Africa and Identity in the Art and Writing of Breyten Breytenbach

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From the strongly autobiographical tone of his writing to the striking recurrence of selfportraits in his pictorial art, the issue of identity and self-representation has always been foregrounded and problematised in the work of Breyten Breytenbach[1]. The extent to which the question of identity is—or is not—linked to place, is of primary importance in the context of this paper, not only because I wish to examine the link between Africa and the sense of self constituted in his work, but also because I question the way critics place his oeuvre within a purely European tradition of writing and painting. Hence the rather ambitious title of this paper, meant to evoke the 'bigger picture' which underpins my introductory exploration of the interplay between identity and Africa in his work.

In order to briefly contextualise this issue of identity and place I have to remind the reader of specific events in Breytenbach's eventful life. He left South Africa in the early sixties and settled in Paris with his Vietnamese wife, a decision which inevitably, during the apartheid years, constituted a form of exile and undoubtedly shaped the nature of his work. Although he now—since the democratic elections of 1994—regularly returns to the country of his birth, the fact remains that for several decades his art and writing were informed by the various European trends of the day. The rich infusion of both French Surrealism and Symbolism[2] comes to

[1] Breytenbach's writing is almost exclusively autobiographical, from *Die ysterkoei moet sweet* (1964), *Om te vlieg* (1974), *Met ander woorde* (1973), *Seisoen in die Paradys* (1974) and *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1983) right up to the more recent *Return to Paradise* (1993), *Dog heart* (1998) and *Woordwerk* (1999), to name just a few. Selfrepresentation has similarly been problematized in his pictorial work, as implied in exhibition titles such as 'Selfportraits and other ancestors' (1991); 'Painting the eye' (1993) and 'Portraits, Prints and Paper' (1998).

[2] Critics have long proclaimed the influence of Surrealism and Symbolism in Breytenbach's work, for example Brink (1971) as regards the writing, and Leenhardt (1987) as regards the pictorial work.

mind, (e.g. *Die Ysterkoei moet sweet* 1964, and *Om te vlieg* 1971), as do the explicit intertextualities of *A Season in Paradise* (1974), *Return to Paradise* (1993) and *Rimbaud's Une saison en enfer.* His pictorial art too—thematically as well as stylistically—leans heavily on the work, amongst others, of Magritte, Henri Rousseau, De Chirico and Bacon.

In spite of this obvious European influence one remained acutely aware—throughout the years—of the umbilical cord which tied Breytenbach to Africa. The subject matter of his work and the consistently rich Afrikaans he continued to practice in spite of years in exile make this abundantly obvious. For him, Africa and the act of remembering are indelibly intertwined, the one feeding on the other and together providing the matter of his creative imagination. Life in a foreign land may have turned his seldom-heard mother-tongue into a memory, but its very absence seems to have nourished his imagination in sometimes unexpected ways, as when claims, for example, to 'always draw in Afrikaans, my mother-tongue ...' (Breytenbach, 1991:54).

However, this attachment to the land of his birth took a turn when, on a clandestine visit to South Africa in 1974, he was arrested for so called subversive political activities against the Apartheid Régime and imprisoned for seven years. Ironically, this lead to almost cult status for the enfant terrible of Afrikaans literature, he became both a martyr for, and emblem of the alternative voice of his people. His creative work was stimulated by the hardships of prison life and his resistance against the system, and some of his most outstanding poetry was written in this period. After serving his prison sentence he remained vehemently opposed to the political system sustained by the National Pary and seemed unable to overcome his anger and despair at the loss of a personal homeland. Significantly, he now also preferred not to write in his mother tongue. Accepting French citizenship on his return to Paris, he started working on several manuscripts simultaneously, all of them in English: *End Papers* (1983a), *Mouroir* (1983b) which was written in a mixture of Afrikaans and English, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984), and the translation of a selection of prison poems, entitled *Judas Eye* (1988).

On one level the decision to write in English was a practical one and has remained valid to this day: The works do not require translation and immediately become accessible to a wider reading public. On another level though, as is evident from the bitterness and tremendous sense of loss expressed in his art and writing at the time, the decision was emotional and reflective of the way language (in this case the mother tongue) and place intermingle in the constitution of a self. When one compares the psychological fragmentation[3] expressed in some of the prison poems

[3] A fragmented sense of self can be traced throughout this collection of poems, not only in the evocation of a profound sense of depersonalisation experienced as a result

(cf ('Yk') 1983c) to the lyrical clarity expressed by the 'I' of his most recent writing (Papierblom 1998a), it is obvious that more than the mere passing of time must have entered the equation. A new, and in many ways nurturing, connectedness with North and West Africa was established (elucidated further on in this paper) and served as catalyst to heal his acute sense of alienation. It is the nature of this connectedness with Africa—as well as the interaction between this connectedness and the European-colonial tradition from which he springs—that significantly informed the sense of identity now constituted through his art and writing. It is against this background that I should like to highlight the nature of this 'I' and its significance in a global context, as it constitutes a subject position which not only poses a challenge to Breytenbach's fellow South Africans, but also has ethical—and political—implications for changes taking place in the world today.

