

André Brink's *A chain of Voices*

From Camus, through archetypes, to Greek mythology

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife," Jane Austen begins her most famous novel. Whether we take this statement as ironical or at face value, it does not really contain controversial ideas about human nature. It seems only natural that a person without too many worries about other things, should, when the occasion presents itself, want to join another person to share a lifetime. This far, however, we have envisaged a "normal", traditional society and "normal", traditional people mainly associated with a not-so-modern, western world. Jane Austen's society, it may seem, did not generate existential questions or moral dilemmas commonly associated with (post-)modern societies, or, say, even with Austen's contemporary South African society, for example as portrayed by André Brink in his 1982 novel *A Chain of Voices*. We will never know exactly how a change of focus on the part of the writer and the disturbance of a changing world has influenced works of art in varying degrees, but Brink portrays a society which, very much like our own, is marred by moral dilemma, loss of direction, communication deficiency, as well as a general notion of absurdity and estrangedness. In the society he describes, marriage has little to do with the familiar process of mutual interest, courting, love, and, eventually, the joining of two families that takes place in Austen's world, and sometimes in our own. On the surface something similar may seem to take place, but beneath the surface an enormous muddle of conflicting emotions wrestles with itself.

In his construction of the plot, Brink, in a general meaning of the word, uses archetypes to establish a four-cornered frame.¹ Within this frame the main action takes place, ending with a slave rebellion. On a closer scrutiny, however, we see that the main characters as archetypes function differently on different levels and that they are more complicated than the label might suggest. Roughly, we may nevertheless say that Piet, the old baas at Houd-den-Bek, represents an archetypical, evil father figure: masculine and strong, spreading violence and love in a strange mixture that his children do not know how to respond to. He is the pater familia earning his respect from the fear he creates in those who are close to him. He is described as "a father who knew only the sjambok and the thong to overcome resistance and

instil fear where respect was impossible.”² At the same time we also get a sense of his insecurity and doubts as to whether his life has been meaningful or not. “Home. But even home looked strange,”³ Piet thinks to himself towards the end of his life, sharing the sense of loneliness and isolation that all the major characters in the novel experience at some point. Having been struck with paralysis in his old age he feels that God has punished him unjustly, making him identify with Uzza⁴ and Job in the Old Testament: “Where have I sinned against You?”⁵ This is the father of Barend, Nicolaas, and, possibly, Galant.

The parallel to Piet is Ma-Rose, the slave earth mother. In a setting which opens up for an extensive play on the black-white dichotomy, Brink makes the most of it. Ma-Rose in many ways becomes a comment on Piet. Her religion for example, though “primitive”, is much more an integral part of her life than Piet’s Calvinism is a part of his. The nature religion is much more all-including than Calvinism, which is more a religion for crises, and above all, for the strong. Ma-Rose’s religion includes all people, there is no such thing as a chosen Elect; her religion affects all aspects of life and is a natural part of that life. All in all, in spite of her being uneducated, “savage”, and uncivilized, Ma-Rose is Piet’s equal in most respects, but with the additional ability to observe and take note of the significant details in history even as it evolves before her eyes. She was there when it all started; she is still there when it ends. She is mother of all, and they are all her children.

Of the children, the next generation, two are particularly important in making up the remaining two corners of the frame: Nicolaas and Galant. Nicolaas, as we follow him from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood, turns into something like Camus’ Absurd Man. At one point, he thinks to himself:

Odd names and memories presenting themselves at random: like when the fog closes in over these highlands swathing everything in its blankness – only the occasional rock or hump or shrub protruding: you know very well they must be connected in some way; hidden in the fog must be a continuous and significant landscape, yet it remains invisible. All sense relinquished long ago, leaving only a meaningless opacity.⁶

We recognize in Nicolaas the sense of confusion, absurdity, disillusionment, and meaninglessness that we find in so many portrayals of the modern man, from Conrad’s Marlow, Sartre’s Antoine Roquentin to Updike’s Harry Angstrom. In this sense, the novel really is Nicolaas’ tragedy. His attempts to reach out, first to Hester, then to Galant, all fail. He is killed without having developed any kind of achieved identity or profound insight about his

role in society. His personality develops into the kind of monster his father was – or even worse, because Nicolaas does not really believe in anything, he does not feel responsible to anyone. This kind of literary personality may have its precursor prior to modern literature, even before Austen who started off this article. According to Harold Bloom it is Chaucer's Pardoner who is "ancestor of all Western literary characters condemned to nihilism."⁷

