The Politics and New Humanism of André Brink

"Isidore Diala has written an invaluable study on the writing of André Brink in which he ranges with ease between the various intellectual, literary, and philosophical influences on the writer to the significant shifts in contemporary literary discourse. It is an admirable accomplishment."

Hein Willemse
Professor of Literature
University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
University of Ghent, Ghent, Belgium

"André Brink's work is often celebrated for its resistance against apartheid and for the ways in which his oeuvre demonstrates how ideology is entrenched in language. In this creative and thorough study of Brink's novels, Isidore Diala reaches beyond indicating how Brink reforms language in order to break conformist political and religious norms. He also points out that Brink wanted to avoid the dangers of counterhegemonic writing becoming implicated in the discursive structures it opposes. His thorough analysis of Brink's roots in existential thought, especially the Sisyphus myth and his creative reading of some of Brink's characters as manifestations of Tom O'Bedlam, provides a timely and significant contribution to Brink studies that will set the standard for some time."

Willie Burger
Professor of Literature and Literary Theory
University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

The Politics and New Humanism of André Brink

By

Isidore Diala

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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All praise is due to God for His abiding grace.

FOREWORD

It was pure coincidence that I read Isidore Diala's manuscript *André Brink: Politics and a New Humanism* in Paris, France, literally within spitting distance of the Luxembourg Gardens. Every reader knowledgeable about Brink's biography would know that Paris was pivotal to his intellectual formation. Here, he was deeply influenced by post-war French existentialism of which Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre were the leading figures. The Sartrean perspective on the existential freedom (and angst) of the individual influenced many. Not only did the individual have to take responsibility for his own actions but also for his impact on humanity and a commitment to freedom whatever its consequences. From Camus, Brink understood that resistance to oppression, wherever it occurs, is an individual responsibility but that human conscience crucially requires the recognition of a common humanity, and that all human beings are deserving of dignity.

Brink writes in his collection of essays *Mapmakers* that he "was born on a bench in the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris, in the early spring of 1960." He, then in his mid-twenties, read Sartre and from afar read about the Sharpeville killings of March 1960 in his home country. The existentialist creed spoke directly to him. He came to realise, by his own admission, that his relative privilege as a white Afrikaans speaker did not shield him from taking responsibility for resistance to the atrocities of the apartheid regime. Brink regarded his insight on that park bench as a "decisive" moment of rebirth since it allowed him to recognise the morally unjust social and political dispensation in South Africa. Whereas his earlier writing was a continuation of the ruling trends of mid-century Afrikaans literature, his post-1960 writing as a novelist, essayist, and polemicist pointed to an increasingly socially conscious direction. The concepts of *littérature engagée*, notions of existentialist philosophy and the polemics on the writer's commitment to his craft, and social change and resistance entered Afrikaans literary studies.

Brink's activism, along with that of writers such as Jan Rabie, Breyten Breytenbach, and Adam Small, straddled the demands for late-modernist aesthetic renewal, artistic innovation, and social struggle, often expressed in their literary journal *Sestiger* (Sixty, lit.: Sixty-er). For my generation of

students who began studying Afrikaans literature in the early to mid-1970s, it was an extraordinary time. The paradigms of Afrikaans Studies, and Afrikaans literature in particular, had shifted and were rewritten during our undergraduate years. Contemporary literary figures and Afrikaans intellectuals publicly broke with Afrikaner nationalism, the National Party, and the apartheid regime. Their declarations and polemics, often at odds with the nationalist and apartheid certainties of the old textbooks, were widely reported in newspapers and magazines. Isidore Diala in this book quotes Lewis Nkosi who regarded the Sestigers' literary experimentation as "curiously irrelevant, even faintly comic." As far as the writing of Brink is concerned, this is a generalised overstatement.

For us in the literary realm, Brink's novel *Kennis van die Aand*, later translated as *Looking on Darkness*, opened up new vistas on existentialism, human sexuality, and anti-apartheid activism, but it also became an iconic symbol of censorship and political tyranny. We borrowed contraband copies and used bound grainy photocopies in our graduate seminars, in direct contravention of the government's restrictions on it. Further, Brink and his anti-apartheid contemporaries literally created a different vocabulary in Afrikaans, new words fashioned from anti-nationalist experiences or the worldliness of literary experimentation–words very different from *apartheid*, that word of odious intentions that Afrikaner nationalism bequeathed to the world. When in 1976, non-Afrikaans-speaking Black South Africans rejected the machinations of apartheid rule, the Afrikaans language became its representative symbol. Brink did not shirk his task. "The Afrikaans writer has a special responsibility in this context," he wrote.

Brink's novels published in the latter half of the 1970s, including *'n Oomblik in die wind* (*An Instant in the Wind*, 1975), *Gerugte van reën* (*Rumours of Rain*, 1978), and *'n Droë wit seisoen* (*A Dry White Season*, 1979), gave expression to his self-imposed historical responsibility of keeping 'people informed' and of exploring and exposing 'the roots of the human condition as it is lived in South Africa: grappling with essentials, with the fundamentals of human experience and human relationships, *sub specie historiae*.' At a time of severe political repression in South Africa these texts stood as beacons of hope, underscoring the vital impression that not all Afrikaners were nationalists or apartheid supporters, that among Afrikaans speakers there was a tradition of resistance, and more importantly, that a world beyond apartheid rule was possible. Brink was not unaware of the magnitude of signaling his dissent. He acknowledges in his essay

"After Soweto" in *Mapmakers* that "a book written by an Afrikaner dissident draws significant echoes from the silent world of the oppressed."

