



Apartheid Spies: The Character, the Reader, and the Censor in André Brink's A Dry White Season

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It's like living in an aquarium, [...] your every move scrutinized by eyes watching you through glass and water, surveying even the motion of your gills as you breathe.
André Brink, *A Dry White Season* (1984: 222)

A Dry White Season is no spy fiction in the strict sense of the word. Published in the late 1970s, at the beginning of the direst period in the history of apartheid South Africa, it depicts the struggle of a white family man and schoolteacher against the oppressive but elusive power of the Johannesburg Security Police. A politically committed novel, therefore, which is still shocking thirty-five years after its publication (1979) for its exposure of the brutalities of apartheid. Rather than focusing on intrigues involving major powers and international criminal networks, André Brink's narrative touches the sore spot of the utter destruction of the ordinary life of individuals in the grip of power, and of the dissolution of their family bonds – be they representatives of a black oppressed majority, or of a white indignant minority desperately trying to 'put things right'. Ben Du Toit, the main character of *A White Dry Season*, is very far from the



lightness and witty irony which characterizes the perhaps most popular fictional spy, Ian Fleming's James Bond; and yet, the name of Bond is ironically evoked in Brink's novel, when Ben's daughter scornfully compares her middle-aged and inexperienced father to the master of espionage: "Suzette burst out laughing before he'd finished. 'Are you trying to tell me you're turning into James Bond in your old age? [...]" (Brink 1984: 64).

Ben Du Toit evokes James Bond because he secretly investigates a double crime: the assassination of a black teenage boy, and later of his father, in a Johannesburg which is clearly identifiable with the real one in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising (1976). The crucial difference between the two 'spies' is that the amateurish Afrikaner works *against* his own government, which does not fulfil the role of guardian of its citizens' inalienable rights; on the contrary, it embodies a hostile and inscrutable power which endangers the people's lives, security, and property. In order to find out 'the truth' about the death of his old acquaintance, Gordon Ngubene (the black cleaner in the school where the protagonist teaches history and geography), Ben Du Toit finds himself in an odd and extremely dangerous situation, that of a citizen who acts as a 'counterspy' against the Special Branch of his own government's Security Police.

The strict correspondence between the setting and timing of the novel and the real circumstances in which Brink wrote it has been underlined by critics and by the author himself on several occasions. Brink has often described the experience of "writing in a state of siege", both during the apartheid period and in more recent years. In his collection of essays entitled *Mapmakers. Writing in a State of Siege*, published in 1983, the task of the writer is clearly enunciated on several occasions, and it has to do with the imperative to state and restate the truth incessantly: a deeply unjust political system must be "exposed, countered and eventually shattered", in the name of truth, freedom and justice, "provided one commit oneself unconditionally to the need to state it, and restate it, and state it again, and again, and forever." (Brink 1983: 35). Notwithstanding Brink's often reiterated wariness when it comes to defining the writer's function, his views on the responsibility of the artist before history have maintained themselves basically unaltered over the years.¹ Talking about the time and place in which *A White Dry Season* was set in a fairly recent interview, Brink reflects on the question of the advantages and disadvantages of strict correspondence between fiction and reality, and discusses both the material and the spiritual conditions in

¹ In "After Soweto", an article originally published in 1976, Brink states his own responsibility towards history, both as a white man and as an Afrikaner writer (Brink 1983: 151). In his memoir, *A Fork in the Road*, published in 2009, he reads his own decision to leave for good his country of choice, France, in order to assume his responsibility *as a writer* ("[...] what else can I offer? I cannot handle a gun or blow up a building or maim children", Brink 2010: 303) in front of his "beautiful, damned, despicable land" (Brink 2010: 303. See pp. 302-306 in particular).



which he produced his novel. In spite of everything, the strongest drive remained the necessity to “bear witness”:

EM: Rape, murder and torture are also not alien to your novels. Do these atrocities come in because they are part of reality and it is the novel's task to depict it, or is there also another reason behind this?

