

Breyten Breytenbach's *Memory of Snow and of Dust*— A Postmodern Story of Identiti(es)

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I

Marcel Proust once remarked that most authors, throughout their creative careers, continue writing or rewriting one and the same basic book.

This is particularly true of the South African poet, painter and novelist Breyten Breytenbach who in 1990 was awarded the CNA prize—perhaps the most prestigious literary prize in South Africa and as such late recognition for an author living in exile for more than twenty years. His prize-winning novel (if it can be called that at all) *Memory of Snow and of Dust*¹ reveals itself even at first sight as being another poetic or narrative reworking of his obsessive preoccupation with exile and imprisonment respectively, both of which he had to undergo, plus the attending problems of identity the exiled or imprisoned subject is necessarily exposed to.

In a *Weekly Mail* review, Fanie Olivier (1989:1) says:

Memory of Snow and of Dust is essentially a work of human existence. The novel reintroduces the themes and literary motives from Breytenbach's other works, examines them, considers and rejects them, and, paradoxically, reaffirms their relevance. In this search for being, calling on one's memory is essential. In the novel memory itself becomes part of the narration, in the same sense that living and dying is part of writing one's life.

Breytenbach quite openly confesses to the essential sameness of his *oeuvre*, to its—in order to put it more fashionably—internal intertextuality. In a poem of his serving as a kind of motto or prefix to *Memory of Snow and of Dust* he writes somewhat programmatically:

The biography
I am repeatedly in the process of
writing is always the same one,

¹ All quotations are from the 1989 Faber and Faber edition.

and it may be described
as a variously sliced-up or torn-apart
book of myself as the essential
apocryphal memory (p. 3).

The book he has thus produced consists of two parts: The first one deals with the goings-on and actions of Mano, a South African coloured (to use the invidious terminology of race) and an actor by training, and Meheret, his Ethiopian girlfriend, a writer and journalist, both living in exile in Paris. Mano, who is a member of a so-called 'movement', gets sent to South Africa on an undercover-mission and, inevitably, is caught by the Secret Police. When it becomes clear that he is to stand trial on a trumped-up murder charge which will result in an almost automatic death-sentence, Meheret starts writing down the events of her time with Mano. This she does partly in an attempt to conjure up images of her lost lover, partly as a kind of tribute to the unborn child whose stirrings she is beginning to feel in her womb and for whom she wants to secure a past by preserving memories of his lost father.

The second part is chiefly made up of Mano's reminiscences and impressions, both 'real' and phantasmagoric, while he is awaiting 'the high jump' in the death row of Pollsmoor Prison.

This brief reconstruction of the plot-outline of the novel is sufficient to convey the impression of the extent to which it is nothing but a thinly disguised fictional reworking of what happened to Breytenbach himself and of what formed the basis for his more overtly autobiographical writings, such as *Mouir*, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, *End Papers* or *Judas Eye*. What the plot-outline has not managed to get across is the fact that the 'story', to use that inadequate term for want of a better one, is not so simple as it might appear from summing it up.

II

Of course Breytenbach is far too sceptical, as has been evinced by his other writings, about the ability of the human memory to supply a precise and reliable remembrance of things past. After having lived in Paris for such a long time, thus consciously or unconsciously absorbing the influence of the French *maîtres-penseurs* of our times, he no longer subscribes to the European *cogito*-tradition culminating in Husserl's concept of '*Erinnerung als Selbsterkenntnis*'.² Following this tradition human beings always remember and present their lives, as Umberto Eco (1965:162) has shown, as a

² Cf. Manfred Sommer (1990:205): 'Selbstfindung ist diese "Erinnerung" aber im doppelten Sinne: ein Finden in sich und ein Finden seiner selbst' (This kind of memory is an act of finding oneself in a dual sense: a finding in oneself and a finding of one's own self [a.t.]).

conventional, unified story from which all accidental and distracting elements have been removed, or as Wolfgang Iser (1976:203) has put it: 'only in our memories do we have the freedom to give shape or meaning to the diverse and discordant complexities of life such as we experience them' (a.t.)³.

Accordingly, *Memory of Snow and of Dust* cites this tradition by constantly referring to the novelistic qualities of autobiography: 'Each life is a novel' (p. 82), it says somewhere, and Mano, before embarking on his memoirs, reassures the reader: 'Life is a story'. So a story you will get', and he goes on to say: 'my report is a story. Which, by definition, must have a beginning, an opening up and enduring to an ending' (p. 216).

If, therefore, 'memory is a faculty of the imagination' (p. 215), as Mano observes, 'if people invent themselves' (p. 25), human beings must have an almost in-built tendency to delete from their past lives everything that does not conform to what later in their lives they have come to conceive of as the essence of themselves.

