

# IAN BURGESS-SIMPSON

## BEING THERE

It was one of my Christmas presents, Andre Brink's *The Wall of the Plague*. In many ways it's not a very good book. He has a reputation, so he can get away with a lot. I'm sorry I read it. At first it was just another book, two days and I'd finish it. But I started reading more and more cautiously, dragging it out. There on those pages, ordinary printed pages like those of hundreds of other books, a mere story, a smallish work of art, I began to appear. I didn't relate to any of the characters, I found them rather unconvincing in fact. And there was too much sex, and too much fashionable 1980's phrasing, "I invented myself anew" and so on. And now I'm using it too. "On those pages . . . I began to appear". What nonsense. I mean rather that my own personal dilemma of many years began to appear as the central point of this book. Not in the way that one almost expects from a book, when it puts one in a position from which one can't help seeing oneself, by suggestion. Or perhaps it isn't suggestion at all, but one's own insistence on trying to find clues in everything and everyone, clues that might solve a problem, or at least guide one towards a brief lucidity that is gone a couple of hours later, after doing a few chores or talking to a friend on the phone.

This was entirely different. I didn't want to see any clues. I wanted simply to read the book as any non-South African would — with interest, some horror, some righteous indignation culminating perhaps in a brief flaring commitment to justice at all costs, before the enormity of the world and the weight of my daily life's normality forced me back to my own little struggle, which is itself on the whole too much for me. I resented it, because after all it didn't seem to be the novelist's skill (he is frequently clumsy) that was edging me back to something I thought I had resolved, but the situation itself, South Africa itself. Not the mythical heroes of South Africa as portrayed in Brink's book, because I know they don't exist, but the very real villains of both sides, the whole mess asserting itself back into my memory, no matter how I resisted. Why, Andre Brink might as well have been working for the South African Government when he wrote this book.

I had escaped, it had been a victory to escape and begin to live a fruitful life here ("inventing myself anew"). Brink was wrong in this idea of his book, with its mythical hero, bringing enlightenment through "his furious dark body" to a couple of refugees like myself, who realise after his death (he is assassinated by the South African Special Branch, in provincial France) that they were wrong to get out. One of them, Andrea Malgas, the coloured heroine, goes back. The other, Paul, an

ageing white, resident for many years in France and winner of an award at Cannes, abandons an almost lifelong idea for a film or novel about the Plague, a very serious, almost philosophical work that had the potential to outlive by far “the struggle”. Certainly it had the potential to outlive world interest in the struggle, which, catering as it does to the boredom and sloth of the European Tradition, can only sustain itself for a limited period before giving way to a new interest in some disaster. And the heroes, who are always far too small for the task they’ve undertaken and will lose their souls whether or not they attain the Victory, carry on struggling in a gloom all the darker for having been lit by the concern of the world.

Paul writes instead this book, in which he appears as one of the major characters. And that is his contribution to the struggle. But there are two terrible things about this book. Firstly, it suggests, albeit obscurely, almost accidentally, the answer to a question on which I have based my escape.

You see, I am not South African, I’m not anything. I was born in an independent African country that won’t acknowledge me because I missed Independence by a couple of years and was born when that country, unbeknown to me, still bore its hateful Colonial name. (Even though when the brick-throwing and burning and so on was more or less over and my parents just smiled as friends and acquaintances went back “home” and warned them, the colour of my skin associates me with that name, as another’s colour in South Africa keeps him or her in such-and-such a slum township). And I was raised for many years in another independent African country which didn’t much mind my being white but wouldn’t acknowledge me because I wasn’t born there. So although from birth I knew only Southern Africa, I had no place there — legally, and have lived all my life on Temporary Residence Permits. All of which I have accepted, more or less, but which poses the question I have asked myself through all the years of my freedom why should I go back to a martyrdom in South Africa when I am not South African, by birth or inclination (far preferring in every way my other two temporary African homelands) and more than that, when I am not acknowledged as Southern African or even African. And always I’ve answered myself — there is no reason why you should go back, you owe yourself the chance of a new life. Let them who rejected you tear each other apart.