AB: I think the first answer that you suggested is very close to it: it is part of our reality and one cannot pretend that it is not happening – even though I remain wary about talking too glibly about “the writer’s task”. So, while one is writing and looking at the scene, these things are actually happening, which can be very productive: it can be tremendously stimulating; but of course it can sometimes have a numbing effect which I felt very strongly when I worked on the novel *A Dry White Season*, and I have written about that several times before. I had started working on this novel and I had been writing for a few months already, dealing with two deaths in detention of a black boy and his father and the attempts of a white man to find out what had happened. [...] So I was working on this, and then Steve Biko was murdered by the security police. He had been arrested in the small town of Grahamstown where I lived. They had arrested him perhaps a kilometer away from where I lived. It was so traumatic, I stopped writing that book. I thought this was obscene: “I write about a fictional character to whom these things are happening, and here is a real man, an incredibly important man in our present situation, and he is arrested, and very soon after that, he is murdered”. So that was just too much, I thought I could not go on writing, and it took several months and speaking to a variety of people before I was persuaded that, for that very reason, I could not be silent. However terrible and atrocious the experience was, I had to try to bear witness to it almost from the inside, because I felt so close to it. (Mengel and Orantes 2010: 5-6)²

The “youth riots in Soweto” are explicitly mentioned in the novel on page 37, and they trigger the development of the plot; the death of Stephen Biko looms over the whole story; the fictional text must “bear witness” to reality. *A Dry White Season* thus seems to display the main characteristics of the politically committed documentary novel: a novel which engages directly with the contemporary socio-political situation of the country, and which provides a tool to expose, and possibly to oppose, the outrageous practices of power. It was a kind of fiction largely predominant in South African literature under the apartheid *régime*;³ in addition to

² A similar recounting of the “distressing” (in Brink’s own words) experience of writing *A Dry White Season* can be found in *A Fork in the Road* (Brink 2010: 244-246).

³ Already in 1966 the South African writer and literary critic Lewis Nkosi discussed and criticized the tendency of black writers to produce what he considered a rather flat and unartistic kind of documentary literature: “What we do get from South Africa therefore – and what we get most frequently – is the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature. We find here a type of fiction which exploits the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning, without any attempt to transcend or transmute these given



denouncing the crimes of an unscrupulous and violent system of oppression, many writers felt that they should at least try to awaken the consciousness of their readers – the oppressed and paralyzed consciousness of the blacks, as well as the too often slumbering consciousness of the whites.

Yet, *A Dry White Season's* 'architecture' is much more complex than what one would expect from a chiefly documentary narrative, and the journalistic aspect of fiction – that Brink himself considers important to "keep the people informed" (Brink 1983: 152) – is the very literary device which complicates the plot and contributes to intensify the sense of anguish derived from a tortuous and ruinous investigation. As Mélanie Joseph-Vilain contends, "Much of the plot revolves around [...] 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" (Joseph-Vilain 2009: 105). Joseph-Vilain discusses the self-reflexive aspect of *A Dry White Season*, and highlights its 'postmodern' characteristic, that is, its laying "bare its own fabricated nature – while pretending to do exactly the opposite" (Joseph-Vilain 2009: 104).⁴

The "fabricated nature" of the novel is the very feature that the present contribution wishes to explore, although my aim is not to analyse the self-reflexive quality of Brink's narrative *per se*, but to show the way in which a complex and multi-layered narrative structure succeeds in both reflecting and exposing the intricate apartheid system devised to "discipline and punish"⁵ its own citizens. Far from limiting

'social facts' into artistically persuasive works of fiction." (Nkosi 1973: 110). The more renowned essay "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" by Njabulo Ndebele appeared twenty years later, and went deep into the analysis both of the still diffused tendency, in South African literature, to the "representation of spectacle" (Ndebele 1986: 143) and of the new voices trying to move in different and more nuanced directions. In 1987 J. M. Coetzee addressed the question of the relationship between the discourse of fiction and the discourse of history in a brief speech he made at a Book Fair in Cape Town, published a year later as "The Novel Today" (1988). Brink, in 1996, put the question in terms of the *writer's burden*: "For a very long time (for eminently understandable reasons, and perhaps not without effect) South African fiction has been intimately tied up with the need to record, to witness, to represent, and to interpret [...] At a time when the media were prevented from fulfilling their basic function of reportage, fiction writers had to assume this burden" (Brink 1996a: online).

