
“First hand becomes second hand”: André Brink’s *A Dry White Season*

Mélanie Joseph-Vilain



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/8744>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.8744

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2009

Number of pages: 98-109

ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Mélanie Joseph-Vilain, ““First hand becomes second hand”: André Brink’s *A Dry White Season*”, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 32.1 | 2009, Online since 23 December 2021, connection on 17 February 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/8744> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.8744>



Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

“First hand becomes second hand”: André Brink’s *A Dry White Season*

This paper offers a reading of André Brink’s novel *A Dry White Season* in relation to his own essay *The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino*. The aim is to demonstrate that Brink’s theory can help highlight aspects of his apartheid writings which have often been neglected. The paper explores, in particular, the metafictional features of a novel more famous for its committed dimension than for its self-reflexivity.

André Brink’s international reputation was gained from such novels as *A Dry White Season* and *A Chain of Voices*. He has nonetheless also published a number of essays¹ on a variety of subjects ranging from apartheid to rugby and from the heritage of Gandhi to his own novels. These essays are recognized as important statements on literature and politics. Under apartheid, Brink’s essays mostly focused on the situation in South Africa and on the difficult position of the writer in his or her struggle against the system. The essays collected in *Mapmakers*, for instance, mostly explore the dissident Afrikaner writer’s experience in a world ruled by the arbitrariness and censorship imposed by his own people². It has become commonplace to divide the career of South African writers of the second part of the twentieth century into two different periods, ‘apartheid’ and ‘post-apartheid’. Hackneyed as it may be, this division can help us to analyse the changes in Brink’s career, both as a fiction and as an essay writer. He himself insists on the freedom associated with the “New” South Africa in his introduction to *Reinventing a Continent*. After describing the almost frightening awareness that “suddenly, ‘there is nothing to write about anymore’”, he highlights the other way of looking at the new situation: “the discovery of a near-miraculous opening up of the horizons of the possible, where after decades we can now engage more deeply with the various dimensions of our craft than ever before” (Brink 10-11). These new literary horizons included the recourse to magic realism, a departure from the realistic, committed literature which had previously been largely predominant³. If the transition liberated Brink as a novelist, it also gave him scope to explore new horizons in the field of essay writing. In 1998, he published a full-length study on the metafictional nature

1. I am using the term “essay” in a broad sense, to refer to Brink’s non-fiction writings.

2. In “André Brink and the Censor”, J.M. Coetzee brilliantly points to the ambiguities raised by the metaphors Brink uses in these essays to describe his position as an Afrikaans writer in apartheid society in terms of illness and diagnosis.

3. In the apartheid context, realism and commitment came to work hand-in-hand: because they wanted to denounce apartheid in as forceful a way as possible, most writers remained as close to reality as they could, which meant that realism was largely dominant.

of the novel as a genre, *The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino* (1998), in which he endeavours to demonstrate that all novels are and have always been primarily about language and that self-reflexivity is far from being a postmodern innovation⁴. His demonstration is based on a series of case studies exploring fifteen novels, from Cervantes's *Quixote* to Calvino's *If on a Winter Night a Traveller*.

This paper will endeavour to shun the pre- and post-apartheid approach to Brink's work, by bringing together this essay and a novel written at a time when his priorities did not seem to be metafiction or postmodernism. The novel chosen to explore Brink's theory of the novel and to confront it to his own fiction is *A Dry White Season*. After briefly examining Brink's main argument in *The Novel*, I will justify the seemingly surprising choice of *A Dry White Season* and will then try to show how reading it through the prism of the author's own theory helps to highlight aspects of the novel which have been neglected until now. In the process, I hope to reassert the literary value of *A Dry White Season* and to develop a reflection on the complex relationships between realism and postmodernism, but also between theory and practice.