The first definite indication in the post-prison period of this shift from Europe to a renewed and healing groundedness in Africa appears in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984) commenced shortly after his return to France. Although here the narrator writes from Sicily and thus strictly speaking still from Europe, he is acutely aware of the way in which the colour and quality of the light around him reflects that of the African soil; a conscious assimilation that helps him to recall and confront the full horror of his prison experience. The presence of Africa—north of his homeland—escalates in his subsequent work, as in the haunting *Memory of snow and of dust* (1989), which unfolds mostly in Ethiopia before shifting to South Africa. *Return to Paradise* is similarly placed in North and West Africa, mostly in Senegal, and even his poetry becomes imbued with themes and images from that part of the world[4]. His paintings too, suddenly become startlingly bright with the warm, clear colours of Africa, there is no sign any more of the foggy greys and murky green tints that characterise his earlier work from Europe[5]. More than a superficial presence on the level of themes or images however, these linkages with the African soil have indeed had a profound effect on Breytenbach's understanding of the creative act of writing and painting, and in particular on the sense of self constituted through this process.

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of solitary confinement, but also in the ruptured—yet powerfully 'signifying'—structure and syntax of most of the poems. Compare in particular 'Isis' (p.155), 'ii' (p.156) , 'Nekra' (pp. 43- 44) and 'Mahala' (p. 8).

[4] See *nege landskappe van ons tye bemaak aan 'n beminde* (1993), and in particular the three 'island' poems on pp. 5-6,98-99 and 172-174, as well as entire sections in Soos die So (1990b) for example pp.160 -166.

[5] Representative of this shift is the contrast between the dull tones of the early 'Ma vie et moi' (1975), (reproduced in 1993b:43) and the vivid hues of 'Famille sainte' (1991).

Take for example his affinity with the African concept of ancestors and its role in ancient and contemporary forms of worship. The title Selfportraits and other Ancestors for an exhibition of his work in Stockholm is a case in point, as is the subject of one of his best known paintings, the sinisterly beautiful Moonlight Arab, which was inspired by an annual festival in Ethiopia to honour the ancestors, when bodies are exhumed, garlanded and fêted for a day and a night, to be buried again with the rising sun[6]. Such explicit reference in his work to this ancient tradition is not fortuitous: In the same way in which tribal peoples relate to their world through the prism of kinship, Breytenbach refers to the act of writing or painting as 'a dancing of the bones' (1991:62), thus recalling how art practice in Africa traditionally serves to confirm one's links with the ancestors. Creative practice thus has a specific function: Through one's art, a return to the forefathers creates a sense of belonging and becomes an opportunity, as it were, to renew relationship with oneself and the world.

In a similar vein, the mask as archetypal African image has also become synonymous with Breytenbach's work[7]. For him the concept of identity is closely linked to the concept of masking: Not only does it embody identity as something which cannot be fully revealed or understood, it also suggests a constantly transforming 'I'—a perpetual shedding of identities which evoke the mysteriousness of being. This is indeed the traditional African point of view: As in the case of, for example, the initiation masks from Mali with which Breytenbach is familiar, 'the more secret the association (of the initiate), and the "deeper" its knowledge, the more ambiguous, abstract and metaphoric their visual language' (Nooter 1993:59). The unfamiliar effect of a ceremonial mask glimpsed in semi-darkness therefore effectively conveys such fathomless depth of being. The mirror too, as primary motif in both the art and writing of Breytenbach[8], points not only to a similarly constituted ever-changing 'I' but specifically evokes the meaning of the small mirror sometimes

[6] One of the prison poems evokes a similar practice from Madagascar, the Famadihana ancestral feast (Eklips 1983d:45-46).

[7] This is evident from the many pictorial depictions of masked figures (see for example 1990a:16;36;40;44;48 and 1993b:14;17;19;50;54), but also from the frequent evocation of multiple, interchangeable identities in his writing. See for example 1993a:163-168, where the poet refers to himself as Bibberbek, Bewebors, Bittergek, Buitendag Bruidjiebark, Bietjiebees, Bredebroek and Babbeldors in the space of one poem.

[8] Pictorial examples abound (1990a:125 and 1993b:17) and come as no surprise in the light of the 'Don Espejuelo' (Mr. Mirror) alter ego encountered repeatedly in his writing, and which foregrounds his obsession with the impenetrable nature of being.

fixed to the stomach of a tribal fetish[9]: Although 'I' am temporarily visible in the reflected image, the essence of my full identity remains impenetrable as the glass itself.

