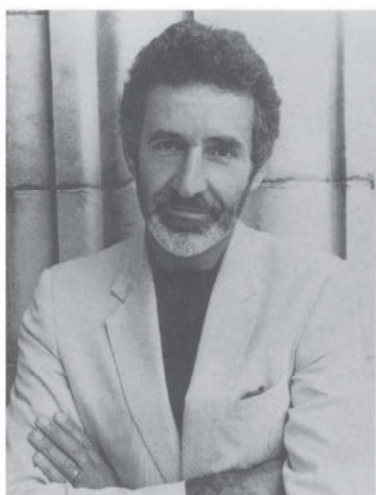


The

Poet in the Mixer

The Work of Breyten Breytenbach



Breyten Breytenbach
(1939-) (Photo by Jerry
Bauer).

The South African poet and artist Breyten Breytenbach (1939-) once said that he wrote in a 'bastard language', Afrikaans.¹ Nowadays he publishes mostly in English, having turned his back on the Afrikaans literary establishment which once showered him with prizes and accolades. In his uneasiness with his own cultural heritage Breytenbach is by no means unique, coming as he does from a country with eleven official languages, and where ethnic conflicts have been the thread running through the patchwork that is South African history.

Novelist Chris Barnard once remarked that Breyten Breytenbach's alliterating name sounded as if it had been 'thought up'. The poet started life in two other 'B's', Bonnievale, a small town in the Cape region of the Boland. No other area in South Africa is so quintessentially Afrikaans; even the accents sound as if they were made for TV programmes about wine and regional cooking.

Living in self-imposed exile in Paris – he married a French-speaking Vietnamese in the early sixties, to the chagrin of the apartheid authorities back home who initially refused her a visa to visit the country – Breytenbach poured out his love for his native Boland in poems, even whole anthologies, such as the following poem about his father in the town of Wellington, also in the Boland:

*I will die and go to my father
to Wellington with long legs
gleaming in the light
where the rooms are heavy and dark
where stars sit like gulls on the roof
and angels dig for worms in the garden
I will die and be on my way with little luggage
over the mountains of Wellington
between trees and twilight
and go to my father
the sun will throb in the earth
the surf of the wind makes the joints creak*

*we hear the tenants'
shuffle above our heads
we'll play checkers on the backporch
– cheat daddy –
and listen to the news of the night
on the radio*

*friends, companions in dying
don't fear – now life hangs like flesh around our bodies
but death doesn't let you down –
our coming and our going
is like water from the tap
like sounds from the mouth
like our coming and going:
our legs will know freedom –
come along
in my dying and going to my father
to Wellington, where the angels
fish fat stars from the sky with worms –
let's die and perish and be merry:
my father has a big boarding-house*

(Translated by Ria Loohuizen)

The paradox of Breytenbach's poetic sensibility is to be found in the tension between his attachment to a small-town upbringing, as enunciated in this poem, and his exposure to the cosmopolitan world of Paris with its political and cultural fashions. Zen Buddhism, which had its heyday in the Paris of the sixties, became a major influence in Breytenbach's work, especially in his two properly 'Zen' works, *Lotus* (1970) and *In Other Words* (Met ander woorde, 1973). Echoes of the Dutch poet Bert Schierbeek, himself a follower of Zen, can be found in various parts of Breytenbach's work, as well as other Dutch Experimentalist poets from the Fifties Movement such as Lucebert and Gerrit Kouwenaar. In his work as a visual artist, too, Breytenbach embraced a form of later surrealism not too far removed from that of the CoBrA group of Karel Appel, Corneille, Alechinsky, Constant, Asger Jorn and others, to which authors of the Fifties Movement such as Lucebert and Hugo Claus also belonged.

Apart from Zen, the left-wing atmosphere of 1960s Paris also left its mark on Breytenbach, so that he became more and more attracted to the role of revolutionary, struggling against apartheid and capitalism – two notions that, until recently, used to be easily equated. The rest of Breytenbach's trajectory, his ill-fated involvement with an obscure underground movement known as Okhela, clandestine visit to South Africa in 1975, and subsequent arrest and tragic incarceration, is fairly well-known. His release from prison after eight years of confinement was followed by a spate of publications, including a considerable body of poetry in Afrikaans, as well as a kind of prison notebook, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984).