The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino explores Brink's favourite mode of writing from a perspective which stresses the continuity of the genre rather than the differences discernable in its various stages. The study begins with a general introduction in which Brink describes the major changes the novel underwent in the twentieth century, emphasising, in particular, the key role played by James Joyce. Brink then quotes the famous passage from Elizondo's *The Graphographer* which serves as an epigraph to Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*:

I write. I write that I am writing. Mentally I see myself writing that I am writing and I can also see myself seeing that I am writing. I remember writing and also seeing myself writing. And I see myself remembering that I see myself writing and I remember seeing myself remembering that I was writing and I write seeing myself write that I remember having seen myself write that I saw myself writing that I was writing and that I was writing that I was writing that I was writing. I can also imagine myself writing that I had already written that I would imagine myself writing that I had written that I was imagining myself writing that I see myself writing that I am writing. (quoted in Brink, *Novel* 3-4)⁵

4. Brink published another study entirely devoted to literature in 1996. This collection of essays on Shakespeare is based on a series of conferences delivered in 1994 and 1995 and is entitled *Destabilising Shakespeare*. The aim is "the revelation of strategies and devices within various plays through which some of the apparent 'constants' of the Elizabethan / Jacobean world are challenged or subverted: kingship, power, identity, gender" (Brink, *Destabilising Shakespeare* i).

5. Further page references provided in the main text.

After this rather dazzling quote on apperception, which seems emblematic of how extreme the self-reflexive strategies of modernism and postmodernism can be, Brink wonders if this is “really as new as it sounds” (4). His argument is that “what has so persistently been regarded as the prerogative of the Modernist and Postmodernist novel (and of a few rare predecessors), namely an exploitation of the storytelling properties of language, *has in fact been a characteristic of the novel since its inception.*” (6-7) He insists on the uniqueness of the way in which novels have always been using language: “It is in narrative language, I believe, that one should look for the key to the full experience of engaging with the genre. ‘It is the world of words’, says Lacan, ‘which creates the world of things’ ... there are no people or houses or trees or dogs between the pages, but only words, words, words” (5). To demonstrate the validity of this argument, Brink endeavours to revisit a number of classics from world literature, exploring “*the way in which a particular view and concept of language is demonstrated implicitly or explicitly in the text*” (16). He insists that self-reflexivity is a constant in the novels he analyses, in particular the less recent ones, “and all of this long before the rise of Postmodernism, with which this kind of linguistic consciousness has come to be most specifically associated” (*ibidem*).

This might sound paradoxical, since even though many contemporary critics recognize that postmodernism has a small number of “great ancestors” like *Tristram Shandy*⁶, most of them⁷ highlight the specificity of its emphasis on language as such, on fiction as fiction, on “the medium as the message”, as Brink puts it (1). Brink’s essay therefore challenges views which have now come to be widely accepted, views according to which postmodernism is unique and radically differs from what preceded it⁸ – although most theoreticians of postmodernism admittedly also stress its capacity and willingness to comment on and criticise previous genres and texts, as demonstrated for instance by Linda Hutcheon’s definition of parody as “a perfect postmodern form, in some sense, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (Hutcheon 11). Brink’s fairly convincing demonstration thus lays stress on the constants of the novel rather than on its various phases. This emphasis on continuity is the first reason why I chose to engage with *A Dry White Season*. Most of the critics who have provided an overview of Brink’s novels⁹ distinguish between two

6. See, for instance, David Lodge’s assertion that “The granddaddy of all metafictional novels was *Tristram Shandy*, whose narrator’s dialogues with his imaginary readers are only one of the many ways in which Sterne foregrounds the gap between art and life that conventional realism seeks to conceal” (206-207).

7. See, among others, Patricia Waugh’s *Metafiction*, Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction* or Linda Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.

8. This view privileges the disjunctive acceptance of the prefix ‘post’ in postmodernism, a reaction to, rather than a following of or alignment with, modernism.