The tragic hero proper, of course, is Galant, the archetypical rebel slave. He is the one who is capable of analysing his own situation and to make a decision to act, even though he realizes at a relatively early stage that he cannot do much to improve his own situation in his own lifetime. In the end he has been fighting for the future, for his own child: "Perhaps I planted my life in her [Hestia's] womb. I'll never know for sure."⁸ Hester knows, though: "I bear the future in my womb."⁹ Almost from the start – triggered off by his being refused to swim with the white children on the farm when the girl, Hester, is present – Galant reacts to the way he is being treated as different from the others. We recognize in him Camus' Rebel Slave. In this sense, Galant serves as a comment on Nicolaas in the same way as Ma-Rose in one sense was said to be a comment on Piet. The parallel rebellion that Nicolaas should have carried out is what Camus calls "metaphysical rebellion":

The slave protests against the condition in which he finds himself within the state of slavery; the metaphysical rebel protests against the condition in which he finds himself as a man. The rebel slave affirms that there is something in him that will not tolerate the manner in which his master treats him; the metaphysical rebel declares that he is frustrated by the universe.¹⁰

This accords very well with Brink's own statement that "I believe in rebellion as a dimension of existence; in fact as a prerequisite for life"; "I believe in the metaphysical concept of revolt as defined by Camus";¹¹ and, finally,

The most abiding influence on my work [...] has been Albert Camus, notably his view of man in a state of incessant revolt against the conditions imposed upon him, and reacting creatively to the challenge of meaninglessness.¹²

The situations of Nicolaas and Galant, then, can be said to be very much the same – both feel imprisoned and condemned by their surroundings – but Galant is the one who manages to break free. Both die as a result of their problematic situation, but Galant is the one providing hope for the future.

This far I have tried briefly to describe what I take to be the main constellation of characters and their relation to each other. On the vertical axis there is an obvious difference in age between the parent generation and their children. But there is also a difference in world view, a difference that manifests itself for every new generation in any culture as a reaction that may take different forms, but which in itself seems to be an integral and universal part of the human psyche: the child's rebellion against his/her parents. The particular situation in the Bokkeveld at this particular time makes this natural process take its own particular turn, but its substance should be recognizable to all.¹³ On the horizontal axis each pair comments and parallels itself. Both pairs contain the obvious opposite black/white, and for both pairs there is a master/slave relationship for which it is not really clear who is in charge. Both Ma-Rose and Galant are slaves, no doubt, but they emerge as equally strong – or stronger, which is the case with Galant – as their respective counterparts. The situation between Nicolaas and Galant is most interesting in this respect. We see that basically they share a similar kind of existence; they are both oppressed. Galant is oppressed in an obvious way, but Nicolaas is not a free man either. He reflects: “all I was conscious of was that I didn't want to be [at the farm]; that I wasn't meant to be there,”¹⁴ and somewhere else: “The ponderous world is smothered in a fog.”¹⁵ He has been raised by a very dominating father, he clearly has not got the strength it takes to assert himself as a confident individual, and he is trapped by the fact that he has to be a master to his best friend, a role that carries with it a particular tradition of conduct and interaction.

I have used the label “archetypes” to help me in making the picture of the characters' relation to each other as clear as possible. I have used the term in a loose and general way, and so far this has been sufficient. Presently, however, I shall turn to quite another character in *A Chain of Voices* who will force us to pay more attention to archetypal psychology proper. The character I have in mind is Hester, the adopted sister of Barend and Nicolaas and the fifth corner in the frame outlined above. She is a complicated and immensely fascinating character who may not serve a particularly significant purpose in relation to the main plot as such, but as an individual character she moves in the background as a disturbing ghost without making it clear to us who she really is, what is her role. In many ways she functions as a catalyst for the development of the situations already described, but she also has a private life that is exclusively her own, isolated from the other people on the farm. Many of Brink's female main characters seem to have something in common, as Brink himself remarks about another female character in another novel, that she “shares with female characters from some of my

other novels a certain 'history of calamities'."¹⁶ Whatever calamities they may have in common, Hester remains the most powerful and mysterious female character in all of Brink's novels. To arrive at a most inclusive and interesting interpretation of her personality we should turn to the Greek goddess with almost the same name: Hestia.