And now this man’s book accidentally provides a new answer, a phrase that he uses over and over in an entirely different context but which, no matter how I recoil or how many times I wander through my flat looking at the things that prove my new life to me, keeps sounding with terrible authenticity as the real answer: BECAUSE YOU WERE THERE. I don’t understand how it is the real answer because I can argue

it into oblivion with ease and have been doing so since I finished the book, or perhaps since I first vaguely realised what this man was going to do to me with his book, do to me without ever intending or even realising it. Yet despite the sound arguments to the contrary I know that this answer, this “because you were there”, is the unfortunate and unfair truth. Perhaps that’s why I finished reading the book.

The second terrible thing about this book is that it ends in a very clever manner, as an echo of itself, with the white South African telling Andrea, at the end of the book he has written in the voice of Andrea, that he is going to write the story of their love, and the resolution of their terrible dilemma (the resolution more terrible in my coward’s mind than the dilemma could ever be), in her voice. And on the last page of the book he has already written he begins to jot down his attempts at a beginning for the book and for a dedication. He leaves the dedication unresolved and returns to some journal entries of the now departed Andrea (and as far as I’m concerned she might as well be dead now that he’s sent her back to South Africa, a coloured girl with a heavy political record!).

Once again I read your questions. The aching clarity with which you challenged my confusion:

*Do you know — ? Do you really know — ? Do you know — ?*

No, I don’t know yet, Andrea. But I’m going to try. So help me God.

*Because I was there; had been there. (So many journeys travelled on a single trip.) Because I’d been exposed before to the quality of that light which once again struck me.*

Grahamstown — Eygalieres, 1983

And of course that “Because I was there . . .” and so on is the beginning of the book he has already written and that’s Andrea’s voice, Andrea who goes back, God help her.

And Grahamstown, I’ve been there, I fell in love for the first time in Grahamstown and wrote my first poetry on a train leaving Grahams-town, I know it well. Eygalieres, I’d never heard of it until I read this book, it’s one of the scenes of action in the “novel”. I can’t even pronounce the name, but I can feel the quality of that name next to Grahamstown; it has the sound of the name of a place where an exile lives and I could substitute for it many names, the places of my exile, and they would sound exactly the same next to Grahamstown, where I first fell in love. And I look back to the dedication page which I ignored when I started the book and sure enough, the dedication (which one must remember, by the normal rules of the game, is still outside the book) is to Andrea, only he, Andre Brink, uses the special name that she gives herself and all beloved objects in the story, “Nanna”, and it reads like this:

for  
NANNA

because you are there

Now I know what he's done and I smile and say — Not bad Andre Brink. Very clever Andre Brink, you've used an interesting twist of the narrative there. Good Heavens but we're getting clever these days, the things people think of doing with illusion and reality . . . But I'm furious and I go cold all over because as an African I know that this is no novel, it's a true story, there was an Andrea Malgas and a Paul and everything and she IS THERE. That is the second terrible thing about this book and the second reason why I wish I'd never read it.

The woman next to me has just waved her fat little fingers in front of my face, pointing out the window of the aeroplane, there it is — a glimpse as Andrea saw it on the drive, Capetown to Johannesburg, that took her away the first time, "at last the yellow and white of the mine-dumps, a city drifting weightless in the smog . . ." I feel ill.

Well Mister Brink? Where are you Mr Brink? You were here too, where are you now, Eygalieres?

## STEPHEN J. WILLIAMS

### INTERVIEW

- EP: First, the obvious question: When did you begin to write poetry?
- SJW: In 1979. And it was all awful. I did a Kafka on it, burned it, and started again.
- EP: You apparently thought it was rather different from the work in *A Crowd of Voices*. But how was it different?
- SJW: When I started writing poetry I was, like most people, locked into an idea of what I thought poetry *should* be like. So, I had to shake that off first. Poetry can do anything it wants. It's like speaking in tongues. If there's anything to be said about style in *A Crowd of Voices*, it's just that it's a crowd of voices, not a single voice. There seems to me something suspect about the notion of a stable voice speaking behind different poems: is it a fiction that makes criticism of poetry easier?
- EP: Influence is a misleading word, but were you interested in the work of writers like John Tranter, for example, or Michael Dransfield, when you began to write?