias, living in an ostrich palace on a Karoo farm, has been injured in a fire caused by arsonists. The time of the narration is the period leading up to the 1994 general election in South Africa.

In *Imaginings of Sand*, the postcolonial dimensions of the oeuvre are concentrated in a nonlinear, open-ended polyphonic narration. The novel consists of Ouma Kristina’s stories: “I have an amazing memory. At times I even surprise myself, I can remember things that never happened” (4) and “Her stories always resolved everything” (5). However, the narrative process in this novel is not generated merely to make fiction in a postmodern mode. It becomes an affirmative(eco)-feminist act of remembering or “un-forgetting”, in the terminology of *An Act of Terror* (see 659). In a profoundly postcolonial mode, Ouma Kristina says: “I’ll give back your memory” (58). The novel becomes a code system testifying about the female position from the time of Eve.

Some feminist literary approaches, such as are expounded by Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and in works by other Anglo-American feminists, scorn rigidity and formal theory. This alternative world-view is reflected in *Imaginings of Sand*. Informed by a feminist perspective, the storyline in this narrative construction moves forwards and backwards in time and space, and indeed Ouma Kristina says: “Our story is different, it does not run in a straight line” (350).

The postcolonial fusion of Self and Other finally assumes racial and ecofeminist dimensions in this text. Gradually Ouma Kristina’s narrative reveals that Maria, the mother of the family lineage, was indeed an indigenous woman whose original name was Kamma. Her name meant “water” and it was believed that she had originally been born from the earth by appearing out of the water. This woman lost her tongue as the direct result of colonial violence and counter-violence informed by phallocentric cruelty. “She didn’t speak a word. She couldn’t. Her tongue had been cut out” (191). Eventually she became one with nature once again, when she turned into a tree (382).

Kamma, however, did not only undergo an ecological fusion with the earth, but indeed, she was given a voice by Ouma Kristina and by Kristien, the narrator, as it transpires in the narration that indeed she is also their ancestral mother.

Finally, in this postcolonial text, coloniser, colonised and colony fuse into one and undermine the binary oppositionality of colonial thought. Ben Okri’s formulation of postcolonial writing as being “literature of a newly ascendant spirit” (qtd. in Boehner 4) provides an apt description of this text.

Above all, Brink’s oeuvre is preoccupied with humanism. In *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992), Kwame Anthony Appiah discusses the notion of humanism in relation to postcoloniality as follows: “Maybe, then, we can recover within postmodernism the postcolonial writer’s humanism – the concern for human suffering, for the victims of the postcolonial state (a concern we find everywhere: in Mudimbe…in Soyinka’s *A Play of Giants*, in Achebe, Farrah, Gordimer, Labou Tansi – the list is difficult to complete)” (152). As Brink’s prose oeuvre registers human suffering as a central concern, his name, in my opinion, would not be, out of place in the list of postcolonial humanists referred to by Appiah.

**The Post-Apartheid Phase**

In 1994, South Africa entered a new democratic era, and the object of Brink’s political engagement seemed to have dissipated. In a lecture at Potchefstroom University, Brink himself posed the
question as to what direction writers would choose after Scheherazade’s one-thousand-and-first night (see “Die duisend-en-tweede dag” 67). He suggested that the answer to this question is to be found in the fact that the problems of racism, injustice, corruption, and the lack of freedom, in whatever guise, concern the world as a whole and remained a moral challenge, wherever they may be in the world.

Brink stated in an interview that the “little voice of the individual conscience” (“Die duisend-en-tweede dag” 71) still has the duty to tell stories. After all, Walter Benjamin contended, “fiction has an amplitude that information lacks” (Vertelkunde 37). Brink maintained that telling stories is our human way to accept responsibility for our world (see “Die duisend-en-tweede dag” 73).

The first post-apartheid text in the prose oeuvre of André Brink, Devil’s Valley (Duiwelskloof in Afrikaans, both 1998), explores the bizarre depths of apartheid in the form of magical realism. This text consolidates the long tradition of opposition to apartheid within Brink’s oeuvre.

Brink indicated in an interview that this was his treatment of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, which took place in South Africa four years before the publication of this novel. (See “Brink se Duiwelskloof van magiese Die Hel” 8).