In this monograph, Isidore Diala concentrates on Brink's novels published in the mid-1970s and 1980s. These were years of upheaval and tumult with severe repression on South African streets and revolutionary resistance in the air. In re-reading his novels *Looking on Darkness*, *An Instant in the Wind*, *Rumours of Rain*, *A Dry White Season*, and *A Chain of Voices* at the beginning of the twenty-first century, one is reminded of Brink's role as an exceptional chronicler of that particular historical moment. Yet, as Diala points out in this study, Brink's "keener focus is shown to lie beyond politics." The deep influence of Camus and Sartre on the young Brink continued in his later works, revealing his "abiding experiences that are typically human: the tragic miscarriage of energy and ambition and human existential isolation and insecurity." Diala identifies these novels where Brink's concept of humanism combines with his political vision as counterhegemonic writing, i.e., writing against the hegemonic values and anti-humanist social and political structuration of South African society. Diala reads the selected novels and much of Brink's oeuvre against the considerable influence of the Western intellectual tradition, but crucially points out how he continually adapts and rethinks his own positionality, whether it is existentialism, postmodernism, or contemporary feminism.

Isidore Diala has written an invaluable study on the writing of André Brink in which he ranges with ease between the various intellectual, literary, and philosophical influences on the writer to the significant shifts in contemporary literary discourse. It is an admirable accomplishment.

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INTRODUCTION

André Philippus Brink (1935-2015), renowned South African novelist, playwright, scholar, critic, essayist, translator, travel writer, and editor, was also an internationally celebrated commentator on the enormities and aberrations of the apartheid state. Born on 29 May 1935 in Verde in the Orange Free State to conservative Calvinist Afrikaner parents, Brink had a background that could hardly have suggested his later political affiliations. Brink's father, Daniel, was a magistrate, and his mother, Aletta, a teacher. Given his father's fundamental support to the apartheid establishment by his implementation of its policies, and Brink's growing up surrounded by stalwarts of the regime, his early attitude to the status quo was basically thoughtless acquiescence. Even his attending and graduating from the strictly Calvinist Potchefstroom University in South Africa, where he earned an MA in Afrikaans in 1958 and another MA in English in 1959, was a crucial part of the formation process aimed at allegiance to the Afrikaner laager.

The period of Brink's postgraduate studies in comparative literature at the Sorbonne, University of Paris, between 1959 and 1961, was a crucial stage in his life and writing career. His experience of greater personal freedom in France, away from his typically conservative Afrikaner clan, was in itself alone an exhilarating experience. It was at the same time his first opportunity to meet blacks as equals, and to encounter distinguished black professionals, rather than the representative black South African menial workers and domestic servants he had hitherto known. Moreover, the period coincided with the Sharpeville massacre in which the apartheid police had shot at a crowd protesting against the pass laws, killing 69 people, some of them children. Seen from a distance, the experience assumed the dimension of a revelation and had a deeply transformative impact on Brink.

However, the immediate effect of Brink's disenchantment with apartheid South Africa was more profoundly cultural than political. His discovery and adulation of French existentialist writers, as he told Bahgat Elnadi and Adel Rifaat in a 1993 *Unesco Courier* interview, was aimed at exalting the Afrikaner European heritage and canonizing that civilisation as preeminent: 'I

used them to avoid exploring my own roots–roots of which I was a little ashamed, to be honest. I wanted to focus my attention on Europe, which for me was the peak of civilization' (4). The discovery and acceptance of the Afrikaner's dual European and African heritage as the distinctive attribute of the Afrikaner writer and the recognition of the full political consequence of his disillusionment with the apartheid establishment, however, required further South African experience and a return to France in 1967. But even then, Brink's engagement with the intellectual and cultural traditions of Europe marked his entire career and on occasion accounts for paradoxes that tend to blur his political affiliations. Characterising Brink's motives as 'exemplary' and arguing that 'his sense of the relationship between private and public duty is informed by a consistent and admirable set of ethical prerogatives' (27), Rosemary Jolly nevertheless notes his subconscious entrenchment in complex imperialist assumptions ultimately traceable to his Western intellectual background.