⁴Joseph-Vilain's essay proposes to explore the metafictional features of *A Dry White Season*, challenging a diffused critical interpretation which situates the novel in the first phase of Brink's narrative production, that is, in his "'realistic/committed' phase" – against a post-apartheid "'self-conscious, postmodern' phase" (Joseph-Vilain 2009: 101). Actually, towards the end of her essay, Joseph-Vilain somehow reassesses the traditional view on Brink's fiction, by seeing a difference in focus between his pre- and post-apartheid novels: "*A Dry White Season* undeniably foregrounds its own fabricated nature, but the focus remains on the context more than on the text." (Joseph-Vilain 2009: 107).

⁵ The reference is to the well-known study by Michel Foucault on the birth of the modern penal system, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*, 1975 (in English, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*).



itself to the level of documenting violence and injustice through the characters' suffering, the novel manages to include both the reader and the South African censorship apparatus in the picture – that is, to represent a constant dialogue between fiction and reality through the reciprocity of a deeply disturbing 'spying gaze'. In *A Dry White Season*, as we shall see, most of the characters intrude into the life of the others and are intruded upon; this creates an atmosphere of constant anguish and insecurity, besides bringing to the surface the iniquity of a system which compels its citizens to embrace illegality in order to defend themselves from injustice, and to disregard human bonds based on respect, dignity and affection. The relentless descent into the hell of the novel implicates everybody, and it is played against a nightmarish, but at the same time very real, geographical space: the deeply divided, inhuman and labyrinthine Johannesburg of the late 1970s.⁶

The novel shows the process of constructing a novel: the beginning is called "Foreword", and works as an introduction to the book that the first anonymous narrator, a hack writer "devoted to writing romantic fiction" (Brink 1984: 9), has assembled using the papers sent him by a deceased friend of his, Ben Du Toit, the protagonist and second narrator of *A Dry White Season*. The whole story, therefore, consists in the narrator's reconstruction of the last period of Ben's life, from the moment in which he started to investigate Gordon Ngubene's detention to the 'accident' that cost him his life, when a hit-and-run driver knocked him down while he was walking in the street. A couple of weeks before dying, Ben Du Toit had sent to his friend a parcel containing notebooks and exercise books filled with his own handwriting, newspaper and magazine cuttings, typewritten pages, documents, letters, and a couple of photographs. A quite confused and disordered bulk – all the evidence of Ben's investigating activity, together with his journals – that the protagonist meant his friend to keep for him, and to use in case anything should befall him: "You may even turn it into a bloody novel if you choose. As long as it doesn't end here. You understand?" (Brink 1984: 13).

Turning Ben's journals and documents into a novel is exactly what the unnamed writer sets about doing, once he realizes the responsibility Ben has loaded upon his shoulders. A responsibility towards his friend, no doubt, and maybe his friend's family,

⁶ A more analytical look into Brink's aesthetics surpasses the limits of the present essay, even if crucial issues concerning Brink's writing – like, for instance, the conjunction of the political, the aesthetic and the ethic, the meaning of *truth*, the status of the writer and of the reader, the limits of a liberal, Eurocentric attitude – have been debated extensively in the last decades. To give just a few examples: Rosemary Jolly addresses many of the above mentioned questions in the first chapter of her book on white South African writing, which starts with an analysis of *A Dry White Season* (Jolly 1996); Jolly's arguments draw on an insightful article by J. M. Coetzee on Brink and censorship (Coetzee 1990); more recently, Isidore Diala discusses the limits of Brink's humanism in his early fiction, and concludes by remarking that the writer "often evokes the ideals of Western humanism as though they had universal validity, thereby subconsciously implicating his work in the discursive strategies of the Afrikaner hegemony which he devotedly interrogates." (Diala 2002: 444).



but above all towards society and ultimately history. This writer, *the* writer, cannot do much besides telling stories – but stories can do much in the direction of trying to change the course of history, as Brink himself stated on a number of occasions. In a much later article on the literature of the new South Africa, he defines the hack writer of *A Dry White Season* “unreliable”, because of “the tension between the attempt to ‘do justice’ to the documents and his professional inclination to sensationalize his material” (Brink 1996a: online). Even that tension, though, – Brink continues – can be useful in order to highlight the struggle between different perceptions of history, and thus demythologize it.⁷