9. See e.g. Anthony J. Hassall and Godfrey Meintjes.

main phases in his work corresponding to apartheid and after: first, the 'realistic/committed' phase, and second, the 'self-conscious, postmodern' phase; such a division reflects at the individual level the broader historical evolution of the novel as it is often described, that is to say, an evolution from realism to self-reflexivity. If Brink's theory is valid, it should apply to his own novels, and in particular to those belonging to the first phase, that is, novels intended and perceived as realistic and/or committed. However, Brink qualifies and nuances the capacity of nineteenth century realistic novels faithfully to represent reality rather than their own fabricated nature:

In not a single one of their texts does language dissolve into the legendary transparency of a picture window through which the reader's gaze can wander, unchallenged, across the landscape of the story beyond: on the contrary, in each of them, in one way or another, the self awareness of the medium presents the reader with startling new discoveries and challenges. (19)

This view, of course, is neither innovative nor heterodox. Without dwelling on Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal theorization of the novel, one might invoke Alison Lee's study of realism in postmodern British fiction, for instance, which starts with a similar acknowledgement about nineteenth century realistic novels: "Novels of the period which are even now reputed to be examples of high Realism – particularly those by George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, and Henry James – are certainly aware of their own artifice and their own processes, even if their authors, in their non-fiction texts, take a different view" (Lee 10). Brink's 'discovery' of self-reflexivity as a generic constant does not fully depart from recent critical views. After all, Lee's study was published eight years before *The Novel*. Lee's remark also has the merit of suggesting that our way of reading novels as realistic is in some cases linked to their authors' conception of writing as expressed in their theoretical texts, which both seems to justify our own attempt to read Brink's fictional work in the light of his own essays and suggests that we need to remain fully aware that a writer's conception of writing and his practice as a novelist might be neither consistent nor convergent. In short, Lee reminds us that we should not take Brink's theory of the novel at face value when exploring his own fiction. In order to probe Brink's theory, then, it seems appropriate to choose a novel which is formally as close as possible to the criteria of the nineteenth century realistic works Brink would have liked to analyse more deeply. Obviously, the realistic label encompasses a wide range of novels and defies definition. For the sake of argument, my definition will be as general as possible. From my perspective, a realistic novel is a work in which the belief in the capacity of literature to represent reality, although not absolute, remains dominant and mostly uncontested, and which "endorses a particular way of looking at art and life as though there was a direct correspondence between the two" (Lee 3).

A Dry White Season is perceived as the most realistic of Brink's novels. Critics like Meintjes, Mac Dermott, Watkins and Hassall seem to agree that among his

novels *A Dry White Season* best illustrates the function of the writer as a reporter, one defined in *Mapmakers* by Brink himself as the necessity to “keep the people informed” (Brink “After Soweto”, 152). Brink, however, also specified that the novelist’s responsibility should not be confined to this role:

The writer’s second responsibility, much more important than the first (for the first hardly goes beyond the level of journalism, however important that in itself may be) is to explore and expose the roots of the *human condition* as it is lived in South Africa: a grappling with essentials, with the fundamentals of human experience and human relationships, *sup* [sic] *speciae historiae*. (Brink “After Soweto”, 152)

Such a description of the novelist’s function seems to convey a conception of the relationship between reality and fiction which is fairly similar to that of nineteenth-century realism, that is, a belief in the capacity of language to express reality as transparently as possible. The last sentences of *A Dry White Season* read like an echo of this definition of writing: “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, original emphasis). This *excipit* might explain why *A Dry White Season* was read mostly as a realistic and committed novel, seeking to denounce the situation in South Africa: “That, André Brink would seem to say, is the situation of the writer in South Africa today: as far as possible to write down, to report what one has seen, even if the beam of light is narrow” (MacDermott 188). Similarly, Mel Watkins explains that “*A Dry White Season* is both an exposé and a passionate appeal for social justice” (99).