Hestia is one of the least known of the Greek goddesses. She was the goddess of the hearth – both the hearth of the house and the hearth of sacrifice. In fact she was more associated with fire itself than with a person. Already at this level the connection between Hester and Hestia becomes interesting. Brink's novel consists of four parts, each of which corresponds to one of the four elements; earth, water, wind, and fire, in that order.¹⁷ The last chapter, "fire", in which the rebellion takes place, is the chapter where Hester really steps into the main action, giving the ending its disturbing intensity. Having been only a minor mysterious character with an indefinable role so far, Hester becomes vital as a catalyst for the central themes of the novel. But the similarities between these two figures go far beyond this rather superficial level. If we take a look at a recent interpretation of the Greek goddesses, done by a professor of psychiatry in the Jungian tradition, Jean Shinoda Bolen, this will become clearer. Bolen's book is called *Goddesses in Everywoman* and describes "a new psychology perspective of women based on images of women – provided by the Greek goddesses – that have stayed alive in human imagination for over three thousand years".¹⁸ In the following I shall try to compare Hestia, "the social isolate who stays on the periphery of activity, a nonparticipant who appears to others to be self-sufficient and isolated by choice",¹⁹ with Hester's personality as it is described in the novel.

Hester is always the outsider. Alida, her stepmother, describes her as "forever [...] solitary and independent".²⁰ For Alida, who wanted a daughter to care for, this is painful. In Bolen's description we find that

Hestia may do what others tell her and appear to be just as compliant, but when left on her own she contentedly plays without direction. Little Hestia has a quiet, self-sufficient quality. If she hurts herself or gets upset, she is as likely to go to her room to find comfort in solitude, as to her mother.²¹

The only person Hester has had a relatively close relationship with, apart from her father who killed himself when she was a child, is Nicolaas, but only during their childhood and youth. When Nicolaas proved to weak to stand up for her as Barend declared his intention to marry

her, she lost respect for him. Barend, her husband's description of their relationship is a description that might just as well have been her own:

She would remain my adversary until the day of my death; and the only way in which to remain worthy of her was to be as strong as she, never to give in, never to show a tender spot on which she might get a hold, for then she would destroy me.²²

The only difference is the Hester does not worry about being "worthy" of Barend. She is completely self-sufficient. She has learned that "To grow attached to anyone means running the risk of forfeiting that part of oneself entrusted to the other".²³ The self-sufficiency, then, clearly has a price, and Bolen writes about Hestia that she "often feels as alienated or isolated from her siblings as she does from her parents – and she truly is different from them".²⁴ The goddess had been exposed to tyranny in her childhood – Hester is surrounded by it constantly. This, added to her outsider mentality, makes Hester's situation very similar to that of Galant, and in many ways her way of protest is a fight for women's rights, against the oppression of women. She thinks to herself: "Ensnared in your condition – woman, wife, underling – only two escapes offer themselves as alternatives to violence: madness, or suicide."²⁵ The oppression of minorities or the weak is against Hestia's nature; she is "uninterested in personalevel concerns, in who's who and how to make a good or appropriate impression".²⁶ Unfortunately, according to Bolen, the Hestia woman will not "engage [...] in intellectual or political discussions",²⁷ which is also the case with Hester. Her asocial behaviour or attitude makes her the more focused on the things immediately around her: "The feel of things. Textures [...] Above all the things outside [...] The feel of water."²⁸ She wants to be "one" with nature, to retreat into an extreme form of meditation that will cut her off completely from the complexities of social interaction:

Not only to feel but to know what it feels like to be feeling. Not to feel the surface of the rock against your skin but to know how from inside it feels you. Its weight in the earth, its stillness, its silence. And how it feels the rain. The first drops, their smell, and how they bring to life the smells of grass, heather, lichen, earth. Soaking you to the skin; the feel of clothes clinging in cold lust, sucking at your flesh [...] the smell and feel of your own body, separate limbs, an aching ecstasy inwards. I would sit in the rain, if they let me, head down, arms and legs drawn in, the shape of a stone, to feel it wash over me, permeate me entirely. Thunder. Not coming from clouds above but reverberating in the earth. The wish to be bare then, the nakedness of desire. Skies aflame, a sound of mountains falling, crushing about me; a dissolution into pure liquid existence, shaping me, running and beautiful.²⁹

Hester, it should now be apparent, enjoys only her own company, leaving solitude her favourite condition. She has a closer relationship with nature and animals than with her fellow human beings. "With Hestia as an inner presence," Bolen argues, "a woman is not 'attached' to people, outcomes, possessions, prestige, or power. She feels whole as she is. Her ego isn't on the line."³⁰ Bolen further sees the condition of women in general as a kind of double bind:

The Jungian perspective has made me aware that women are influenced by powerful inner forces, or archetypes, which can be personified by Greek goddesses. And the feminist perspective has given me an understanding of how outer forces, or stereotypes – the roles to which society expects women to conform – reinforce some goddess patterns and repress others. As a result, I see every woman as a "woman-in-between": acted on from within by goddess archetypes and from without by cultural stereotypes.³¹

In the case of Hester, it is difficult to say which force is stronger, her own personality or the society around her. The safe thing is probably to say that her liability to asocial behaviour is strengthened by the society she is a part of, a society that she loathes. But of the archetypal forces modelled on the Greek goddesses, the strongest in Hester is beyond doubt that of Hestia with her "inward-focused consciousness".³²

Hestia is classified as one of the virgin goddesses, which also includes Artemis and Athena. Together these three represent independence and self-sufficiency. The most conspicuous trait that these three have in common is their ability to concentrate, to focus their consciousness on one goal or plan. But whereas Artemis and Athena focus on the external world, Hestia has an inward focus; her attention is on her "inner subjective experience"³³. This, however, is not to say that Hestia does not relate to the exterior world, on the contrary: "Hestia's way of perceiving is by looking inward and intuitively sensing what is going on."³⁴ But, as Bolen later points out, "Coping with the outer world is what is difficult for Hestia women".³⁵ This might explain some of the paradox of Hester: her isolation from social life and her very correct analysis of it. Bolen argues further that

The Hestian mode allows us to get in touch with our values by bringing into focus what is personally meaningful. Through this inner focusing, we can perceive the essence of a situation. We can also gain insight into other people's character and see the pattern or feel the significance of their actions. This inner perspective provides clarity in the midst of the confusing myriad of details that confront our five senses.³⁶

This is a very good description of the impression one gets of Hester's personality in Brink's novel. Though being an outsider, one gets a strong feeling that Hester possesses true insight into the situation at Houd-den-Bek. She is like an artist observing human behaviour, analysing it as she tells us her story. Bolen claims that "For some women, poetry emerges when Hestia's presence is felt".³⁷ As a result of the inward focus Hestia acquires a "tendency to withdraw from the company of others",³⁸ in the same way as Hester chooses her isolated role.

Hestia is a virgin goddess and in Rome she became the goddess Vesta. Those girls who were chosen to become Vestal Virgins had, naturally, to stay virgins. A Vestal Virgin having sexual relations with a man would receive terrible punishment. If we compare this with Hester, she is clearly not a virgin, being married to Barend and giving birth to several children, but she shows a strong revolt at her pregnancy: "Everything in me denied a child."³⁹ She clearly sees nothing positive about her married state, showing an attitude that does not only question but that denies the validity of the Austenian "universal law" cited at the beginning of this article.⁴⁰ This is how she describes her life with Barend: "Already I could see us in our old age, two dry bodies clawing and fighting each other to delve ever more deeply in search of whatever rare moisture remained in the hideous bone-dry carcasses."⁴¹ The conflict with her husband, as well as her inward focus, forces her to seek solace in the household chores and the tending of children. Such a focus on household activities is also central to Hestia, the hearthkeeper. It becomes a goal in itself, an exercise in meditation: "She derives an inner peace from what she is doing, like a woman in a religious order for whom every activity is done 'in the service of God'."⁴² The "trivialities" of everyday life, the routine of domestic tasks, is what gives Hester as well much of her strength. According to Bolen, a Hestian woman performing the daily chores "is in what the Greeks called *kairos* time – she is 'participating in time,' which is psychologically nourishing".⁴³ This is something I suspect that most of us have experienced at one time or another: being involved in an activity so deeply that we forget everything else.

The old Hestia becomes something of a wise old woman, Bolen writes. Her self-centredness makes her strong and perhaps a bit cynical in relation to life around her. When this is added to her capacity for analysis mentioned above, some sort of wisdom will emerge. And Hester's observations of life around her do tend to result in reflections or words of wisdom, like

One always thinks of freedom as something "out there", remote and separate, a territory to be reached by climbing a mountain or swimming a river or crossing some frontier. But is there, ever, anything "out there": freedom? truth? Can it ever be anywhere, or

otherwise, than here, in here, inseparable from who you are, what you are, what you were, what you alone allow yourself to become?⁴⁴

These reflections reveal a mind that does not only function well, but that uses the time it takes to think things through. Her personality, however, makes it very difficult for her to share these thoughts with her fellow men. Very often she will keep her thoughts to herself and draw strength from them, and perhaps enjoy the fact that they are solely her own. Within herself she has developed a calmness allowing her to be “grounded in the midst of outer chaos”.⁴⁵