_Devil’s Valley_ revisits silences in the South African history in a way that contributes to the development of a radically new historiography. Nuttall and Coetzee describe the historiographic project in Brink’s oeuvre by stating that Brink embarked on a process of narrativising the past: “In this novel Flip Lochner, a failed journalist and one-time history teacher, recounts a visit to an isolated settlement in the South African interior.

The magical realism in the text is utilised in order to debunk, not only the traditional South African, and specifically Afrikaner myths, but indeed to question traditional historiographic assumptions.

_Devil’s Valley_ joins the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in registering racism and oppression by constructing a caricature of the Afrikaner obsession with racial purity (see Van Vuuren “Afrikaner kultuur word ooggedelf” 14). This caricature or allegorical portrayal which Van Vuuren describes (14), is a form of postmodern Uchronian or counterfactual history which, according to Wesselling, imagines “an apocryphal course of events which clearly did not take place, but which might have taken place” (204).

In _Devil’s Valley’s_ the intended utopia of neo-colonial Apartheid, consistently opposed and deconstructed in the preceding politically engaged novels in the oeuvre, is finally registered as a dystopia.

In _The Rights of Desire_ (Donkermaan in Afrikaans) Ruben Olivier, sixty-five years old, narrates his experiences over a period of seven months involving a thirty-year-old lodger, Tessa Butler, his seventy-year-old housekeeper Magrieta Daniels, and a female ghost, Antjie of Bengal, who was executed three hundred years earlier. The text is an attempt to verbalize or narrativize their lives, which, in turn, becomes a three-hundred-year history of South Africa.

The novel registers a meditation on loneliness as the narrator dares to articulate the unsayable regarding the inescapable human condition of ageing, “the long twilight...with nothing more to hope for, no new surprise, no sudden moon, a landscape of the mind as monotonous as my childhood plains of the Kalahari” (3). As an ageing, disillusioned man, he also dares to speak the unspeakable regarding aspects of the dysfunctional society of “murder, mayhem, corruption and scandals” (64). However, socio-political phenomena are always presented in relation to their human consequences, as is the case when the narrator talks about the suffering of his housekeeper:

She, the mother from the townships in her sleeveless housecoat and her slippers with pink pompoms, harbouring inside her global body the violence and the rape, the raping and killing and burning of her everyday world, its poverty, its meekness and patience and suffering, its anger and rebellion and despair, its affirmation and denials, its witches and witchhunts. (142)
Antjie of Bengal, a one-time sex slave who was eventually unjustly executed, haunts Ruben’s house. Ruben says, “the only way in which I can gain access to her is vicariously, through books, through the notes I have made over the years based on journeys of exploration through bones” (133), but at least he can, in retelling Magrieta’s views, also speak on behalf of Antjie; “Because she was a slave and because she was coloured and because she was a woman they all treated her as shit” (134).

The emphasis on writing registers the metatextual nature of this text. It is indeed a text that narrates about narrative itself. The text constantly refers to texts in world literature. Consequently, meaning is generated not only by the references themselves but also by the transtextual discourse prompted.

In his twentieth novel in English, The Other Side of Silence (Anderkant die stilte in Afrikaans, both 2002), Brink returns to feminist concerns, as indicated in his Potchefstroom lecture referred to earlier. Early on in this novel, the narrator states: “Their bodies carry the imprint of their histories. It shows in the way they sit or stand or lie...the faces turned away, the silent crying which they make no attempt to suppress” (45). Like the Bells of Bremen in the novel, Brink’s text gives a voice to the “hope, and despair, and suffering, and suffering, and suffering” (8) of the most unspeakable, literally and figuratively, ordeals endured by womankind.

The novel refers to Vita Sackville-West’s exploration of an exemplary woman in her Saint Joan of Arc: “she makes us think and she makes us question. She uncovers the dark places into which we may fear to look” (66). This would be an apt description of Hanna X in Brink’s novel, which traces the female protagonist’s traumatic life from her childhood as an orphan and later as a servant in Bremen. Shortly after her arrival in the colony, she fell foul of a drunken army officer and, in a drunken fracas, her tongue was severed. After having killed a man who attempted to rape her friend in Frauenstein, she left for Windhoek, in order to break the silence regarding her suffering by confronting the criminal who had maimed her. En route to Windhoek, she gathered a troupe of men and women equally driven by despair and by hatred for colonial evil. The text reactivates the language code in the oeuvre and re-introduces the postmodern problematization of language when the narrator states, “Her life itself is the only story she has been reduced to: and that cannot be told, it can only be endured” (220). And yet, the textual process can attempt to break her silence. As the narrator affirms, “I believe more and more, that as a man, I owe it to her, at least to try to understand what makes her a person, and individual, what defines her as a woman” (153).