One critic, though, might have been expected to notice *A Dry White Season*’s departure from realism: in his overview of André Brink’s literary career Godfrey Meintjes explains that “The Brink texts form a transtextual web in which the process of narration itself is foregrounded”. His analysis aims at indicating “how the texts in this oeuvre are ‘scriptible’ or writerly texts in which ‘[...] language, that infinite storehouse of citations, repetitions, echoes and references, crosses and recrosses’ in the narrative process” (4). Yet the few lines he devotes to *A Dry White Season* do not focus on the novel’s concern with language. Instead, Meintjes underlines the various connections between the novel and South African reality, and argues that such connections “make this text perhaps *the Brink novel most directly concerned with the South African situation*” (9, italics added), thus contradicting his own assertion of the dominance of self-reflexivity in Brink’s oeuvre. Because it is so unanimously perceived as a realistic novel providing what Hassall calls “a real alternative history of contemporary South Africa in place of the approved version peddled by the media and official sources” (186), and because Brink himself explains in his introduction to *The Novel* that “the very nature of [his] enquiry suggested that it might be more productive to explore novels where the centrality of language was, at least at first sight, less discernible” (19), *A Dry White Season* seems to encapsulate his first, committed period.

In his essay, Brink tries “to illustrate that the self-consciousness of language / narrative in the Postmodernist novel goes back to the very beginning of the novel as we have come to know it; but also that the nature of this consciousness, and the means through which it is expressed, is unique to each novel” (17). Each chapter deals with a specific novel and tries to demonstrate which particular relationship to language is developed in the book:

we encounter language conceived of as translation in the *Don Quixote*, language as a web of social deceit in *La Princesse de Clèves*, language as a gender trap in *Moll Flanders*, as dialogic tension in *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*; in *Emma* it becomes a parlour game played to exorcise the darker forces of society; in *Madame Bovary* it functions as scandal, in *Middlemarch* as a system of quotations – and all of this long before the rise of Postmodernism, with which this kind of linguistic consciousness has come to be most specifically associated. (16)

Language in *A Dry White Season* is made perceptible in quite specific ways. In particular, events in the novel are mediated and validated through their transcription in the written, or printed, form. *A Dry White Season* is supposedly written by a nameless narrator, a South African writer who used to specialise in popular romances. The story of Ben Du Toit is preceded by a “Foreword” and followed by an “Epilogue”, both written in the first person and explaining how the narrator found himself writing down Ben’s story. Surprisingly, this structure has been little commented upon by critics. Watkins, for instance, merely remarks that it gives the novel “an objectivity, an almost documentary sense, that both heightens its effects and moderates the occasional lapses into bathos and tendentiousness which have marred Mr Brink’s earlier work” (21).

The progressive incorporation of the documents inherited from Ben certainly contributes to the novel’s verisimilitude. But Watkins’s assertion that the documents reinforce the objectivity of the narrative is contradicted by Sheckels Jr., who argues, on the contrary, that the form of the novel “suggests that he has found the objective stance impossible to sustain and now must merge his voice with Ben’s voice. Ben has, posthumously, converted his friend to the cause” (198). The narrative voices do merge, since the shift from the narrator’s voice to Ben’s is never signalled explicitly, and, more often than not, it takes a number of lines, or even of pages, before the reader realises that a shift has occurred. There thus arises a dialogue between a document used as a source by the narrator and the narrator’s own reconstructed, fictionalized version of what happened. This increasing split of voices leads to a duality of perception. On the one hand the reader is constantly reminded that the whole narrative is based on sources, whose physical existence is mentioned twice in the “Foreword”: “And here I’m stuck with the litter of another man’s life spread over my desk. The diaries, the notes, the disconnected scribbling, the old accounts paid and unpaid, the photographs, everything indiscriminately lumped together and posted to me”

(Brink, *Season 9*)¹⁰. And, later: “the jumbled papers he dumped on me. The press cuttings and letters and photocopies and journals and scribbled notes. A passport photo of a girl with a sweet provocative face. The other photograph. Names. Gordon Ngubene. Jonathan Ngubene. Captain Stolz. Stanley Makhaya. Melanie Bruwer” (32). The multiplicity of the sources and their factual nature thus tend to validate the reality of the story – a strategy frequently used by writers for the sake of verisimilitude, to pretend that fiction is history. On the other hand this strategy also paradoxically emphasises the fictional nature of the text, as shown by the passage which immediately follows the narrator’s second mention of Ben’s documents “dumped” on him:

And the possibilities suggested by my often misused imagination. I have to immerse myself in it, the way he entered into it on that first fatal day. Except that he did not know, and had no way of knowing, what was lying ahead; whereas I am held back by what I already know. What was unfinished to him is complete to me; what was life to him is a story to me; first-hand becomes second-hand. I must attempt to reconstruct intricate events looming behind cryptic notes; what is illegible or missing I must imagine. What he suggests I must expand: *He says – he thinks – he remembers – he supposes.* (32-33)

What is foregrounded here is not a transparent relationship between reality and text but, on the contrary, the process involved in making fiction; not “life”, but “story”. Such words as “imagination”, “story”, “imagine” or “expand” lay bare the process of fiction-writing which is the origin of the novel. In spite of their verisimilitude, the documents which the narrator describes so precisely and repeatedly mentions are fictional. Ben Du Toit does not exist, and neither does the narrator himself, who is merely, as Sheckels suggests, “perhaps Brink’s semi-satiric version of himself” (145). In other words, from the very beginning *A Dry White Season* explicitly lays bare its own fabricated nature – while pretending to be doing exactly the opposite. Such a strategy is of course very similar to what can be found in many postmodern novels, in which writers play with the conventions of realism, the better to subvert them.

The sentence with which the narrator describes his task as Ben’s chosen biographer (“first hand becomes second hand” (33)) could be used to describe the way language functions in *A Dry White Season*. The whole narrative seems to be shaped by this passage from “first hand” to “second hand”. Several major turning points in the novel are not lived but reported, starting with the one which triggered the writing of the novel, that is, Ben’s death: “It was *reported* in a humdrum enough fashion – page four, third column of the evening paper. Johannesburg teacher killed in accident...” (9, italics added) Similarly, Jonathan’s death is announced indirectly to Gordon, through a phone call from the Special Branch to his lawyer, Dan Levinson: “Would he kindly inform the man that his son Jonathan had died of natural causes the night before?” (46). We could

10. Further references to this edition provided in the text.

also mention Dr Suliman Hassiem's release from jail (201), soon followed by his transportation to Northern Transvaal (206), or Dan Levinson's flight to London via Botswana (251), which are all similarly told through the accounts given in newspaper articles. The latter event is particularly interesting: Levinson's exile "shakes" Ben because it means "the loss of so many original statements and documents" (251), which is emblematic of the novel. Much of the plot revolves around these statements and documents, affidavits, medical reports and so on. The fight led by Gordon, and then by Ben, against the State consists in a battle of documents, each of the two adversaries trying to produce evidence to justify his interpretation of what happened. The court inquest concerning Gordon's death is a case in point. A large part of the debates consists in discussing the note found on Gordon's body, which is quoted extensively: "It read: *John Vorster Square, 25 February. Dear captain, You can carry on interrogating my dead body, perhaps you will get what you want from it. I prefer to die rather than to betray my friends. Amandla! Your friend, Gordon Ngubene*" (108). The crude tone and the stereotypical inclusion of anti-apartheid activists' slogan *Amandla*, an unlikely signature on the part of a quiet man like Gordon – at least, as Ben's perception makes him appear – can but lead the reader to think that the document was forged. Yet, the court uses it as evidence to justify their conclusions. Another crucial moment is the debate on the authenticity of the affidavits signed by co-detainees, since one of them, Archibald Tsabalala, reveals that they were obtained under threat: "he had been forced to sign" (111). The court inquest shows how committing facts to paper, and/or signing them, gives them existence and turns them into a valid and public truth. This phenomenon could explain Ben's comment when he writes about the night he spent with Melanie: "How paltry it sounds, almost offensive, reduced to description. But what else can I do? Silence would be denial" (272). If "silence would be denial", language, conversely, means confirmation.

In *A Dry White Season* even non-verbal documents validate facts. Two photographs of Ben with women thus play a tremendous role in the evolution of the plot. The first one is the photograph of Emily embracing Ben after the verdict at the court inquest which is "splashed on the front page of an English newspaper" (138), and the second one is the photograph of Ben making love with Melanie, which causes Susan to leave him and his school principal to ask him to resign – two major steps in Ben's descent into hell. What makes these two events so powerful, what validates their existence, is their printed nature. As long as they are not printed, the events they show do not have any public existence – or, at least, can do little harm. But as soon as they are given material existence they can influence Ben's life, and even be used as weapons against him.