After this we may change some of our first impressions of Hester. Her position is not as unimportant as it may seem at first glance; we may come to see her as “self-effacing, anonymous, a nonentity who nevertheless has a central position”.⁴⁶ Centrality, however, is not all. Throughout her book Bolen emphasizes the fact that the presence of only one goddess in one personality is not of the good. The healthiest personality is that which consists of a mixture of all the qualities that the different goddesses represent. Hester, we may argue, clearly being something of a pure Hestia, is showing qualities that do not do either herself or her surroundings much good, other than helping her survive. Given her particular historical situation, this is of course not surprising. Thus Hester may emerge as an example of the kind of mechanisms that are activated when a human being faces situations s/he cannot deal with. It looks as if one particular, either dominating or purely accidental, personal trait takes over completely, at the expense of most of the other latent qualities. In the case of Hestia, the most important thing is to “learn to express her feelings”⁴⁷ instead of bottling them up, both for her own sake and for the sake of her fellow human beings. Her potential for valuable contribution is considerable if she could become capable of communicating them. The Hestia woman, then – and Hester – “is a person among people, who must venture outside the walls of the house or temple, and who is ill prepared for the experience, unless other parts of her psyche can help her to be active, expressive, and assertive”.⁴⁸ In this light, Brink’s novel becomes even more depressing at the final end. Hester cannot “survive” in the society to which she is condemned to live, even though she is the person with the most in-depth knowledge about what it means to tolerate and interact with other people. Thus Galant’s death takes care of the topical or local themes while Hester’s experience, added to the fate of Nicolaas, illustrates the universal and eternal questions involved in the story. How does a given situation influence and shape the views in completely different ways for those involved? What is truth? Is objective truth only attainable through the adding together of subjective truths? How does one communicate truth? These are questions that are both spelled out, as in the quote above, and raised by

implication, and Hester plays a central role in this connection. Answers, however, are scarce, but the hope lies in the possibilities of the human mind and in making a climate that allows it to work in an atmosphere of tolerance and inspiration.

Notes

- ¹ The frame, as I shall return to, may be argued to have a fifth corner, but on a basic level these four are the most significant ones.
- ² André Brink, *A Chain of Voices* (London: Flamingo, 1983), p. 67.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- ⁴ See 2. Book of Samuel, 6. 3-8.
- ⁵ Brink, *A Chain of Voices*, p. 29.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- ⁷ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 119.
- ⁸ Brink, *A Chain of Voices*, p. 498.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 496.
- ¹⁰ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 23.
- ¹¹ André Brink, *Writing in a State of Siege* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 61, 72.
- ¹² Susan M. Trotsky (ed.), *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*, 39 (Gale Research Inc.: 1992), p. 43.
- ¹³ A son's struggle to earn his father's love, his need to respect his father – exactly the same situation can be found, for example in the film "Rebel Without a Cause".
- ¹⁴ Brink, *A Chain of Voices*, p. 94.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- ¹⁶ André Brink, *States of Emergency* (London: Flamingo, 1989), p. 62n
- ¹⁷ Brink has stated that he "tried to broaden and deepen the enquiry by relating the voices, in four successive sections, to the elements of earth, water, wind, and fire", in *Contemporary Authors*, p. 43.
- ¹⁸ Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Everywoman: A New Psychology of Women* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 2.
- ¹⁹ Bolen, p. 120.
- ²⁰ Brink, *A Chain of Voices*, p. 98.
- ²¹ Bolen, p. 118.
- ²² Brink, *A Chain of Voices*, p. 155.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- ²⁴ Bolen, p. 119.
- ²⁵ Brink, *A Chain of Voices*, p. 138.
- ²⁶ Bolen, p. 128.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- ²⁸ Brink, *A Chain of Voices*, p. 97.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- ³⁰ Bolen, p. 113.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- ³⁹ Brink, *A Chain of Voices*, p. 134.
- ⁴⁰ In ancient Greece, Hermes was the obvious counterpart to Hestia. Bolen describes them as "related but apart" (p. 115). Following this line we could see Galant as representing Hermes, the two of them forming a male/female couple who can never be properly united. This would again support Brink's subdivision of his novel into the four elements, with Hestia representing fire and Hermes representing wind. Both, however different, are symbols of spirituality, something abstract, and their role in conveying the central themes of the novel is nothing but critical.
- ⁴¹ Brink, *A Chain of Voices*, p. 247.
- ⁴² Bolen, p. 111.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- ⁴⁴ Brink, *A Chain of Voices*, pp. 254-255.
- ⁴⁵ Bolen, p. 113.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129.