Brink's most seminal insight could be said to be his recognition that political ideologies insinuate themselves into the subconscious of the unthinking human herd through ostensibly innocuous facets of culture; and that through myth-making, moreover, they typically assume religious trappings to insulate themselves against interrogation. That way, they play out at the deepest threshold of human consciousness and imagination. Language and religion typified this process for Brink in apartheid South Africa. Thus, Brink privileged the role of language in fiction which aims at political conversion, investing it with the distinctive ideological power to break with conformist societal conventions and norms. He highlights the distinction between the language of society and that of the creative writer: 'Society, by virtue of its nature, must generalize and systematize language within a structure of acceptable common denominators: the writer must hone blunted words anew, rekindle the fire of "original inspiration" in them, rediscover new ones, departing in every respect from the well-known and well-trodden syntactical and semantic paths, exploring whatever territory remains on either side' (*Mapmakers* 118). The ideological culmination of this reinvention of language is the birth of new moral values. For with its root in convention and, moreover, conditioned by it, pragmatic discourse is the language of conformity, and by interrogating it, literary discourse invariably critiques at the same time the commonly held social values that nurture it. The important stern examination of social discourse therefore implies its ideological transformation into literary discourse, which Brink contends liberates one from 'society's acquiescence in traditional, conventional, stereotyped ways of looking, listening, thinking and experiencing' (*Mapmakers* 120). Entrenchment in the

rhetoric of society invariably means imprisonment in the questionable conventions of the laager. Brink was clearly aware that the political relevance of the novel, especially in situations of extreme political turmoil like apartheid South Africa, lies in the novelist's cultivation of its symbolic language to highlight and possibly perpetuate its ideological preferences.

Repeatedly, he emphasised the desperation of the Afrikaner establishment to create a doctrinal self-validating image for itself by appropriating realms of human value other than the overtly political, especially religion. Theology then assumed a pride of place in the formidable composite of polemic myth-making that strove to empower apartheid, and the Bible was reduced to a white mythology meant to justify a racist ideology. Edward Said noted that religious discourse 'serves as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly. Like culture, religion therefore furnishes us with systems of authority and with canons of order whose regular effect is either to compel subservience or gain adherents' (61). Brink identified this appropriation of religion by the apartheid establishment in its deployment of what is arguably the most adaptable myth of imperialism, the biblical myth of the divine curse on the sons of Canaan, and the convenient equation of blacks with Canaan's progeny, to perpetuate black servitude.

Examining the history of the 'Hamitic hypothesis', the notion that Caucasian culture-bearers, rather than indigenous black Africans, were responsible for all signs of civilisation in Africa, Edith Sanders has shown the particular adaptability of that biblical myth which she considers symptomatic of the nature of race relations (521). Sanders notes the unending mutations of the myth, demonstrates that the image of the black man has always 'deteriorated in direct proportion to his value as a commodity' (524), and shows the collusion of prevailing intellectual viewpoints in the construction of the enabling theory. Focusing on the role of theology in the invention and reinvention of the empowering features of the myth, Sanders underscores its fecundity in the production of diverse readings of the Bible, prodded by economic or political necessity, and explains why the codification of the black as divinely accursed fits seamlessly into the Christian framework. By not excluding the black from the human family, the myth did not threaten the Christian teaching on a common human ancestry; but by making black enslavement biblical, it abrogated both individual and collective guilt, making the subjugation of the black an act of obedience to the Almighty. Thus, the myth of Canaan

was highly consumable for an ideology like apartheid that sought anchorage in the revealed word of God.

Identifying religion as the cornerstone of Afrikaner morality, and in revulsion to the crucial historical role played by the Dutch Reformed Church in support of apartheid, Brink renounced conventional religion and morality and became an atheist. Abandoning orthodox religious faith, he exulted in the freedom to interrogate the apparently sacred and the dogmatic as well as the time-honoured conventional reflexes of the laager in order to make new discoveries, unencumbered by sterile traditional obligations.

As much, then, as the enormity of the historical suffering of blacks and coloureds under apartheid elicited from Brink the deepest compassion, and as much as he documented this massively with the aim of transforming the obnoxious regime, he believed nonetheless that their resistances to the evil ideology and the reciprocities of fellowship demanded of them on a daily basis by the condition honed their humanity. For Brink, then, Afrikaners' humanity was the true cost of their absorption by the lure of power, and Afrikaners thus were ironically the greatest victims of apartheid. He feared that 'Afrikaner' risked becoming a synonym for 'apartheid', and Afrikaans the language of its implementation. The horror with which Brink evoked the stereotypical image of the Afrikaner derives in part from his fear that that myth was steadily transforming to the truth:

> [T]he rough-edged frontiersman, gun in one hand and Bible in the other, inspired by the conviction of his covenant with God, his mission to tame the wilderness and subject the black heathen; his life determined by an obsession with racial purity and an atavistic brand of Calvinism based on an Old Testament view of the world; suspicious of sophistication and most things modern; and ever ready, when confronted by dangers real or imaginary, to retreat into the laager, that ring of ox-wagons drawn in nineteenth-century clashes with black enemies. (*Re-inventing* 76)

The redemption of Afrikaners became paramount in Brink's schema. Black characters still played prominent roles in his fiction, but his more mature view of the oppressor as the major victim of oppression and the need to show Afrikaners especially in their role as champions of freedom and other humane causes necessitated the focus on Afrikaner protagonists. And notably, Brink looked to black traditions for a new, warm, all-inclusive humanism.