Written documents are, in *A Dry White Season*, the only evidence that something exists, or existed. It explains why Emily is so reluctant to give up Gordon's two clandestine messages. They are, she argues, the only trace which is left of her husband. It is significant that the narrator should devote ample space to a detailed description of their appearance: "The first was ruled, like an exercise

book, the other a square of toilet paper. Both were inscribed in soft pencil, almost illegible through handling and crumpling. The handwriting was shaky, the style oddly formal” (175). Even more significantly, the narrator quotes them *in extenso*, as if thus to validate them:

The first note was the easier to read:

“My dear wife you must not have worries for me but I am longing for you and the children you must look after them in the fear of the Lord. I am hungry and I cannot understand what they require from me there is too much shouting going on but I think I shall be home some day I think about you all the time. With kind regards,

From your husband.

The piece of toilet paper proved more difficult to decipher:

My dear wife I am still in these conditions (followed by a few illegible words) worse and too much pain you must try to help me for they do not want to (illegible) me. You must care for the children and if you need money you must ask the church or my (illegible) master who is kind to us. I do not know if I will come home alive they are very (illegible) but God will provide and I miss you very much. Try to help me because

It ended abruptly, not torn off, but in the middle of a line, with ample space below. (176)

Writing or printing events does not only validate their existence, it also gives them meaning, which explains Ben’s impulse to write everything down after the photograph showing him embracing Emily is published in the newspaper, causing much indignation among his white acquaintances:

Then, in a conscious effort to regain control and to sort out the confusion in his mind, he started making notes: a brief, cryptic catalogue of all that had happened from the very beginning. It helped to see it set out so objectively on paper, as neat and inevitable as the pattern of veins on a leaf. This way it was easier to handle, to judge, to evaluate. (141)

Writing becomes a way of giving meaning to life. Susan complains to the narrator: “You can write, whether it’s twaddle or not. In one way or another you can give some sort of shape to whatever happens to you. But what about me?” (23). The whole novel is precisely the narrator’s attempt to “give some sort of shape” to what happened to Ben. Yet, in the Epilogue, he wonders if he has succeeded and if writing about his friend has really helped him to find meaning:

And yet, with almost everything written down, what have I resolved of the enigma that tantalised me so? Ben: my friend, the stranger. The disturbing truth is that even as I prepare to finish it off I know that he will never let go of me again. I cannot grasp him: neither can I rid myself of him. [...] I am left with a sense of hopelessness. In my efforts to do justice to him, I may have achieved the opposite. We belong to different dimensions: *one man lived, another wrote*; one looked forward, the other back; he was there, and I am here. (313, italics added)

The reason why he feels so unsure of what he has actually achieved may lie in the second-hand nature of his experience, in the fact that the only basis he has is what he described in the Foreword as “the litter of another man’s life” (9). In *A Dry White Season*, everything is second-hand, reality always but a quotation, a report, a statement, an affidavit. In other words, everything is fiction, in the etymological sense of the word: everything is made of language. Instead of celebrating the capacity of fiction to describe reality, *A Dry White Season* seems to foreground the primacy of language. This raises a final question, that of the part played by reading in the elaboration of meaning. Indeed, in this conception of language, the passage from first to second hand involves a mediator, a receiver who in turn becomes an emitter; or a reader, in literary terms, who becomes a writer. This holds as a possible description of what happens to the narrator: reading and decoding Ben’s papers and documents, he appropriates them and becomes the author of the novel. The second-hand nature of language thus points rather directly to the hypertextuality which exists in all texts¹¹. The narrator’s frequent allusions to his efforts to decode Ben’s documents can be interpreted as Brink’s playful way of showing that every writer is, first and foremost, a reader. This aspect seems to be particularly relevant when reading the work of a writer who has always made such extensive use of quotation and hypertextuality in his work, as a mere look at the title of his novels confirms.