In his diaries, politically inspired polemics, novels and other prose works, Breytenbach loves to mix fantasy and reality, narrative and moralising,

often choosing various aliases for himself, such as B.B. Lazarus, Panus or Jan Blom, with whom the narrator engages in fanciful dialogues that are sometimes peppered with scatological puns.

In one of the many ironies of the post-apartheid era, Breytenbach has now become something of a political anomaly and finds himself rejected by a younger generation of sycophantic intellectuals who are pandering to the jargon and African self-righteousness of the new regime. Increasingly therefore, the figure of Breytenbach the activist and aspiring politician is fading on the new-South African stage, in favour of a more classical image of the poet / artist doubly exiled from his country and from himself, celebrating that age-old loss of identity that is synonymous with creative being. As a reader one is drawn irresistibly towards his earlier work, where the *mot juste* often crops up amid a simple, guileless celebration of love or domesticity, as in the famous poem, 'The Hole in the Sky' ('Die gat in die lug').

THE HOLE IN THE SKY

(for our house)

*my house stands on high legs,
I live in the attic,
ho ho
I'm happy here
stoke the fire,
blow my flute;
when a visitor arrives
he knocks at the door,
I just open the window,
the sun comes to drink
with a clear tongue
the wine in my glass*

*and I can't complain;
sometimes the thousand-eyed rain
watches at panes
but can't find a foothold,
little tadpoles slip to the ground*

*I've chairs and a table,
books and oranges,
a wife,
a bed that folds like muscles around me*

*in the evening my house is an observatory;
this coach pulls up at the eyepiece
and a martian climbs out:
come come
I scratch my crotch,
let wind into my shoes;
no thanks, I'm happy here*

Breyten Breytenbach,
Untitled. 1967.
Water colour on paper,
55 x 55 cm. Private
Collection.



*stoke the fire,
blow the flute;
I shake my hands out,
doves gallop through the air:
go tell the politicians
and the other idiots
my life is without purpose,
a grave, a hole in the sky,
but I'm happy here*

*in the morning my house is a boat;
I stand at the prow,
my fingers set
to plumb the uncharted coast,
limbs of trees in the yard
flashing past the porthole*

*the tree:
the tree grows red leaves,
the leaves eggs, eggs become fists
and moult and die
like old bloodroses;
but my house is sound,
that's where I walk around
like a tongue in its mouth;
tongues decompose?
the lean man wastes away?
mould covers bones?*

*ah the earth shudders,
the walls show through,
the floor splits open: fruit;
my doors are hoarse,
the windows gape,
my wine turns sour,
it snows in the summer,
the rain wears glasses, small rose hands,
but I am happy here*

(Translated by Denis Hirson)

This translation comes from the Canadian selection *Sinking Ship Blues* (1977), but the original was published much earlier in the collection *The House of the Deaf One* (*Die huis van die dowe*, 1967), the title being a reference to Goya's residence in Madrid, '*la quinta del sordo*.' It is a good example of the earlier poetry in that it combines Zen-type allusions to a void or nothingness – in this case the portrayal of the house as a hole in the sky – with the intensely personal nature of Breytenbach's poetic activity. (His predilection for the first person singular was initially denigrated as '*ekkerigheid*', an untranslatable neologism that could approximately be ren-



Breyten Breytenbach.
Untitled. 1972.
 Canvas, 150 x 200 cm.
 Collection Dado.

dered as 'me-obsessed'.) The enumeration of personal possessions here can be seen as an exposure of the self, a common theme in his work, which is also very compatible with the kind of Oriental *Weltanschauung* normally associated with Zen.

Roland Barthes once referred to a form of textual voyeurism as '*scopophilia*' ('love of seeing'). The depictions of the rain as having vision and also 'wearing glasses' are also very typical Breytenbach devices – be they insects or secret policeman, a lot of his creations are provided with spectacles of one sort or another. Not only does the rain look in, but he looks out from his '*observatory*' so that one is very much persuaded of a universe of beings peering at one another.

