

Isidore Diala Tribute

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André Brink: In defiance of boundaries



With the death of the South African novelist, playwright, literary critic, translator and scholar, André Brink, on 6 February 2015, just seven months after Nadine Gordimer's on 13 July 2014, a crucial epoch of South African literature and history inexorably moves to a close. Like Gordimer, Brink had been among the few particularly distinguished white South African writers whose denunciation of white privilege and enunciation of enlightened humane values potentially applicable to all humankind did not only

become the presiding concern of their art but was also expressed in their "heretical" association with the ANC (that is, rather than the National Party or better still the Broederbond). Brink apparently suffered an aneurism over Brazzaville on a KLM flight from Europe to South Africa. Perhaps, there could not have been a more emblematic way to die for a writer who envisaged all his 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.

Born on 29 May 1935 in Vrede, South Africa, Brink attended Potchefstroom University where he earned an MA in Afrikaans in 1958 and another MA in English in 1959. He was at the Sorbonne, University of Paris, between 1959 and 1961 for a post-graduate research in comparative literature. Brink's emergence as a writer was as a prominent member of the Sestigters—writers of the 60s—and his earliest writing was in Afrikaans until his 1973 novel *Kennis van die aand* earned the reputation of being the first Afrikaans work to be banned by the apartheid establishment. That experience had a twofold momentous impact on his career: the strengthening of the compact between art and politics in his work, and his tradition of self-translation into English which had the ultimate impact of enhancing his commitment to his international audience.

Brink's work is monumental: well over twenty-five novels, more than twelve plays, and volumes of critical and scholarly material, in addition to numerous translations. And the many literary prizes that he won or was nominated for testify to the high regard in which his work is held. However, his reputation is especially

peerless as an internationally renowned commentator on the aberrations and enormities of the apartheid state. Brink easily recognised that political ideologies typically assume religious appurtenances to insulate themselves against interrogation, and play out at the deepest threshold of human consciousness and imagination through myth-making. His signal insight was his recognition of apartheid's desperation to create a doctrinal self-validating image for itself by appropriating realms of human value other than the overtly political, especially religion. Like historiography and cartography, theology became a species of polemic myth-making and the Bible was reduced to a white mythology that justified a racist ideology.

Where, however, it was Brink's cardinal goal to have political relevance in South Africa's state of moral siege, he was equally passionate to remain central in the larger human context. His fiction reveals an obsession with abiding experiences that are typically human: the tragic miscarriage of energy and ambition, and existential human isolation and insecurity. In the face of the sober realities of the human estate like aloneness, defeat, and death, the discriminations of race are revealed to be hollow as all humans, in their full variegated complexions, men and women, are shown to be kindred sufferers. Brink's forte was his unusual power to transform political facts into enduring insights into the human condition. However, that fixation with 'universalist humanist' denominators often seemed to interrogate his politics in apartheid South Africa. For example, his treatment of institutionalised racial discrimination by the apartheid establishment as a metaphor of humans' existential loneliness or even mythical primordial human orphaning, and his theologising of torture as redemptive purgatorial fire virtually endowed an obnoxious regime with mystical divine grace and thus complicated the categories and procedures of the activist. For while Brink's political position in his nonfictional writing and interviews was characteristically impeccable, his fiction is always invariably replete with paradoxes.

Brink's poetics did not only separate politics from literature but actually privileged the latter: "My stated conviction is that literature should never descend to the level of politics; it is rather a matter of elevating and refining politics so as to be worthy of literature." He abjured self-incarceration in any particular school of thought, even if he demonstrated an obvious admiration for the French existentialist novelists, Spanish writers of the seventeenth century, Tolstoy, and Shakespeare. His aim was always to get an imaginative grasp of history with all its enduring mythic substance; and at different periods in his career, realism, postmodernism, magical realism, and myth-making were among the modes through which he sought to mediate the historical. Equally, renouncing orthodox religious faith, Brink exulted in the freedom to interrogate the apparently sacred and the dogmatic as well as the time-honoured conventional reflexes of the human herd in order to make new discoveries, unencumbered by sterile traditional obligations.

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, yet embodying redemptive human compassion. Brink's fixation with that image is evident enough in his recurring citations and allusions to it. But he also replicates and appropriates it in endless variations in his fiction. 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 defiant tragic protagonist; its theological and philosophical countenance is the threadbare ascetic, contemptuous of fleshly tinsel, labouring at his/her Stations of the Cross in his/her 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 (memorably portrayed in the image of Elisabeth at the end of her pilgrimage across the Karoo in *An Instant in the Wind*). In probably his most fascinating incarnation as the weird Xhosa bogeyman in *Rumours of Rain* who dares Martin Mynhardt to murder his father in order to have the *Momlambo*, ragged Tom is transformed into a hybrid figure, exemplifying cultures in a dialogue. Transcultural and timeless, rooted as much in the present as in history and in myth and, moreover, dyed in the hue of the ash and breath of human life itself, his fate continues to haunt human imagination and awareness as will indeed Brink's work.

We mourn André Phillipus Brink (1935–2015)—but with exultation.