This concept of a shifting identity is further problematised: On a first reading of his more recent work, for example *Return to Paradise* (1993), 'Foreword' (1996a) and 'Travelling towards an Identity' (1996b), one is struck by the notion of homelessness foregrounded in the recurring figure of the exile, the drifter, the bastard and so on. In fact, the notion of identity itself seems to be adrift, as for example in the sometimes confusing array of names the author uses to refer to himself: Mr. Bird, Mr. Mirror, Lazarus, Jan Afrika, Bangai Bird, Breyten Breytenpag, Bibberbek, Bewebors and so forth. As stylistic device this insistence on a constantly changing 'I' naturally undermines the idea of a single, unified voice (see Van der Merwe 1980 and Viljoen 1993). In his pictorial work the many images of masks, mirrors, creatures associated with change such as moths, butterflies and chameleons similarly evoke transforming and (inter)changeable identities, thereby constituting a veritable gallery of selves—in metamorphosis (see Breytenbach 1990:16,36,40,44,48).

Breytenbach's longstanding interest in, and commitment to Buddhist philosophy[10] no doubt partly explains this persistently shifting 'I' as well as his claim that 'every portrait—landscape or other depiction—is a selfportrait' (1991:76). He argues that, although the artwork reflects what the artist sees, it also incarnates what the artist is, in other words what he or she has consciously absorbed (see Breytenbach 1991: 76f). Such (Buddhist) transcendence of the self as a separate entity in order to identify with the depicted landscape is even explicitly expressed in some early paintings, where a horse or a shoe entitled Self-portrait clearly implies 'I am (also) the other'[11]. Although a reading in terms of Buddhist selflessness goes a long way in clarifying statements of this kind, the blurring of conventional subject-object

[9] Wooden sculptured figures where the fetish material on the abdomen is covered with a small piece of (imported) mirror is a common occurrence in African art (Willett 1993:167).

[10] Evident from his very first collection of poetry (*Die ysterkoei moet sweet* 1964) and repeatedly acknowledged as feeding ground of his oeuvre, Buddhist philosophy represents a way of being that permeates Breytenbach's understanding of the creative process (cf. Sienaert 1993:25-45).

[11] Such Buddhist dissolution of self and integration with the perceived object springs from the premise of relativity and the principle of 'dependent arising' formulated by the historic Buddha. All things are in a state of 'constant arising and ceasing' as nothing has a true material nature through which it can exist independently (cf. Abe 1985:92-93). 'You' and 'I' are relative to each other as poles of one and the same process, therefore 'you' are inherently present in 'I' just as 'I' am present in 'you'.

boundaries and the associated notion of a shifting 'I' also postulates identity, in true postmodernist fashion, as a construct within the discursive practice of writing or painting.

In view of Breytenbach's overriding connectedmess with Africa however, the blurring of boundaries between subject and object also strongly recalls the fact that—whenever African art is considered in a tribal context—there is no division between the object and its beholder (cf. Forster, 1993:30). This implies that in Africa, art—be it an object, music or dance—is not seen as being separate from the person who experiences it. Breytenbach (1991: 76-79) similarly insists that the act of painting or writing becomes both the approximation (or reflection) of reality and the energy which brings it into being; it represents a single process through which the subject-object dichotomy of artist (or observer) and image dissolves. This particular vision of reality requires the active participation of an observer and can metaphorically be seen as a kind of confrontation; an interaction between object and viewer which challenges conventional perception and leads to its transformation or renewal.

The notion of art as constitutive of the subject rather than constituted by the subject (Lechte on Julia Kristeva, 1990:24) offers a Eurocentric theoretical counterpart to this tribal assumption of art practice. Of significance however, is that in the case of both types of understanding, be it African or European, the subject position thus brought into being is predicated on the ability to confront and transform, a definition of identity which—for Breytenbach—is rooted in 'the Africa into which you are born and where you adapt, a world posited on metamorphosis, because we are interchangeable with the land and vegetation and animals and spirits' (1992: Thinking Fire 179).

This groundedness in Africa also finds persistent expression in a relatively new but more and more predominant branch of Breytenbach's work, namely the philosophical essays[12], many of which are written for and in the context of the Gorée Institute's activities. This Institute was set up in the early eighties when a group of influential Afrikaners met with a delegation from the then banned African National Congress in the city of Dakar. Breytenbach was instrumental in negotiating the establishment of a Pan African Institute on nearby Gorée, the small island and last foothold of slaves exported to the new world. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Gorée Institute operates as a think-tank for democracy, culture and development in Africa, and has since its inception been pivotal in forging links

[12] In addition to *End Papers* (1983a), *Hart-Lam* (1991), *The Memory of Birds in Times of Revolution* (1996) and essays written for the catalogues of his art exhibitions there has been a proliferation of recent essays and philosophical papers, some of which were written for public lectures and are yet to be published.

between West and South Africa, (cf. The Time of the Writer festivals and the Natal Technikon's graphic art programme), and also between Zanzibar and the Centre Rimbaud in Djibouti.