The novel ends with the words “at last, Hanna X has reached the other side” (307). Her story has been told. In the desert, Taras, a Nama woman, asked Hanna, “‘How is your pain?’ And Hanna nods to indicate that she is feeling better. And Taras says, ‘That is what stories are for’” (55).

In Brink’s twenty-first novel, Before I Forget (Voor ek vergeet in Afrikaans, both 2004) the narrator, Chris Minnaar, a seventy-eight-year-old writer, prompted by the death of his lover, addresses the deceased in a set of notes that take stock of his life and his loves; in the process, the private experiences recounted reflect broad tracts of South African history.

A central code or theme is, once again, the attempt to challenge silence. Chris’s narrative is prompted by the eternal silence of the death of the last love of his life. And, like Scheherazade, Chris, in response to the trauma, demonstrates through language “a thousand and one different ways to negotiate absence” (175).

Chris also fears his own death and ultimate silence: “Soon it will be time for the days when the doors shall be shut...and the mourners go about the streets” (221); and when there shall be absence, silence. Chris’s strategy, to “Rage, rage against the dying of the light” (280) with Dylan Thomas, is to create and to narrate. “I thought of my own attempts at holding on, my writing, these notes I am so compulsively making. Impossible to let go, because all will then be lost” (281).

Then, Chris Minnaar, the generator of the texts, comes to a startling new insight:

In the beginning, all my life, I think, I believed that I was writing to hold on, not to let go, not to lose it all for ever. But through Mam’s death – and
through yours, which I am now approaching, I know that the opposite is true...

Brink’s twenty-second novel, *Praying Mantis* (*Bidsprinkaan* in Afrikaans, both 2005), is based broadly on the life of Cupido Cockroach, the first Khoi missionary to be ordained in the Cape of Good Hope by the London Mission Society. Initially, Cupido turned vehemently against his traditional beliefs. However, this narrative registers how he was abandoned to his fate by the Mission Society and left to his own devices in the isolated, arid North-Western Cape.

Cupido Cockroach is the arch-existentialist who devotes an entire life to his strong beliefs and he cannot but say no to that which challenges his authentic existence. When his wife questions the sense of his preaching he confirms his belief in his cause thus: “‘Some of us must go on believing, no matter how hard it is’. ‘And if it doesn’t help any more?’ ‘Even then. Most especially if it is useless. Because it is for their sake that I believe. If I don’t, then what will become of the world?’” (250).

In the mould of the Colombian writer, Gabriel García Márquez this text uses little stories, oral histories, myths, fables, and indigenous lore to interrogate history from the perspective of the ordinary person. Cupido’s story is indeed a history from the perspective of the insignificant person who, in his own way, challenges perceptions and received truths. The Reverend James Read puts it as follows: “Quite simply, I needed this small, crooked, limping man in order to know who I was” (156).

The postcolonial “re-shaping of dominant meanings” becomes evident when Reverend Read registers his despair regarding the missionary project: “what have we done in the name of that dominion and for the sake of that subjugation? All these countless dead, now rising to nod their heads at us and shake their fists at us in silent sorrow and accusation” (190-191). And eventually he comes to a further startling insight: “And today, these years later, I am beginning to think that perhaps our Hottentots were not the only ones we failed, their cause not the only one we unwittingly betrayed. We also failed the colonists of the country” (182).

The novel does not, however, register doom, despair, and disintegration only. Cupido Cockroach establishes a distance between himself and his acquired Western ways. In a magical-realist mode, he moves to some extent back to his African Khoi cosmology, to a world of miracle and the scientifically inexplicable. On one occasion towards the end of the novel, he finds a fallen star:

Cupido shakes his head. Some things are better not examined too closely. He bends over again and picks it up. It isn’t very heavy at all. A child can pick it up. He has always been good at throwing stones, ever since the time he used to tend the goats and sheep. And as far as he can he hurls the shining object back into the sky. It leaves a line of shimmering dust past the other stars. Good. So at last this, too, is where it belongs. (267)

Here we find one of the most prominent postcolonial concerns at this particular stage in the development of the Brink oeuvre – that of achieving a new kind of belonging and the exploration of alternative cosmologies. The prominent South African literary critic Jakes Gerwel aptly described *Praying Mantis* as a “grootse” (magnificent) *African novel* (“Lees-lees leer ons beter met mekaar saamleef” 21).