Although conscious of his literary (and political) mission, it is not without an irrepressible sense of resentment and even nausea that the anonymous writer approaches his task: sorting out the bulk of documents sent him by his deceased friend means forcing one’s gaze into the life of another person, intruding into the most private recesses of his everyday life – actually, *spying* on Ben and his relatives, even if retrospectively. The writer is embarrassed:

[...] I couldn’t repress a feeling of resentment, almost of nausea. Not only at the impossible mess of the papers I’d received, but at the embarrassment of having to work through them. It was bad enough to get mixed up with the life stories of total strangers, but at least one remained objective, uninvolved, a more or less indifferent spectator. With an acquaintance it was different. Too private, too bewildering. (Brink 1984: 14)

Also Ben Du Toit, the object of the first narrator’s literary investigation, during the last period of his life had felt compelled to turn himself – from a pacific and meticulous schoolteacher employed in one of the best schools for whites in Johannesburg – into an improvised detective for the sake of a black acquaintance of his, Gordon Ngubene. Gordon had been arrested for trying to investigate the death of his teenage son Jonathan, picked up during the youth riots in Soweto and expired under suspect circumstances in the hands of the Security Police. Gordon, who had been kept in the dark about his son’s conditions for more than one month, had started a sort of private inquiry, effectively supported by a black taxi driver, Stanley, “a man who knew everything about everything in the townships” (Brink 1984: 41), and by Ben himself, who had even hired a lawyer to help in their inquiry. By the time he is at last informed by the police of the death of his son “of natural causes”, Gordon has collected enough elements to exclude that Jonathan might have died naturally. But there is nothing to be done: unable to obtain a plausible explanation from the police,

⁷ In this article, which is, among other things, a later evaluation of some aspects of his former novels, Brink adds a sentence to the above quoted passage which seems to underplay the role of *A Dry White Season* as a text really able to challenge the discourse of history: “[...] even though the novel as a whole, geared toward representation-as-protest, does not radically question the status of history” (Brink 1996a: online).



and not even permitted to see his son's dead body for a long time, Gordon is at last defeated by the same means: he is suddenly arrested, arbitrarily detained in the very headquarters of the Security Police – the Johannesburg Central Police Station in John Vorster Square – tortured, starved, and ultimately killed.

It is during Gordon's detention that Ben Du Toit is finally forced, despite his strong wish to believe in justice and in the uprightness of the representatives of law and order, to recognize that reality is, for the majority of black South Africans, a daily nightmare. From the moment in which he chooses the road of investigation, he starts visiting Gordon's family and friends in their own surroundings, in that destitute suburb of Johannesburg he had never taken into consideration, the black township of Soweto. He drives along its dangerous and labyrinthine streets, enters Gordon's house in Orlando West for the first time in his life, and is deeply disturbed by the family's impoverished way of life – a family he had known for years. Talking with them, he begins to apprehend the abyss of cruelty, corruption, abuse and violation in which the black detainee is plunged once he falls into the grip of a task force whose name, 'Security Police', begins to take on a paradoxical, Orwellian connotation. The more he discovers about Jonathan's death and Gordon's detention, the stronger his drive to investigate becomes, in spite of everything. When Gordon finally dies, the burden of responsibility weighs entirely upon Ben's shoulders: he feels guilty for not having done enough to prevent his friend's death, and feels compelled to go on with his inquiry, even at the cost of his family bonds, and, ultimately, of his own life.

There are other 'costs', though. The perverted methods of the security forces are contagious: Ben's means to attain the 'truth' on Gordon's death become progressively more intrusive and even harmful, heedless of the safety of the people he addresses. His craving for evidence proves inexorable, even though it obviously puts in danger the life of Gordon's widow, of the black people who work in the prison or in the hospital, of the doctor who had attended the autopsy on behalf of the Ngubene family, Dr Suliman Hassiem – who, being 'Asian', is already in a weak and dangerous position. The day after Gordon's funeral, Dr Hassiem, who had drafted a separate autopsy report describing the dead body's injuries more precisely than the official one, had been arrested "in terms of the Internal Security Act" (Brink 1984: 101). Detained for three months, he is at last released under banning orders and sent back to his house, in the Asian Township of Lenasia, south of Soweto. He hopes to be able to reconstruct his life with his wife and his little girl, but Ben soon digs him out. Relentless in his inquiry, the improvised detective finds out the doctor's private address and goes to see him in his own house; after pressuring him in front of his little daughter, he obtains more information on the condition of Gordon's body before the autopsy. That additional intelligence, in the end, proves useless to the cause; the doctor, instead, is promptly removed from his house and transported somewhere else – a piece of information which is conveyed to the reader in the brief and impersonal register of a



newspaper report. In that game of state and private 'espionage', Ben Du Toit has become a dangerous agent:

