



A CHAIN OF VOICES

Andre Brink

Faber & Faber, 1982; hardback £7.95

ISBN 0571118747

Brink is concerned with the ways in which history is made, with the effect an individual can have upon it and with the limitations placed by it upon the exercise of individual will. In his most recent novel, *A Chain of Voices*, he sets out to investigate the clash between two histories, that of the Afrikaaner and that of the black slave.

The novel is set in 1825, a time when the Afrikaaner farmers felt themselves threatened by the growing jurisdiction of the English from the Cape. Rumours that they will be forced by the English to free their slaves create a general tension in both Afrikaaner and slave communities and drive the Afrikaaners to extremes of cruelty in attempts to shore up the power that they feel is being undermined.

A Chain of Voices is Brink's most ambitious novel to date, with the consciousness of each character, black and white, female and male, explored in turn. The chain of events that leads to tragedy is centred on two characters, Nicolaas van der Merwe and Galant his slave. Galant is the most powerfully expressive of all the characters, the metaphors he uses reverberating

with repressed passion, while Nicolaas tries feebly to recreate the golden age of childhood equality that Galant has learnt is only a figment of the white imagination.

Yet while Brink's concern is to investigate the particular relations of power between white and black and man and woman, his undeniably powerful analysis is weakened by a central, unquestioned belief.

As in his other historical novel, *An Instant in the Wind*, the sexual act between white woman and black man takes place outside history and politics; it is expressive of a sentimental wish towards union of black and white and in both cases, despite a careful investigation of all other aspects of the relationship, it remains unconvincing. In both cases, too, the results of such a union fall outside the time-span of the novel: the sexual act is presented as a whole in itself, ahistorical, transcendental and perfect. So, in *A Chain of Voices*, the vigorous articulacy

of each character in the face of the historical circumstances that both forge and constrain their individual consciousnesses, is undermined by being put in opposition to a sexual act that is essentially free of both speech and conflict, and that recreates the golden age that elsewhere Brink has shown to be a sentimental dream.

A Chain of Voices is a powerful depiction of a period in the history of South Africa. It shows the roots of the conflict between Afrikaaner and English and the ultimate irrelevance of that conflict to the black majority. Both aspects are important for an understanding of present day South Africa. Yet the vision at the core of *A Chain of Voices* reduces the conflict between historical forces to one between individuals who are unable to communicate. Brink has produced a powerful and gripping historical novel, but he has not produced a political one.

Sarah Lefanu