Brink’s theory of the novel, then, seems to be at least partly validated. *A Dry White Season*, a realistic and committed novel, is also clearly self-reflexive, suggesting that language is always a quotation. Yet, if Brink’s essay, although not particularly innovative, has the merit of providing useful tools to pinpoint neglected aspects of his own work, his theory must be put into perspective. It would probably be a mistake to deny the difference between this and Brink’s subsequent, more openly self-reflexive narratives. *A Dry White Season* undeniably foregrounds its own fabricated nature, but the focus remains on the context more than on the text. It is the novel of a writer “in a state of emergency,” to use Brink’s own words. Only post-apartheid readers, whose horizons have also been opened up by the new dispensation, can partly make abstraction of the immediate denunciation of a regime which has now disappeared and be prepared to give more importance to the self-reflexivity of the novel.

Here lies one of the limitations of Brink’s theory of the novel. Suggesting that the novel as a genre can be defined through its self-reflexivity partly denies postmodernism’s specificity, which may rest both in the intentionality of metafictional strategies on the part of the writer and in the priority granted them over more traditional considerations by readers. Although Brink’s assertion that postmodernism is “no more than an umbrella term for a staggering variety of forms, styles, experiments and manifestations” (Brink *Novel*, 3) might hold

11. On this question, Antoine Compagnon’s study *La Seconde main : Le travail de la citation* offers insightful analyses.

true, it can also be seen as a way of evading all the disturbing questions which may jeopardise or even invalidate his theory. Brink's essay, in particular, carefully avoids answering a question which underlies his whole argument – and, probably, all of Brink's fiction –, the difficult question of the definition of postmodernism.

Mélanie JOSEPH-VILAIN
Université de Bourgogne

Works Cited

- BAKHTIN, M.M. *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.
- BRINK, André. *A Dry White Season*. 1979. London: Minerva, 1997.
- . *A Chain of Voices*. 1982. London: Minerva Paperbacks, 1995.
- . "After Soweto." In André Brink. *Mapmakers. Writing in a State of Siege*. London and Boston: Faber, 1983. 128-153.
- . *Destabilising Shakespeare*. Grahamstown: Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa, 1996.
- . *Reinventing a Continent. Writing and Politics in South Africa*. Cambridge, Mass.: Zoland Books, 1998.
- . *The Novel. Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino*. London: Macmillan, 1998.
- COETZEE, J.M. "André Brink and the Censor." *Research in African Literatures*. 21: 3 (Fall 1990): 59-74.
- COMPAGNON, Antoine. *La Seconde main ou le travail de la citation*. Paris : Seuil, 1979.
- HASSALL, Anthony J. "André Brink: The Lives of Adamastor", in Robert L. Ross, ed. *International Literature in English: Essays on the Major Writers*. Chicago and London: St James Press, 1991: 181-192.
- HUTCHEON, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1988.
- LEE, Alison. *Realism and Power. Postmodern British Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.
- LODGE, David. *The Art of Fiction*. London: Penguin, 1992.
- MACDERMOTT, Doireann. "A Narrow Beam of Light: A Reading of Two Novels by André Brink." *World Literature Written in English*. 28: 2 (1988): 178-188.
- MACHALE, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1987.
- MEINTJES, Godfrey. "A Chain of African Voices: The Prose Œuvre of André P. Brink." In Emmanuel Ngara, ed. *New Writing from South Africa: Authors who Have Become Prominent since 1980*. London: Jonathan Currey / Cape Town, D. Philip, 1996. 3-19.
- SCHECKELS, Theodore F. "Action." In *The Lion on the Freeway: A Thematic Introduction to Contemporary South African Literature in English*. New York: Peter Lang, 1996. 181-199.

WATKINS, Mel. "A Novelist's Impassioned Indictment." *New York Times Book Review*, 85 (March 23, 1980): 15, 20, 21.

WAUGH, Patricia. *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1984.