The next day's evening paper reported briefly that Dr Suliman Hassiem and his family had been transported by the Security Police to a destination in the Northern Transvaal. His banning order had been amended by the minister to ensure that for the next five years he would not be allowed to leave the Pietersburg district. No reasons for the removal had been given (Brink 1984: 206).

The Special Branch of the Security Police is much more dangerous, of course. Apart from monitoring the situation of black 'agitators', they direct their attention also to the white Afrikaans schoolteacher, when they start considering his investigating activity too scrupulous. The first official search in Ben's house takes place towards the middle of the novel, in chapter 8; from that moment onwards, he feels constantly spied on: "And all the time, day by day, there was the awareness of being surveyed." (Brink 1984: 222). Little by little he comes to the distressing conclusion that an outright fight against the state apparatus is not possible; much worse than losing the battle, it is the impossibility of identifying the enemy that disheartens him:

Today I realize that this is the worst of all: that I can no longer single out my enemy and give him a name. I can't challenge him to a duel. What is set up against me is not a man, not even a group of people, but a thing, a something, a vague amorphous something, an invisible ubiquitous power that inspects my mail and taps my telephone and indoctrinates my colleagues and incites the pupils against me and cuts up the tyres of my car and paints signs on my door and fires shots into my home and send [*sic*] me bombs in the mail, a power that follows me wherever I go, day and night, frustrating me, intimidating me, playing with me according to rules devised and whimsically changed by itself. (Brink 1984: 237)⁸

If Ben had thought, at the beginning of his inquiry, that it was at least possible to play the part of the 'heroic loser', he must soon discard the notion of heroism altogether. Actually, he acquaints the reader with his progressive loss of all frames of reference in the first person, because from chapter 9 onwards he becomes the second narrator of the story, and entire portions of the text are his own version of events. It is as if the first narrator, the unnamed writer, had suddenly decided to insert parts of Ben's journal into his literary achievement, maybe in the hope of rendering more objective a narrative that he is in great part obliged to invent, in an attempt to give coherence to a bulk of disordered documents; the two voices, therefore, alternate until the end of the book, thus cooperating in the construction of a multifaceted story.

⁸ A similar description of the devious but devastating activity of the Security Police can be found in Brink's memoir, when he recalls the political climate of the late Seventies and the intimidations and harassment he himself, as a 'dissident' novelist, was subject to (see Brink 2010: 238).



The first narrator and the main character also cooperate in accompanying the reader right into the lion's den. It is relatively early in the story, in chapter 5, that we are admitted into the very headquarters of the Johannesburg Central Police Station, a historical building that during apartheid was simply called after its location, John Vorster Square.⁹ That name alone was able to evoke the direst apprehensions in political dissidents: it was a notorious site of interrogation, torture, and detention, and those who were locked behind its doors were constantly in danger of their lives and cut off from the world. In the novel, John Vorster Square looms over the very topography of Johannesburg: the town is represented as a schizophrenic site, with a luminous centre knowing nothing of its dark sides, the peripheral black townships scattered all around the white residential areas. Situated in a slightly off-centred position, but still in the middle of the white urban cobweb, the mysterious building of the police station, "tall and severely rectilinear, concrete and glass, blue, massive" (Brink 1984: 57), seems to be waiting like a spider for its next victim. It is the first narrator's voice that recounts Ben's visit to John Vorster Square, trying to convey in a dry paratactic style the feeling of displacement and discomfort that the main character experiences once he has penetrated within its walls. Ben feels constantly spied on along the corridors of the building, and for his part tries to play the spy himself, recording in his mind as many details as possible – as if he could really, like James Bond, find his way in the labyrinth, and detect the place in which his friend Gordon is being secretly detained. Ben, though, is not alone in his brief and unsuccessful mission inside the Security Police headquarters: the reader is tightly bound to him, filled by the same voyeuristic drive to see everything, to perceive everything; the narrator suddenly abandons the third person and addresses the reader directly, with a 'you' that implicates him/her in the morbid, dangerous game of watching and being watched:

A hospital atmosphere inside. Stern corridors; open doors revealing men writing at desks in small offices; shut doors; blank walls. At the back, in the parking basement, the blank lift without buttons or controls, shooting upwards to a predetermined floor the moment you enter. Television cameras following your movements. On the high floor the bullet-proof glass cage, the thickset man in uniform watching you suspiciously while you write down the particulars required. "Just a minute." An unduly long minute. Then you are invited to follow him, through the clanging iron gate which is carefully locked behind you, effectively severing all links with the world outside. (Brink 1984: 57-58)

Brink's narrative makes sure that readers are not permitted to ignore the existence of such a building as John Vorster Square, which plays a key role in their

⁹ Balthazar Johannes Vorster (1915-1983), known as John Vorster, served as Prime Minister and later as the fourth State President of South Africa during the apartheid regime.



imagination: it is the place of evil *par excellence*, where unlimited violence can be exercised and the torturers go unpunished; it is the place of extreme suffering and of the most shameless impunity. And yet the novel does not dwell upon the actual representation of cruelty and distress; rather than exploiting the sensationalistic aspect of a sadly renowned reality in the South Africa of the Seventies, Brink takes his readers right to the verge of hell, but then provides them with a brief and impressionistic representation of the inner building, and, above all, leaves the worst – the exhibition of evil – to their imagination. Ben Du Toit will never be able to meet Gordon Ngubene locked up and tortured in the recesses of John Vorster Square, nor will he ever be permitted to have a glimpse of any detainee being worn out in the bowels of power. The readers who accompany him must bear witness, but they are not allowed to satisfy the morbid curiosity often aroused by the encounter with the “dark chamber”, with the place of “extreme human experience”.¹⁰ The police central offices are both inescapable and elusive – a building that presents only its façade to view, for the rest impenetrable to the eye and to the ear. In his 1986 essay, Coetzee discussed the peculiar choice, on the part of the South African Government, to locate the Johannesburg headquarters of the Security Police in the city centre, in countertendency with the customary choice to isolate the country’s prisons and render them almost invisible to the ordinary citizen, to that white electorate not to be alarmed by the “legal illegalit[ies]” (Coetzee 1992: 363) daily committed there:

One can go about one’s daily business in Johannesburg within calling distance (except that the rooms are soundproofed) of people undergoing the utmost suffering. “It is no different from walking past a child-brothel. It is no different from walking past an abattoir. These things happen. These things are done.” Perhaps. Perhaps these things are done all the time, all over the place. But there is a certain shamelessness in doing them in the heart of a great city, a shameless characteristic of all the security operations of a state which asserts that its own survival takes precedence over the law and ultimately over justice. (Coetzee 1992: 362)

As is apparent from many aspects of the novel, *A Dry White Season’s* dialogue with contemporary life is constant. Characters and plot are grafted on real events, and the fictional Johannesburg shares many features with the actual town, full of blatant contrasts, dangerous, mysterious. The last aspect of the novel to be discussed here concerns both the correspondence between real and fictional writers, relentlessly spied and harassed by the police, and the actual ‘spying gaze’ of the censor directed towards the activity of the dissident writer in the South Africa of the 1970s.

¹⁰ See Coetzee 1992, where the writer discusses the fascination that the obscenities perpetrated in the “dark chamber” of torture exercise upon novelists. Here Coetzee debates the issue of how literature is to represent evil without giving in either to morbid curiosity, or to the opposite tendency to ignore an ever-present reality.



