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Tribute

Birthing me: André P. Brink (1935–2015)



All human beings are born; that is a biological given. Some have the great fortune to be reborn on various other levels during their lifetime—philosophical, religious, political, creative and many other levels of consciousness. If you believe in reincarnation, there are, of course, many births and rebirths—as one wag said: I didn't believe in reincarnation the last time around either.

“I was born on a bench in the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris, in the early spring of 1960.”

We all know these now iconic words regarding the political and social rebirth of André P. Brink, fuelled by Camus and the classic French—often very romantic—tradition of investigating social injustices in a certain revolutionary fashion. Following his death tributes have poured in to honour Brink, rightly showcasing his extraordinary talents: as writer, master storyteller, teacher, critic, erudite scholar, intellectual giant, authority on world literatures, connoisseur, fine reader of poetry, life artist and fearless opponent of apartheid and censorship.

What follows, is a brief personal account of how he touched and shaped my life and thinking in a very specific way.

At the age of 22 I was a perfect product of white apartheid schooling and militarised thinking. The school system from which I came had not taught me to think critically, to question authority or the social order, *au contraire*. Two years in the army—into which I entered unquestioningly and unthinkingly—merely reinforced uncritical, herd thinking.

My first political rebirth happened on a bench in a lecture hall of the Humanities Building during my Honours year at the University of Pretoria in 1983. The father to this birth was André P. Brink; the symbolic nurturing mother was my mentor and dear friend Professor Piet Roodt; the seed: *Kennis van die aand* (*Looking on Darkness*, which had just been unbanned), *Gerugte van reën* (*Rumours of Rain*) and *'n Droë wit seisoen* (*A Dry White Season*). I remember asking Prof Roodt, in a dumbstruck manner, if the scenarios sketched by Brink in these books—abduction, torture and murder of political opponents by the Security Police (especially the so-called Special Branch)—

were really true. He patiently explained that, under the legislation of the time, the Special Branch could really break your house down to the very last brick if they suspected you of any “subversive activities”. And this was a few years before the various states of emergency. Of course, all of these descriptions—and many more—were borne out by testimonies before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and confessions by operatives, among them the Vlakplaas operators.

Impassioned and angered by these books, I wrote my first essay of literary criticism, “Braam Fischer en Bernard Franken: die figuur en die dokument” (“Braam Fischer and Bernard Franken: the figure and the document”)—a comparison between the fictional character of Bernard Franken in *Gerugte van reën* and the real-life figure of Bram Fischer and his last speech from the dock. Advocate Johan Kruger SC (now Chairman of the Council of Northwest University) took me under his wing and into the archives of the Supreme Court underneath Church Square, where he asked one of the clerks lazing about for the relevant Fischer documents. The clerk came back after a short “search” and declared that the file was “missing”. I won’t repeat Advocate Kruger’s response to the clerk *verbatim*, but the documentation—banned at the time, of course—was delivered to us within seconds.

The year after that, I embarked upon my MA degree, “Die betekenis en funksie van die verwysings in *Die ambassadeur* van André P. Brink, met toespitsing op die *Divina Commedia* van Dante Alighieri” (“The meaning and function of the allusions in *The Ambassador* by André P. Brink, with special reference to the *Divina Commedia* by Dante Alighieri”). I read *Die ambassadeur* again a few years ago—the text still retains the freshness of more than fifty years ago when Brink wrote it at the age of 28.

We all know the histories of texts like *States of Emergency*. We all know or have heard stories of how the Security Police hounded and harassed Brink and his family over many years.

The 1980s rolled by in flames, Brink is vilified by his “own” people and the Afrikaans press, states of emergency are declared and, eventually, a new socio-political dispensation is born: 1994. Visionary writer and person that he was, Brink did not let himself be deluded by the new breed of politicians, albeit at quite a late stage in his life. He knew that the old *dictum* still holds true: Two wrongs do not make a right. Brink did have more of a romantic notion of the liberation movement than Breyten Breytenbach. This, I believe, can be explained by the fact that Breyten had looked directly into the heart of the whore earlier than Brink. Which explains the first sentence of a lecture entitled “Die hond se been” (“The dog’s bone”) that Breyten delivered at the University of South Africa in 1990, and I quote: “Enigiets wat die Nasionale Party van kon droom om te doen, kan en gaan die ANC tien keer erger doen” (“Anything that the National Party could dream of doing, the ANC can and will do ten times worse”.) Why? Breyten had looked into the essence of power and the fact that power always corrupts.

Brink touched upon this truth in *'n Droë wit seisoen* (the protagonist, Ben du Toit, is in conversation with Professor Bruwer):

“Nou wat verwag jy dan anders?” [...] “Verstaan jy nie, Ben?—’n gesprek, ’n dialoog is die een ding wat hulle nie mag toelaat nie. Want as hulle jou toelaat om vrae te stel, dan erken hulle die bestaansreg van twyfel; en daardie blote moontlikheid moet hulle uitsluit.”

“Dit hoef tog nie noodwendig so te wees nie!”