Breytenbach has probably never read Kant, but his notion of the artist's life as being futile ('*go tell the politicians / and the other idiots / my life is without purpose, / a grave, a hole in the sky*') is open to a Kantian reading of the 'disinterestedness' of aesthetic contemplation, and indeed, judgment; but this would take one too far away from the current summary of the salient elements of his poetry. However, if one lumps together his multifarious remarks on poetry and art, in and outside his poems, Breytenbach did develop a kind of aesthetic. In various respects Breytenbach is a very *self-conscious* author, also in the Anglo-American sense of the term which denotes a certain self-referentiality in a text. Compare in this regard the penultimate stanza above ('*I walk around / like a tongue in its mouth*'), which focuses attention on the fabricated nature of this poem.

The apocalyptic element in the final part of the poem where the carefully



Breyten Breytenbach,
The Bat. 1983. Canvas,
 185 x 150 cm. Collection
 Nationale de France /
 Musée de Dôle.

constructed house of words is made to break down in some tremor, is also very characteristic of Breytenbach. In another well-known poem, 'Populated Death' ('Bevolkte dood'), he describes a painting by Hieronymus Bosch, the apocalyptic painter *par excellence*. The title of the anthology that contains this poem is *Kouevuur* (1969), which means 'cold fire', but also 'gangrene'. The view of a gangrenous world where everyone is accompanied by his own death, is very much Breytenbach's. In *Kouevuur* and elsewhere he created a kind of topsy-turvy symbolism in which the colour black stood for all good things like Africa, the home country, the chaos of life, and white for everything associated with death, disease, Europe and the white man / albino.

There is an intimate link between Breytenbach the poet / author and Breytenbach the artist / painter. In his paintings and drawings the apocalyptic and grotesque elements of his work seem to attain an even greater prominence. Human figures are usually depicted with malformed faces and limbs, often with impaired sight, their genitals pathetically exposed, stumbling half-blind through a hostile universe. As a motto to his first prose publication in 1964, the collection of short, surreal pieces *Catastrophes* (Katastrofes), he quoted Jean-Paul Sartre: 'No, the universe remains dark. We are animals overcome by catastrophes ... But I have suddenly discovered that alienation, exploitation of man by man, malnutrition, push the metaphysical evil which is a luxury into the background. Hunger is an evil: that is all ... I am on the side of those who think that things will go better if the world has changed.'

The phrase 'animals overcome by catastrophes' retains its appositeness

regarding the portrayal of *angst*-ridden humanity both in the written oeuvre and in the visual one. However, especially in the bright blues and reds of his paintings and illustrations, there is a rough, child-like quality that is lacking in the relatively smoother, more contrived nature of the poetry. It is as if in this field Breytenbach has allowed himself a greater freedom to overthrow convention and the exigencies of academic stylistics than in his poetic production.

In the cultural turmoil of the new South Africa, Breytenbach's former role as poet laureate to dissident Afrikanerdom has certainly changed. But his quest for freedom and his scintillating phrases will haunt and inspire many generations to come amid the never-ending difficulties of the South African situation.

DAN ROODT

NOTE

1. In 1652 three ships belonging to the Dutch East India Company cast anchor in a bay at the foot of Table Mountain, near the Cape of Good Hope. The Europeans aboard the ships were under the command of the Dutchman Jan van Riebeeck. Their task was the establishment and manning of a supply station for ships on their way to the Indies and back. Van Riebeeck's companions were for the most part sailors and farmers from the provinces of Holland and Zeeland. Their seventeenth-century dialects formed the basis of the present Afrikaans language, which to many Dutch-speakers resembles a kind of simplified Dutch. The reasons for this grammatical simplification have been explained in different ways. Some linguists emphasising the influence of other languages (native African tongues, Malay, English, ...), others stressing the internal dynamic of Afrikaans itself.

LIST OF ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS

Sinking Ship Blues (Tr. André Brink, Ria Loohuizen, Denis Hirson). Toronto, 1977.
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Memory of Snow and Dust. Johannesburg, 1989.
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