Brink was prolific and his oeuvre monumental: some 26 novels, many of them translated into 35 languages, more than 14 original plays, as well as numerous adaptations and translations, travelogue, and volumes of scholarly and critical materials.[1] And for a writer who suffered certain persecution for his beliefs, Brink received quite a handful of laurels for his work, among them: the Reina Prinsen Geerligs Prize, 1964; the Central News Agency Literary Award for both Afrikaans and English literature, 1965, 1978, and 1982; the South African Academy Award for translation, 1970; the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize and the Prix Médicis Etranger, both in 1980. In 1982, the French Government awarded him the Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, and in 1987 he was made an Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Brink was awarded the DLitt in 1975 by Rhodes University and in 1985 by the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He was twice runner-up for the Booker Prize and was nominated several times for the Nobel Prize in Literature. He taught for 30 years at Rhodes University, Grahamstown where he rose to the rank of professor of Afrikaans and Dutch literature in 1980 before taking up a chair in literature at the University of Cape Town in 1990. After his retirement in 2000, he was appointed honorary professor in the department.

Brink was married five times: to Estelle Naudé in 1959 (divorced); Salomi Louw in 1965 (divorced); Alta Miller in 1970 (divorced); Marésa de Beer in 1990 (divorced); and Karina Magdalena Szczurek in 2006. Brink was 71 and Karina 29 when they married; her memoir, *The Fifth Mrs Brink* (2017), chronicles their love relationship. Leon de Kock is writing Brink's authorised biography, *The Love Song of André P. Brink*.

In their sober reflection on scholarship on Brink's writing in *Contrary: Critical Responses to the Novels of André Brink*, Willie Burger and Karina Magdalena Szczurek note two lacunae in the critical reception of his work: the lack of a published monograph on Brink's work and the availability of only one collection of essays devoted specifically to his oeuvre, the 1988 Afrikaans text *Donker weerlig* (*Dark Lightning*) edited by Jan Senekal (10). They draw attention to two important comparative book-length studies partly devoted to Brink: Sue Kossew's *Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J.M. Coetzee and André Brink* (1996) and Rosemary Jolly's *Colonization, Violence, and Narration in White South African Writing: André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach and J.M. Coetzee* (1996); two special issues of journals dedicated to Brink's writing: *Stilet* 14.2 (2002) and *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 42.1 (2005). The former comprises nine Afrikaans articles drawn from proceedings of a seminar devoted to Brink's work at the Bloemfontein Arts Festival in

2002, and the latter ten articles on Brink's work, five in English and five in Afrikaans, aimed at commemorating Brink's 70th birthday anniversary in 2005. Burger and Szczurek note the severities of politics in the reception of Brink's work in especially South Africa, often culminating in vilification rather than informed literary criticism (11-12). A collection of 20 previously published articles in English and Afrikaans by some of the most distinguished scholars of Brink's work, *Contrary* indeed aimed not only to provide a second, long overdue critical anthology on Brink's prose writing, but also to foreground some of the most distinguished discussion of Brink's work. This work is the first of a planned two-volume study of Brink's prose fiction.

Godfrey Meintjes has attempted an insightful classification of Brink's fiction into phases, even while indicating his awareness that the phases often overlap in terms of Brink's preoccupations. He refers to the first three novels published only in Afrikaans—*Die meul die hang* (1958), *Die gebondenes* (1958), and *Eindelose*—as 'finger exercises' which are nonetheless relevant to Brink's oeuvre in their experimentation with both language and general techniques (40). The Afrikaans texts *Lobola vir die lewe* (1965), *Orgie* (1965), *Miskien nooit* (1967), and *Die Ambassadeur* (1963) (the first to be translated into English), Meintjes avers, constitute 'the modernist existentialist phase' characterised by their conspicuous modernist forms and prominent existentialist content (41). *Looking on Darkness* (1974), *An Instant in the Wind* (1976), *Rumours of Rain* (1978), *A Dry White Season* (1979), and *A Chain of Voices* (1982) constitute what Meintjes refers to as the phase of 'littérature engagée', distinguished by its engagement with the South African political situation with the aim to transform it (42). Commenting further on this phase, which is focal in this study, Meintjes contends that its affiliation with sociopolitical issues notwithstanding, it is marked by the continuing centrality of the existential theme and Brink's obvious endeavour to deploy the political situation as a metaphor of human loneliness and desperation for communion (44). While *The Wall of the Plague* (1984), *States of Emergency* (1988), *An Act of Terror* (1991), *The First Life of Adamastor* (1993), and *On the Contrary* (1993) make up 'the postmodernist phase' marked by the use of postmodern textual strategies (52), 'the postapartheid phase' begins after South Africa's attainment of democratic status in 1994 and is marked, Meintjes argues, by a dissipation of the object of Brink's political engagement (72). The novels *Imaginings of Sand* (1996), *Devil's Valley* (1998), *Rights of Desire* (2000), *The Other Side of Silence* (2002), *Before I Forget* (2004), *Praying Mantis* (2005), *Other Lives* (2008), and *Philida* (2012) belong in this final phase of Brink's oeuvre.