“Wat kan hulle anders doen, as jy dit eerlik bekyk? Kwessie van mag. Kale mag, niks anders nie. Dis wat hulle daar gebring het; dis wat hulle daar hou. En mag is ’n ding wat sy eie houvas op jou kry.” [...] “As mens eers jou bankrekening in Switserland het, en jou grondjie in Paraguay, en jou villa’tjie [sic] in Frankryk, en jou sakekontakte in Hamburg of Bonn, en met ’n handomdraai kan besluit of ander mense mag lewe of sterwe—dan moet jy ’n baie, baie aktiewe gewete hê as jy teen jou eie mag ’n koevoet wil inslaan. En ’n gewete is ’n ding wat nie sommer son of ryp verdra nie, hy ’t sorg nodig.” (203)¹

The parallels with certain Southern African leaders are obvious. The current corruption by and of power hit Brink hard by way of reports on endemic corruption and simple statistics like more deaths in police custody in one post-1994 year than during any single year of apartheid (Bruce). His cynicism was further strengthened by the hijacking of his daughter and the murder of his nephew in Pretoria. During one of his last interviews in *Beeld*, he referred to these murderers as *barbare* (“savages”)—a term rarely found in the Brink lexicon. When asked who he does not like, he very simply replied: “Jacob Zuma”.

Was he disillusioned? To a certain extent, I believe, yes. He was witnessing how a democracy is sliding into a kleptocracy, how the stereotypical African “Big Man Syndrome” was and is being played out again, how a previous gang of criminals are being replaced by, as someone said, the current crop of criminals nominally governing this country (see de Kock).

Ultimately, Brink always had a prophetic vision of and on the tension between state and author/artist, between raw power and those that defied it creatively by word and/or deed. He had to witness as, just as the apartheid state lumped its opponents together under the blanket term *kommuniste*, the new regime does exactly the same: critics and dissidents are simply labelled “counter-revolutionary”, or the race card is played.

The warning that Brink signals at the end of *'n Droë wit seisoen* still holds true. This is a warning that expands into the realisation that political freedoms and an end to censorship can never be taken for granted, but have to be constantly protected and struggled for. The new government has already shown its teeth against freedom of speech and especially media freedom—see the Protection of Information Bill (cheered

on by buffoons in the National Assembly, not realising that they are signing away the very hard-won freedoms and civil liberties that they and others had struggled for); the on-going onslaught against the free media—see the blocking of telephone signals on 12 February 2015 in the circus called the National Assembly—an onslaught against which Brink vociferously protested and demonstrated.

One is reminded of the Dutch poet Lucebert's words: "Voor je het weet, is het weer zover, draagt de een een zweep, de ander een jodenster" ("Before you know it, it is that far again; the one carries a whip, the other a Jewish star").

But here is the news: just as the apartheid state failed to silence so-called dissident writers like Brink, the current state will also fail to silence critical writers of any race, colour or creed. For being consistent in his view on state oppression and continuing onslaughts against human rights and civil liberties, I salute and respect Brink, as well as for the various facets of his being that I mentioned at the outset. And, of course, despite his human flaws (human, all too human, as Nietzsche said), for being the eternal gentleman, always ready to answer queries of the common person.

I thank André Brink—as many other readers and writers have and will continue to do—for birthing me and others into power-political consciousness and I end by quoting the last few paragraphs of *'n Droë wit seisoen* (261), words that chillingly echo the Nuremberg trials:

Is dit dan uit perverse moedswilligheid dat ek dit alles nogtans hier opgeteken het?
Of uit sentimentele lojaliteit teenoor 'n vriend van wie ek oor die jare vervreem
geraak het? Of dalk selfs om iets van 'n lawwe soort "ereskuld" te betaal aan Susan?

Miskien is dit beter om nie te diep in mens se eie beweegredes in te graawe nie.

En begin alles dan nou inderdaad van voor af? Weer die sirkel. Tot waar? Hoe
breek mens eendag daaruit? Of maak dit nie regtig saak nie? Gaan dit regtig net
om aanhou? Met, miskien, 'n dowwe, skuldige verpligting teenoor iets waaraan
Ben sou geglo het: iets wat die mens *kan* wees en wat hy nie dikwels toegelaat word
om te wees nie?

Ek weet nie.

Miskien is die meeste waarop mens mag hoop, die meeste wat ek my mag
aanmatig, presies net dit: om op te teken. Net om verslag te lewer. Sodat dit on-
moontlik sal wees dat enigiemand ooit hierná durf sê: "Ek het nie geweet nie."
(261)²

Selah, André P. Brink.

Notes

1. "What else did you expect?" [...] Don't you realise?—discussion, dialogue, call it what you will, is the one thing they dare not allow. For once they start allowing you to ask questions they're forced to admit the very possibility of doubt. And their *raison d'être* derives from the exclusion of that possibility."

"Why must it be so?" I asked.

"Because it's a matter of power. Naked power. That's what brought them there and keeps them there. And power has a way of becoming an end in itself." [...] "Once you have your bank account in Switzerland, and your farm in Paraguay, and your villa in France, and your contacts in Hamburg and Bonn and Tokyo—once a flick of your wrist can decide the fate of others—you need a very active conscience to start acting against your own interests. And a conscience doesn't stand up to much heat or cold, it's a delicate sort of plant." (Brink, *Season* 244)

2. "Then why did I go ahead by writing it all down here? Purely from sentimental loyalty to a friend I had neglected for years? Or to pay some form of conscience money to Susan? It is better not to pry too deeply into one's own motives.

Is everything really beginning anew with me? And if so: how far to go? Will one ever succeed in breaking the vicious circle? Or isn't that so important? Is it really just a matter of going on, purely and simply? Prodded, possibly, by some dull, guilty feeling of responsibility towards something Ben might have believed in: something man is capable of being but which he isn't very often allowed to be?

I don't know.

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 ever to say again: I knew nothing about it." (Brink, *Season* 315–16)

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