There are three writers involved in the construction of *A Dry White Season*: the two fictional characters and the author of the text, André Brink himself. By now we have come to know the two internal narrators, the hack writer and Ben Du Toit. Neither of them can be really considered an artist: the first unnamed narrator is a professional, but by his own admission the quality of his literary production is not very high; Ben is a schoolteacher, and when he comes to tell his own story he does so in the form of a journal, at first with the mere intention of recording important events for his inquiry. Yet, both fictional writers can be considered responsible for the outcome of their literary activity, that is the novel itself; both merge progressively into *the writer* as an artist, who is able not only to make up a successful story, but also to activate the reader's faculties of imagination through a powerful and evocative style. First and second narrator, moreover, are linked by the fact of being both observers and observed: as is clear from the very beginning, the hack writer feels guilty for intruding into the life of his deceased friend; at the same time, he is another potential victim of the police, since in the Epilogue he confesses that he suspects being under surveillance himself, and that the security forces are probably making sure he is "conscious of being watched" (Brink 1984: 315). Ben Du Toit, for his part, plays James Bond with the Special Branch, and at the same time is constantly spied on, not only by them, but also, unexpectedly (and tragically) by his own daughter Suzette. She is the last 'spy-figure' of the novel, and a very skilful one at that, since she succeeds in tricking her father into a confession when he is relaxed after a good meal: he tells her the exact place where he has been keeping his secret documents until then, and she betrays him to the police (see Brink 1984: 306-309).

Ben is kept under strict control as an improvised detective, but also as a writer; the target of the Special Branch's searches in his house are the documents he conceals as well as his notes, his written accounts of events filled with personal comments. The visits of the police become progressively more frequent and less considerate of his rights as a white Afrikaner, who should be protected by the state, and not harassed. But Ben has 'betrayed' his own people, has taken sides with the black enemy, and therefore his subversive activity must be stopped at all costs. In this respect, the similarity with contemporary life is striking; in his memoir, *A Fork in the Road*, André Brink recalls the sudden visit of those he mockingly calls "the Seven Samurai" when he was working on the writing of *Rumours of Rain* in 1977:

[...] a contingent of seven security police arrived at my front door in 1977 and burst into the passage without producing a search warrant [...] the seven men started to ransack my study: every drawer, every filing cabinet, every bookshelf [...] From the growing pile of books and files and press cuttings and notes and manuscripts gathered by the Seven Samurai I gradually formed a pretty shrewd idea of what they were searching for. (Brink 2010: 231)



This description of a search into the writer's study is very similar to the various incursions into Ben Du Toit's own study recounted in *A Dry White Season*. In "After Soweto" – an article first published in 1976 and reprinted in *Mapmakers* in 1983 – the author points out that "a very special form of persecution is reserved for the Afrikaans writer who is regarded by the political establishment as a traitor to the cause. The Security Police is ever alert to suppress or inhibit the truth. Often the persecution is brutal and overt. More often it is subtle and destructive on a less exposed level. I have enough personal experience of this by now to know my enemy." (Brink 1983: 153).

It is at this point that a brief mention of the last agent in our 'espionage game', the censor, can be made. The title of this essay, which indicates the character, the reader and the censor as "apartheid spies", takes inspiration from an article originally published by Peter McDonald in *Book History* in 2004, entitled: "The Writer, the Critic, and the Censor: J. M. Coetzee and the Question of Literature". At the beginning of his contribution McDonald discusses Coetzee's collection of essays on censorship, appeared in 1996 (*Giving Offense. Essays on Censorship*), and quotes a passage from "Emerging from Censorship" in which Coetzee defined the censor as an "intrusive reader":

Working under censorship is like being intimate with someone who does not love you, with whom you want no intimacy, but who presses himself in upon you. The censor is an intrusive reader, a reader who forces his way into the intimacy of the writing transaction [...]. (Coetzee 1996: 38)

Even if later in the article McDonald's analysis renders the relationship between Coetzee and the South African literary censors in the 1980s more complex and many-sided (see McDonald 2006: 53 ff.), the notion of the censor as an intrusive reader is relevant in our attempt to identify the various actors implicated in the 'spying activity' revolving around *A Dry White Season*, that, as we have already shown above, concerns both the novel itself and the historical actuality in which it is plunged. By the end of the Seventies, the censorship system in apartheid South Africa had become progressively more regulated and centralized: the first Commission of Inquiry against "Undesirable Publications" was appointed in 1954; in 1963 it was followed by a more sophisticated legislative apparatus, the Publications and Entertainments Act, which established a Board of Censors and "broke new ground by making the publication, printing, or distribution of 'undesirable' materials [...] produced both locally and abroad a statutory offence, punishable by severe fines and prison sentences." (McDonald 2009: 32).¹¹ In 1974 a new Publications Act was appointed, which, among other regulations, abolished the right to appeal to the Supreme Court and established

¹¹ Actually, the 1963 Act was effectively integrated by the Suppression of Communism Act (1950), on which terms it was possible to ban or detain writers and journalists as persons, thus reducing to silence the very source of dissident writing.



an extra-judicial Publications Appeal Board; in the words of Peter McDonald, the 1974 Act “marked the beginning of the most repressive era in the history of the system.” (McDonald 2009: 61).