This present study focuses primarily on the phase of Brink's prose fiction that Meintjes has described as 'littérature engagée', while making references to the two phases between which it is sandwiched and drawing extensively from his nonfictional writing and interviews. It highlights Brink's massive documentation of the history of the South African liberation and his insightful exploration of the ideological mythologies that complemented the materiality of apartheid in *Looking on Darkness* (1974), *An Instant in the Wind* (1976), *Rumours of Rain* (1978), *A Dry White Season* (1979), and *A Chain of Voices* (1982). However, Brink's keener focus is shown to lie beyond politics. The novels are thus read to reveal his fixation on abiding experiences that are typically human: the tragic miscarriage of energy and ambition and human existential isolation and insecurity. Moreover, Brink's acknowledgment of Camus's Sisyphus as the presiding symbol of the rebel and his general conflation of the concept of political freedom with the existentialist ideal of authentic choice, which is further re-interpreted by a more chastened Christian ascetic conception of self-crucifixion drawn mainly from the work of St John of the Cross, are shown to exist in a tenuous relationship with his liberation politics.

Brink's reputation as an internationally prominent commentator on the apartheid state is treated as peerless, and his postcolonial awareness of 'man' and Western 'humanism' as conflictual concepts, like his informed participation in the radical reintegration of the West's Other into a new all-inclusive human category, is constantly set in relief. However, in its retrieval of universal humanistic values, Brink's work is shown to validate that other claim of postcolonialist discourse: the abiding danger of the implication of counterhegemonic writing in the discursive structure it opposes, given its inhibition by hegemonic pressures and limits, and the sheer daunting challenge of locating the ideal position of intervention.

Brink's dynamism as a commentator on the apartheid South African state is highlighted by his sensitivity to the historical mutations of the enclave, necessitating a gamut of aesthetic responses whose trajectory ranges from social realism to postmodernism. Typically though, Brink discerned a continuity rather than rupture in the phases of his work. Sisyphus's eternal metaphysical estrangement, for example, typified for Brink a presiding exilic condition not only central in existentialist thought but also adaptable to a condition of marginality applicable to both the postcolonial and post-structuralist contexts: 'If one then transplants such a hero [as Sisyphus] to the post-colonial and post-structuralist context, where you move theoretically away from any idea of centre, and start cultivating marginality, not only just in relation to the centre but as a given

human condition, then *we are always marginal to something we can't properly define*' ('What You Never' 8).

As central as the figure of Sisyphus, mediated through Camus, is in his work, Brink's presiding image of the mortal condition is Shakespeare's 'forked animal', Poor Tom O'Bedlam in *King Lear*, tattered, traumatised, beleaguered not only by the hostility of the elements but especially by his kinsman's lust for the power and the glory, even while embodying redemptive human compassion. Brink's fixation with that character is evident enough in his recurring citation, replication, variation, and appropriation of both the phrase and the image in his fictional and nonfictional writing, turning it into a composite of the representative symbols through which Brink imagined the human situation. In Brink's interpretation of the image in political terms as the Fanonian wretched of the earth, it is often conflated with the image of Sisyphus, irrepressibly rebellious in his servitude. In literary terms, it is cast in the figure of the doomed but audacious tragic protagonist; its theological and philosophical countenance is the threadbare ascetic, contemptuous of fleshly tinsel, labouring at the Stations of the Cross in a steadfast will to martyrdom. In myth, it is emblematised as the archetypal wayfarer, shedding not clothes alone but also human flesh, a bone-creature, trudging through the valley of the shadow of death. In probably his most fascinating incarnation as the weird Xhosa bogeyman in *Rumours of Rain* who dares the protagonist to murder his father in order to have the *Momlambo*, ragged Tom is transformed into a hybrid figure, exemplifying cultures in dialogue, a conflation of African and Western wisdom.

Brink apparently suffered an aneurism on 6 February 2015 over Brazzaville on a flight from Europe to South Africa. There could hardly have been a more emblematic way to die for a writer who visualised his entire life as a symbolic crossing of frontiers and saw the negotiation of the cultural and intellectual distance between Europe and Africa as the core of his life-long endeavour.

Notes

1. Andy Martin has drawn attention also to Brink's copious journal writing: 'In 1968 alone he filled four 250-page notebooks with his neat, tight handwriting. Typing with one finger, this was the same year in which he broke two typewriters, and then "he borrowed one from a woman and he broke that too"'. Martin cites Karina Szczurek, Brink's last wife, to note that 'sublimation and self-repression never made any sense' to Brink; and to observe that Brink

retained his procedure of self-translation/simultaneous writing in English and Afrikaans begun after the banning of *Kennis van die Aand* till the end of his career: 'In writing his last completed book *Philida*, he was struggling so much to keep track of his own plot–in two languages (Brink would always write in English and Afrikaans)–that they printed out hundreds of pages and spread it all out on the floor in the living room until it all made sense.' Both subjects are discussed in this work. *States of Emergency* is Brink's only novel published in English without an Afrikaans version.