Van Coller says that *Praying Mantis* is a celebration of a belief in the supremacy of the creative imagination (see “*Bidsprinkaan* ‘Brink-hoogtepunt’” 6). It is precisely this creative imagination that urges Cupido to continue preaching to an almost entirely depleted congregation. This creative spirit is demonstrated in the following discussion between the Read and Cupido: “‘But you believe in the spirit’ I argued. ‘Otherwise you would not have had yourself baptised’. ‘Yes’ he said, it seemed blithely. ‘Of course I believe in the spirit. But also in the star. And in the clay pot where I keep my dreams’” (201).

When Cupido Cockroach eventually can no longer align himself with the Christian faith and finds himself in a spiritual crisis, his existential leap into a new paradigm is, once again, an act of
creativity. Having met Arend, “a slave who is no longer a slave” (275) he decides to join him on a journey into Africa. But before that, he declares, he needs Arend’s assistance to repair a heap of stones in honour of his Khoi deities. (275).

The concluding paragraph of Praying Mantis confirms an important concern which had become increasingly prominent in Brink’s oeuvre: “The day turns old and grey around them, tired at the edges. But they go on, ever further. Yet it does not seem to grow dark. Ahead of them, high above, streaks the star, its dazzling course showing them where to go. That way. That way” (275). The direction indicated here would seem to encompass exploring Africanness and ways of being in and of Africa.

Time restrictions do not permit me to discuss The Blue Door (2008), an existential novel published when Brink was 72 years old and Other Lives (2010) a complex fictional reflection on his oeuvre and on theoretical assumptions regarding the nature of fiction. André Brink’s autobiography, A Fork in the Road, was published in 2009. The political criticism traced in his novels, is here directed at the post-apartheid situation in South Africa. However, as this is a non-fiction publication, where the real author directly narrates, this text does not fall within the scope of our discussion this afternoon.

In 2012 André Brink, as it turned out to be, had one last chance to publish a novel. It is apt, I believe, that this novel Philida, registers the life of a slave woman who said “no” to oppression and domination. The voice of Philida in the last lines of André Brink’s last novel speaks about the human existential condition; about political freedom; about being a woman and about the relationship between human beings and the earth. I shall conclude by allowing Philida to encapsulate a vast and incredibly valuable oeuvre, Philida pp 302-303:

“And as I say it to him, this is what I know inside myself: In the brown waters of the Gariep I shall wash myself clean. I do not want to be whiter than snow as the Ouman use to say. Brown is what I am and brown is what I want to be. Like stone. Like soil. Like the earth. Brown like everything that is worthwhile. Brown I will wash myself. A new person I will be. Brown.

This river, this Gariep: where do it come from? They say that if you want to know where it begin, you must first find out where the sky end and where the world begin (...). They say it come from everywhere, it is the whole land and the whole blarry earth, they give it a name, they name it all the names that ever lived in a tongue, they call it Gariep, they call it Orange River, they call it Vaal River. To many people it is the Great River, the Always River the Ever River, the People River, the river where wind and dreams are born, where the sun and the moon and the other stars all swim together, like the love of the Lord God and of Al-lah himself. For ever and ever, amen.

This Gariep. My Gariep. To drink it into me so that it can for ever be part of me and I of it.

We are coming closer, Labyn. I don’t really know to what, but I know we are coming closer. Old Labyn is here. And Lena is here. And Willempie is here. And Mamie. Deep inside me KleinFrans is here to. I am here. I Philida of the Caab. This I that is free. The I who was a slave and who now is free, who is a woman, and who is everything. I.”

POSTSCRIPT:
Thinkfest billed this lecture as a “tribute to André Brink”. Please, therefore, allow me a personal concluding note: South Africa and the world was deprived of André Brink at a time when his critical voice is still much needed, a loss which cannot be described in words. However, the words of the Russian literary figure Paustovsky regarding writers like André are pertinent: “They see the
truth and they write the truth. Their books will survive. They live and will go on living and there is no need to worry about the fate of their books”.

NOTES
1 In the novel Brink quotes from The Listener 14 August 1986.
2 See Camus’ The Rebel and Sartre’s Existentialism and Humanism.
3 See also Hutcheon’s A Poetics of Post-Modernism 40.

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