Breytenbach's commitment to the mission of the Institute, as well as his participation in numerous workshops there, have lead to a number of essays—some yet to be published—which further reveal how this particularly African sense of self informs his thinking: African nomads, and here he cites as examples (1998b:13) the Tuareg—and also the Afrikaner—know that to survive you have to 'initiate change and unleash potential'. Clearly implicit in this wisdom is that one's survival and therefore one's very being depends on the ability to adapt and change. For the nomad then, identity—by definition—becomes synonymous to transformation; to 'be' is to 'transform'. The flexible spirit this implies is reflected in Breytenbach's own nomadic lifestyle and the physical and intellectual interaction he maintains between various points in Africa and between Africa and Europe. Metaphorically, it appears in the drifter or exile figure in his work, but also in the many images of metamorphosis and inter-changeability. A precarious subject position fraught with ambiguity, this identity-in-transit is meant to be read positively. As there is nothing new under the proverbial sun, creativity, after all, is based on the ability to change one's perspective. It implies lateral thinking and a fresh take on familiar objects or notions which have grown stale over time. By interpreting one's world through writing and painting one transforms it; it is an act similar to that of the creative thinker whose ability to offer a fresh perspective stimulates political change. In the words of Breytenbach, 'it is through moving that you make' (1996a:5).

Paradoxically however, this ideal identity cannot be defined as—by its very nature—it can not be fixed. There is a dialectical relationship between specificity and the common pool, so that there is no single (Touareg or Afrikaner) identity, not even for the nomad. The ethical—and political—implications then are obvious: We are required to 'move'; to enter the metaphoric space Breytenbach refers to as the 'middle world' (1996a:5), where anything becomes possible because imagination, indelibly linked to memory[13], can here function at its full potential. In the present climate of the so called African Renaissance and amidst renewed claims of Africanism, Breytenbach uses the image of the African nomad to caution that the very act of defining an identity (self or other), is more than cultural affirmation. Naming accrues power and it becomes a political act, by naming you identify with, or distance yourself from the other. Because identity is normally predicated on an act of recognition which presupposes exclusion and demarcation, he pleads for the ideal of a 'bastard' identity:

[13] See Breytenbach (1993a:71-90) where the explicit equation of memory and imagination underpins a whole section of poems in the collection.

> The bastard, I think, has a heightened sense of identity, perhaps of the furtiveness thereof: the past is more complex and entangled, the future less certain, identity consists of the wells and the pastures and the stars along the lines of travelling (1998c:14).

Thence the chameleon, an archetypal African image of change and an important presence in Breytenbach's art as well as his writing[14]. Not only does it evoke the nomad as go-between, as hybrid identity which facilitates interaction between seeming opposites, it also evokes an identity which—for Breytenbach—would encapsulate what it means to be African:

> [A]ccommodating and realising the enriching qualities of diversity; situating Africa in and towards the rest of the world— not just the North, but the South as well; evolving, historically and theoretically, a body of African thinking, and valorising that which already exists; assessing the mix apparently so peculiar to the continent of culture (creativity), reflection (philosophical and religious) and public action or intervention (1998c:5).

Beyond this pan-African celebration of our affinities with others elsewhere in Africa, Breytenbach also speaks to his second home which is Europe. We cannot limit ourselves by being bound to national or geographical frontiers. When Africa is enriched and not dispersed by its inherent diversity, it mirrors the identity Breytenbach aspires to through the creative act of writing or painting. As suggested by the image of the nomad or chameleon, the diversity of Africa evokes our potential to change—and by implication—to grow, it highlights the way in which the 'I' can constantly transform itself and creatively engage the 'other'. Like the polyphony of voices in a poem or painting which offer no reassuring sense of closure but a wealth of possible readings, it is a subject position which recalls the right of the individual to seek out different possibilities and to transform. Whilst acknowledging our inability to define the ultimate (social or aesthetic) utopia, it is a form of identity which promotes the 'middle way' (Breytenbach, 1996a:5), namely awareness of the world—and ourselves—as revolutionary centres of renewal and change.

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[14] See Breytenbach (1990a:53) for an example of this image in his pictorial work. In his writing, the striking series of poems which feature 'Kamiljoen' (a phonetic play on Chameleon) comes to mind Breytenbach (1993b:61-69).

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