CHAPTER ONE

APARTHEID, THE WRITER, AND THE MORTAL CONDITION

1948 marked a decisive turning point in South African history. Roughly three centuries earlier, the first Dutch colonists had settled at the Cape in 1652 with the modest intention of establishing a way station to supply provisions to the ships of the Dutch East India Company. But they soon chose to settle down permanently there to farm, thus beginning a history characterised by incessant conflicts with the indigenous black population. The situation was exacerbated by British imperial interests in the region, and this compelled the Boers beginning from 1835 to flee into the interior by means of the famous Great Trek, in the bid to move away from British domination. As survivors of many conflicts with the black indigenes, and the vanquished in the Anglo-Boer wars, who beginning from the last quarter of the nineteenth century were designated as 'Afrikaners', they generally saw themselves as a group threatened with extinction. Afrikaners tended therefore to interpret Dr D.F. Malan's National Party's victory in 1948 as the triumph of a long suppressed Afrikaner nationalism. Driven then by the perceived compulsion of a fractious history, and in the context of institutional authority, they sought to consolidate that victory and that nationalism by nurturing their political philosophy to its final culmination in *apartheid*.

Susan Gallagher identifies apartheid as a Dutch word that roughly translates as 'apartness' or 'separateness'. In Afrikaans, however, she notes, apartheid assumed an entirely new and enormous significance, becoming South Africa's grim contribution to the pool of political terminology (1). Gallagher further cites Jacques Derrida's speculation on the disinclination of other languages to translate this word: '[N]o language has ever translated this name–as if all the languages of the world were defending themselves, shutting their mouths against a sinister incorporation of the thing by means of the word, as if all tongues were refusing to give an equivalent, refusing to let themselves be contaminated through the contagious hospitality of the word-for-word' (292). As a distillation of

racism, apartheid was not only similar to Nazism in inspiration and intent but actually had historical links with it. Donald Denoon observes that if 'H.F. Verwoerd who later became Prime Minister [of South Africa] was found by the courts during the war to have disseminated Nazi propaganda; J.B. Vorster, who succeeded Verwoerd as Prime Minister, was interned by the Smuts Government for his fascist activity' (175).

Aimed at the furtherance of the interests of one group in a plural society, apartheid could hope to flourish only by a systematic marginalisation of other interest groups. It needed therefore to evoke laws and practices to check rival nationalisms, especially black nationalism. Parliament was thus reduced to a horrid smithy in which were forged manacles to shackle blacks physically, impoverish them intellectually and spiritually, confine them in poverty and restrict their scope of action and vision to the narrowest conceivable level. Although blacks were overwhelmingly in the majority, Kruger's Land Act of 1913 had restricted them to only 13 per cent of the land: 'Prevented by the Education Act from acquiring a modern intellectual culture and by apprenticeship boards from having useful skills, they were still further hampered in the attempt to earn a living by job reservations. Ten years after the Riekert and Wiehahn Commissions, they still earned, on the average, only a tenth of what the white man earned' (Obumselu, 'Mandela' 13).

André Brink explains that apartheid would aspire to garner deeper relevance and complement its materiality by the annexation of realms other than the overtly political, including even theology and language:

> For apartheid to be sanctioned as the definitive characteristic of the Afrikaner Establishment, it had to reach far beyond the domain of politics: it was not simply a political policy 'adopted' as a response to the racial situation in the country but had to be accepted as an extension of an entire value system, embracing all the territories of social experience, economics, philosophy, morality and above all religion. The Church itself had to provide the ultimate justification for the ideology.
>
> Even that was not enough: the ideology also attempted to annex the language . . . to turn Afrikaans into the language of apartheid. (*Mapmakers* 18)

George Steiner's and Gallagher's insights in this connection affirm the validity of Brink's observation. Gallagher argues the complicity of language in the enforcement of injustice and oppression, since discourse and mythologies that complement the material reality of apartheid depend on language for their existence and actually take their shape in language

(37). But the relationship is of course symbiotic, for language itself is completely permeated and in its exercise of power is fundamentally moulded and affected.

In light of the mythical importance attached to the development of Afrikaans and its basic role in the emergence and definition of the identity of Afrikaners, the temptation to reduce the language to a linguistic incarnation of the ideology of apartheid was almost irresistible to the Afrikaner establishment: 'The Afrikaans language not only is an embodiment of the Afrikaner nationalistic identity, but also is systematically used as a tool for oppression. By manipulating definitions and meanings of words, governmental discourse has employed language to veil and distort many of its activities. In South Africa today [1991], the government regularly practises a kind of 'double speak' in which words mean something other than their literal definitions' (Gallagher 39).

The process by which the consolidation of power, taking the place of the groping towards truth at the heart of language, inevitably leads to its distortion, and corruption is amply demonstrated even in the English translation of Afrikaans official names of Acts of Parliament, beginning from the outset of the Nationalist regime. Gallagher notes that the 1950 Immorality Act actually forbade all interracial sexual relations, even in marriage; the 1952 Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act, far from abolishing the pass law, in truth gave it greater application, extending its scope to include all Africans, even, for the first time, women; the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act, segregating against blacks, reserved movie houses, beaches, swimming pools, and post offices for whites only; and the Extension of the University Act did not extend the University but expelled most black students from the regular universities of South Africa, establishing for them instead a 'tribal' college in which they could be educated in a Bantu language (39-40).

