

Honorary Graduate

André Philippus Brink

André Philippus Brink was born on 29 May 1935 in Vrede in the Orange Free State. In 1952 he matriculated in Lydenburg, obtaining the highest marks for the Transvaal Senior Certificate Examination. He went to Potchefstroom University where he obtained the degree of Master of Arts in English 1958 and the same degree in Afrikaans en Nederlands 1959, both *cum laude*. During 1960 and 1961 he studied at the Sorbonne in Paris - the beginning of a life-long enchantment with the French language and French culture. Since July 1961 he has taught at Rhodes University, first as a lecturer and senior lecturer, subsequently as Associate Professor, and since 1980 as Professor and Head of the Department of Afrikaans en Nederlands. In 1975 Rhodes University awarded him the high degree of Doctor of Literature on the strength of his published critical works.

In the late sixties and early seventies Brink, by reason of his astute theoretical writing, became the leader of the so-called *Sestiger* movement of renewal in Afrikaans literature. In two early volumes of criticism he discussed contemporary developments in Afrikaans prose and drama seen against the background of European and American trends. Apart from these works, he has also published studies on the poetry of Breyten Breytenbach and on the prose works of Jan Rabie, and an outline of Afrikaans literature since 1966. The prominent feature of all Brink's critical assessments is the ease with which he manages to 'place' a new Afrikaans work within a broader, more international context. He has a marked ability to distil the essence of a novel, drama or volume of poetry through concise formulation, and to give an accurate judgment of a work of art based on his own critical acumen and sensitive reaction.

Brink for long has been an impassioned opponent of the restriction of censorship, and has published extensively on the political role of the writer and the freedom of the creative artist within a power structure such as ours. Ironically, his own work *Looking on Darkness* was the first Afrikaans novel to be banned under the Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963.

Although he has written many essays and sketches on the Mediterranean countries and has translated numerous literary masterpieces into Afrikaans, Brink's importance to Afrikaans literature lies firmly in the novel and the drama. An early work, *Lobole vir die Lewe* (1962), was a breakthrough for the modern Afrikaans novel. Here he introduced a broader theme into Afrikaans prose, with a more forthright delineation of the most intimate human relationships. In the field of drama his works have much in common with the Theatre of the Absurd and the existentialist drama of, for example, Ionesco and Beckett on the one hand and Sartre and Camus on the other.

Brink's novels of this period - especially *Die Ambassadeur* (1963) - use the theme of sexual love for metaphysical inquiry. Through their erotic experiences his protagonists gain a deeper insight into reality and so come to a vital reaffirmation of the self.

In 1968 Brink again spent some time in Paris, originally planning to settle there permanently, a sojourn which brought about a turning-point in his writing. During

this year he experienced the student riots and - as he was to state later - 'the whole deep process of self-searching what was going on in all strata of that society freed me to start examining very deeply my own commitment to my particular society'. He returned to South Africa and began 'the search for one's roots' which characterizes his serious work of the seventies: on the one hand an absorption in historical events which have relevance to the present political dilemma, and on the other hand a purposeful exploration of violence and human suffering caused by an unjust political system.

Brink's six so-called committed novels, *Looking on Darkness* (1973), *An Instant in the Wind* (1975), *Rumours of Rain* (1978), *A Dry White Season* (1979), *A Chain of Voices* (1982) and the latest, *The Wall of the Plague* (1984), have been translated into more than twenty-one languages and achieved for him the greatest international recognition ever accorded an Afrikaans writer. Brink himself has stated that these novels originated in Afrikaans and English simultaneously. 'Although I start writing my works in Afrikaans', he said in an interview, 'I prepare the final draft in English, which means that the novel is first finished in English.'

The dominant themes in these novels are the South African reality with its racial problems, human suffering and the tragedy of alienation caused by an unacceptable political dispensation. Frequent reference is made to violence through allusion to various events in the seventies, or to a love affair between brown and white, while the main characters often exemplify the social system with all its anomalies.

Brink's international reputation as a creative artist is evident from the distinctions he has won: the British Martin Luther King Memorial Prize, the French Prix Médicis Étranger, membership of the French Legion of Honour and nomination for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1979, 1980 and 1982. Early on in his career he won the Reina Prinsen Geerligts Prize, an award from the Netherlands. In South Africa he has received the CNA Prize three times: for *Olé*, *Rumours of Rain* and *A Chain of Voices*.

In the academic sphere Brink's catholic broad-mindedness and erudition, his knowledge of a number of languages and of literature, and his ease of delivery have enabled him to continue the work of his eminent predecessor at Rhodes, the Flemish critic, Professor Rob Antonissen. As a literary critic in his own right, Brink has very few rivals in the quality and diversity of his writings.

By honouring André Philippus Brink with the degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*, the University of the Witwatersrand is not only paying tribute to an internationally recognized writer of rare compassion and eloquence but also to a period of renewal and enlightenment in Afrikaans literature of which Brink is such a distinguished exponent.