Until the early Seventies, no literary work by an Afrikaner writer had been banned; it was André Brink’s fiction which first broke the spell. His 1973 novel in Afrikaans, *Kennis van die Aand* – rewritten in English by the author himself and published in Britain as *Looking on Darkness* in 1974 – was the first book in the Afrikaans language to be hit by the South African Publications Control Board in 1974 (the English version was also banned in 1974, and then again in 1980). Its banning “finally broke the pact regarding Afrikaans literature”, which became, together with the much greater bulk of black publications, the target of censorship (McDonald 2009: 54).¹² Peter McDonald argues that “The *Kennis* trial had far-reaching consequences not just for Brink, who became the focus of a campaign of harassment by the security police after the ban was imposed. While the British publishers used the controversy *Looking on Darkness* provoked in South Africa to make Brink’s name internationally, the banning of *Kennis* divided opinion in the Afrikaner literary world and marked a turning point in the relations between Afrikaans writers and the government.” (McDonald 2009: 57).

Also *’n Droë Wit Seisoen*¹³ was the object of the censors’ inspection as soon as it was published in 1979; before that, the very road that had led to its publication had proved arduous. The South African publishing house chosen by Brink – the alternative, oppositional Taurus Publications, founded in 1975 to support anti-apartheid literature – had to make recourse to various stratagems to have it issued before censorship took notice of its existence, like choosing a small Indian printing firm where nobody understood Afrikaans, and concealing the title of the book and the author’s name until the very last moment. Brink also recounts the surreptitious telephone calls with his friends the publishers, during which they came very close to exchanging coded messages in order to hide their activity to the professional spies of the police forces (see Brink 2010: 247-248). The novel was banned “for distribution only because it ‘denigrated’ the security police by accusing them ‘either directly or by implication of (a) dishonesty, (b) torture, (c) victimization, and (d) maltreatment.’” (McDonald 2009: 75). The Publications Appeal Board, though, in the end decided against banning

¹² See also De Lange 1997: 45-52. In 1973 the Afrikaanse Skrywersgilde (Afrikaans Writers’ Guild) was founded, as a reaction to state censorship (see Viljoen 2012: 454).

¹³ The Afrikaans title of the novel, which was written by Brink both in Afrikaans and in English; both versions appeared in 1979. The writer expresses himself on the experience of writing the same novel in Afrikaans and in English, begun with *Kennis van die Aand/Looking on Darkness* – “where intrinsic motives (the urge to attempt ‘saying’ the novel in a new language medium) as well as extraneous ones (censorship) combined to create the challenge” (Brink 1983: 113) – already in 1976, in an essay entitled “English and the Afrikaans Writer” (later included in Brink 1983).



because the novel's "approach to South African political affairs was so one-sided that the book was more counter-productive than propagandistic" (McDonald 2009: 76).¹⁴

A Dry White Season thus seems inextricably bound with the activity of surveillance, both intrinsic to the narration and external, related to the conditions of its composition and appearance on the literary market. The 'spying gaze' we have employed here to approach both the text and the context of the novel actually encompasses a wide range of heterogeneous participants in the literary enterprise, such as narrators and characters (as well as the reader as a character), but also the author of the book itself and the censorship system in force at the time of writing. To be more precise, the metaphor of the spying gaze links the text of the novel with the textualization of the external conditions of its production, reconstructed by culturalists and literary critics, but mainly recounted by Brink himself in his many essays and interviews, and in his recent memoir. Brink has always been particularly inclined to write about himself, and to reflect upon his own place in the world as a writer; similarly, in *A Dry White Season* he created a character who is autobiographical in many respects, and who observes himself in the process of observing a hideous, unacceptable social reality. The protagonist ends up questioning many of the assumptions he had based his former life on, and somewhat relentlessly scrutinizes his new, disturbing self-awareness. The first spying gaze of the novel is thus the constant searching look that Ben Du Toit directs upon himself.

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¹⁴ McDonald quotes from the report of the Publications Appeal Board committee.



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