Similarly, Keyan Tomaselli and Ruth Tomaselli highlight the Nationalist Party's attempts to gain credibility with Western governments through its appropriation of liberal discourse whose true implications, however, did not coincide with the democratic ideals they seemed to allude to: 'one-man-one-vote' in South Africa meant that everyone had a vote–not, however, for the central government but for a racially structured administration subordinate to the State President; and "minority rights" in reality meant 'white protection' (18). Keyan Tomaselli and Ruth Tomaselli even disclose that the Military Intelligence (MI) and police hit squads that targeted only high-profile black and white activists within and

outside South Africa were coyly named 'The Civic Cooperation Bureau' (19).[1] Meditating on the experience of the German language, George Steiner reveals that the corruption of Afrikaans by its role in the discourse of power has historical precedence:

> Use a language to conceive, organise and justify Belsen; use it to make out specifications for gas ovens; use it to dehumanize man during twelve years of calculated bestiality. Something will happen to it . . . . Something of the lies and sadism will settle in the marrow of the language, imperceptibly at first, like the poisons of radiation sifting silently into the bone. But the cancer will begin, and the deep-set destruction. The language will no longer grow and freshen. It will no longer perform quite as well as it used to, its two principal functions: the conveyance of humane order which we call law, and the communication of the quick of the human spirit which we call grace. (124)

When mere school children took to the streets of Soweto in June 1976 to protest the imposition of Afrikaans as the language of their instruction, Brink very probably saw in that the ultimate denunciation and damnation of Afrikaans.

Gallagher's firm grasp of the substance of the South African situation is perhaps fully evident only in her demonstration of significant discourse practices in South Africa as embodiments of the strategies of power and subjection, inclusion and exclusion, voices and silences, and of how these created a psychological apartheid in which blacks were denied full human reality and objectified as 'the other' (23). She acknowledges the veracity of Coetzee's idea on South African history as myth: 'Coetzee charges that the story told by the official history of the Afrikaner is an edifice constructed of selected fragments of the past by a historiography in the service of twentieth-century nationalist politics. It was put together for precisely the purpose of buttressing and justifying the activities of a specific political grouping' (25).[2] Her prototype of the Afrikaner's construction of history to function as myth in the endeavour to justify Afrikaner nationalism and its ideology of apartheid is the official historical myth of South Africa as an essentially uninhabited land into which the Bantu and Boers migrated simultaneously. But even when the presence of blacks is at all acknowledged in official history as in colonial travel narratives, they are represented as a mythical other, subhuman and heathenish, in order to justify European colonisation.

Abdul JanMohamed has indeed located the perception of racial difference at the heart of economic motives. Citing Dorothy Hammond

and Alta Jablow, he notes that European perception of Africans before the development of the slave trade was rather neutral and benign but at the establishment of the slave trade, Africans were newly characterised as evil and barbarous (16). Thus, Gallagher contends that Ralph Standish's account in 1612 is representative of three centuries of colonial writing:

> The Counttrey being firtille ground and pleasant and a counttrey verie temperatt but the people bruitt and salladg, without Religion, without language, without Lawes or government, without manners or humanittie, and last of all without apparell, for they go naked save onelie a ppees of Sheepes Skyn to cover their Members that in my opinion yt is a great pittie that such creatures as they bee should injoy so sweet a counttrey. Ther persons are preporcionable butt their faces like an Appe or Babownne, with flat nosses and ther heads and faces both beastlie and fillthy to behoulde. (qtd. in Gallagher 27)

She places in this tradition the writings of John Jordain (1608), Hondious (1652), Kolb (1719), Mentzel (1785), Barrow (1801), and Philip (1828).

In a recent enquiry into the white perceptual system focused mainly on the white's reflexive perception of the black migrant worker, Michael Wade reveals its culmination in a 'distressing arrest in the development of White perception' (21) and explains it as the impossibility for the white South African to see the black as an autonomous Other. Wade's historical focus is mainly the years spanning the industrialisation of South Africa, after the discovery of diamonds in the north-western Cape in 1860. But his findings are typical: the roots of the whites' perception of the black are fully in economics. In the documents of the South African white imagination, the novel, poetry, drama, the newspaper, and other forms in which whites engage themselves effectively in a dialogue (speaking only less effectively to others), 'the giant image of the migrant worker looms inscrutable, impenetrable; shafts of perception, energised by the urgency of the whites' deepest insecurities and fears, bounce off the matt black of his skin. Little can be learned about the migrant worker himself from these accounts; but much may be garnered towards an understanding of the group that has dominated the private sector of the South African economy since the discovery of diamonds more than a century and a quarter ago' (1). The hardening of the whites' perception of the black into an authorised version of the Other certainly offers an insight into the role of iconography in power and the economy.

The Afrikaners, on the other hand, appropriated biblical hermeneutics to create a nationalistic mythology of Afrikanerdom as the second Israel:

'Taking the traditional Christian idea of history as a progression of events controlled and directed by God to establish his eternal kingdom, Afrikaners, in a distorted development of the Calvinistic notion of election, have come to believe that they are a chosen People, specially selected by God to establish his kingdom in the modern world' (Gallagher 30). The Great Trek was therefore for them a modern Exodus to the Promised Land, the indigenous peoples the sons of Ham: apartheid, thus, was of God.

Gallagher's analysis of the South African situation through the prism of the primary role of cultural discourses in the process of colonial myth-making and in the formulation of political attitudes is thoroughly informed by the work of Edward Said, which she indeed frequently cites often enough. Said defines orientalism as Europe's general effort to rule distant lands and peoples by a special mode of representation of colonised people. Hidden beneath the scholarly and aesthetic idioms of orientalism and Europe's discourses on Africa is a partisan ideology. In *Orientalism*, Said's most sustained demonstration of this process, his contention is that orientalism does not seek to represent the reality of its putative object. It is instead the triumph of Europe's creation or invention or representation of the Orient, the Oriental and his or her world for itself, completely characterised by the Western projection onto and will to govern the Orient. It is, simply put, 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (*Orientalism* 3). This outlook therefore necessarily makes an ontological and epistemological distinction between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident'.

Beyond acknowledging all these points of Orientalism as valid in their general application, Gallagher demonstrates their applicability in the South African situation. In pointing, too, to the part that colonial travel narratives played in justifying European colonisation, she seems to confirm Said's contention in *Culture and Imperialism* that the novel is the aesthetic form most particularly important in the formation of imperial attitudes, references, and experiences in the expanding Western empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and in the converse process of emancipation:

> [S]tories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world. They also became the method colonized people used to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course, but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, and who won it back and who now, plans its future–these issues

> were reflected, contested and even for a time decided in narrative. As one critic has suggested, nations themselves are narratives. (xii)

In South Africa itself, Steve Biko's writing seems to echo Said through his awareness that official history is no more than a distorted version of reality created to empower the Afrikaner establishment:

> Colonialism is never satisfied with having the native in its grip but, by some strange logic, it must turn to his past and disfigure and distort it. Hence the history of the black man in this country is most disappointing to read. It is presented merely as a long succession of defeats. The Xhosas were thieves who went to war for stolen property; the Boers never provoked the Xhosas but merely went on 'punitive expeditions' to teach the thieves a lesson . . . [N]ot only is there no objectivity in the history taught us but there is frequently an appalling misrepresentation of facts. (qtd. in Gallagher 28)

Biko's resolution is found in his invitation to blacks: 'We have to rewrite our history and produce in it the heroes that formed the core of our resistance to the white invaders' (qtd. in Gallagher 31). Since history as written by the ruling race concealed black heroes, Biko had a point in seeking to rewrite that history so as to 'produce' the heroes. The substance of Biko's argument, like his usage of 'rewrite' and 'produce', reveals an awareness of the politics of writing history, and of the ruler's projection and privileging of 'history' as an objective documentation of verifiable and inviolable facts. Biko fundamentally links 'history' with its kindred modes of apprehending or interpreting reality, dwelling on the delights and power of rival myth-making, of storytelling, of literature, to awaken the colonised to consciousness and enable the transcendence of their humiliated condition.

Questions on the uses of literature and the roles of a responsible artist in apartheid South Africa engaged the energies and attention of South African writers and critics over the decades. Among blacks, the general inclination was to consider the overt participation of literature in the democratisation process as inevitable. Mafika Gwala contends that the overwhelming determination of politics of the social consciousness in apartheid South Africa through discriminatory laws meant that the speech and written forms of language necessarily had to be highly politicised (47). In his foreword to Alex La Guma's *A Threefold Cord*, Brian Bunting concurs: 'It is difficult to propound the cult of "art for art's sake" in South Africa. Life presents problems with an insistence which cannot be ignored, and there can be few countries in the world where people, of all races and

classes, are more deeply preoccupied with matters falling generally under the heading of "political" . . . . If art is to have any significance at all, it must reflect something of this national obsession, this passion which consumes and sometimes corrodes the soul of the South African people' (9).

Where there was no lack of goodwill and commitment among white South African writers toward breaking down the unjust political and social structure, they more steadfastly drew attention to the limitations that an overt political writing imposed on literature and sought ways of fulfilling their responsibilities to society without sacrificing their equally important commitment to their art. Coetzee, in his Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, characterises South African literature as being not fully human, given its more than natural preoccupation with power and the torsions of power. He notes its inability to pass from the elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that extends beyond. Coetzee attributes the inhibition suffered by the South African writer to 'the power which the world (where his body lives) has to impose itself on him, and (in the last instance) on his imagination . . . . The *coarseness* of life in South Africa, the naked force of its seductions, not only on the physical level, but also on the moral level, its harshness and its savageries, its hungers and its furies, its greediness and its lies make it as irresistible as it is displeasing' (qtd. in Gallagher 17).

Similarly, Stephen Watson notes 'the intrinsic limitation and ultimate folly of regarding political and military struggle as the sole model of all cultural activities' (472). His evaluation of South African literature is an outright indictment:

> For too long now much South African literature has been stunted by the urgency of its commitments. Thus while it offers many a caricature of brutal policemen, it hardly explores the cruel sensuality that underlies so much human evil; while it contains thousands of indictments of love-affairs blighted by racial laws, it has not even begun to develop a tradition of eroticism. Such matters might receive more attention in a climate in which writers are not insistently under the obligation to use words as if they were AK 47s. (472)

Writing in the wake of the changes announced by President de Klerk in February 1990; the unbanning of the African National Congress, and the Pan-Africanist Congress; the release of Nelson Mandela; and the call for a literary renaissance by the revolutionary ANC activist and writer Albie