III

Breytenbach obviously invokes this tradition in order to play it off against more recent insights into the problematic nature of memorising one's life: Since Freud we have come to realise that memory has its own ways of systematically suppressing certain events or facts, thus revealing a subconscious intentionality at work transcending by far everything the conscious mind may be cognisant of⁴. Derrida on the other hand has taken apart the Husserlian concept of human beings gaining access to their true selves through reflecting themselves in the mirror of their own memories. Such a '*présence à soi*' presupposes a complete convergence of the two selves, the present one reflecting upon itself and the former one being reflected. This, however, would only be possible if the self had access to an immediate pre-reflexive knowledge of itself which in turn would enable it to recognise itself in its former image. Since such knowledge is not available—hence the need for reflection—there are no criteria by which to judge the correctness of an act of retroactive identification. Accordingly, the memorising self is subject to a constant redoubling of itself without ever being capable of bridging the gap between its various stages of existence⁵: '*La présence n'est jamais présente*', as Derrida (1972:336) puts it.

Correspondingly, Breytenbach has one of his characters say: 'absence, that

³ 'nur in der Erinnerung herrscht das notwendige Mass an Freiheit, die es gestattet, die ungeordnete Vielfalt des erfahrenen Lebens in die Sinngestalt eines stimmigen Zusammenhangs zu bringen'.

⁴ For a discussion of this point cf. Jürgen Habermas (1968:266ff).

⁵ For an excellent presentation of this intricate problem cf. Manfred Frank (1984:196ff).

was the very presence!' (p. 82) Based on this epistemological premise the reader, of course, does not get the conventional life story promised him by Mano, i.e. a well-made story in the Aristotelian sense with a beginning, a middle and an end that progresses along a fixed number of firmly implanted syntagmatic sign-posts.

On the contrary it is claimed elsewhere: 'One mustn't make it too easy for the reader!' (p. 80), and since the quest for the self is bound to end up in an endless dissemination of that self 'the search for clarity extends the areas of uncertainty and diffuseness' (p. 5), as Meheret states rather paradoxically at the very beginning of her memoirs, which, incidentally, is a clear reference to Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle' that the observer inevitably changes or obfuscates the observed.

'We don't need to be coherent' (p. 286), Mano claims in one of his mad ramblings in prison, and this is precisely the way the present novel is structured. To begin with it does not have any of the textual markers delimiting its beginning or end, the framing effect we have come to expect from more conventional stories. Rather disconcertingly the novel begins with the wilful imposition of a beginning: 'This is where your story starts' (p. 5), and it takes about a dozen pages or so before any of the deictics or pronouns employed are contextually saturated so that the reader may know who is thus addressed. Equally, the text disclaims its own ending and, by implication, its own significance, when Mano concludes his attempt at recollecting his past with the words: 'Please forgive me for forgetting' (p. 308). As a man without a memory he has truly become Anom Niemand, the name he assumed upon re-entering South Africa, and a story about an anonymous nobody is, by definition, no story at all.

But even what little remains of the ending of the story is undercut by its narrative presentation in that two conflicting versions are given: One where Mano gets miraculously released from prison (p. 296), and one where he awaits execution (p. 297). The novel, in its attempt to capture the diffuseness of human life and memory, rather blatantly flaunts its own flouting of anything even vaguely resembling syntagmatic coherence:

I'm not to know if a clear line will ultimately describe itself But there will be repetitions: it is the simplest way I know of to make patterns, and patterns bring about rhythm by which (an image of) life is ensnared (p. 215)

—thus Mano states his Kierkegaardian or Freudian obsession with 'Wiederholung'.

Hence the novel presents itself as a motley arrangement of isolated narrative sequences, some set in Europe, others in Africa, some rendered more or less realistically, others adhering to a form of discourse Borges has termed 'irrealism'. Poems alternate with descriptive passages where aesthetic or political matters are discussed, and the gruesome reality of South African police practice is presented in a

'medieval morality play' (pp. 88ff) showing in very drastic terms the torturing to death of a black female academic.

IV

What all those pieces of discourse, which are syntagmatically incoherent as far as their sequential arrangement is concerned, have in common, however vaguely, is some kind of paradigmatic theme, namely their preoccupation with exile and the ensuing sense of disorientation, with imprisonment, death, the 'hot' violence of Africa (metonymically represented by black *dust*), the 'cool' indifference of Europe (metonymically represented by white *snow*) and, because of all this, the inconclusive search for an essentially schizophrenic identity that is as elusive and fleeting as a substance as snow and dust:

everything is resolved and encompassed by the immobile mobility of scaling your own life—the mountain will be snow and the movement will be dust (p. 286)

—this is the final realization of *Mano*. As Frederic Jameson (1991:25) sees it, such a schizophrenic condition is typically associated with the experience of 'isolated, disconnected material signifiers that fail to link up into a coherent sequence'. There is absolutely no linking of one's past to one's future, and there is no continuity at all between different mental states. This also seems to apply to South Africa at large which is quite literally a grotesque 'no man's land', a graphic term often used by Breytenbach to denote his country's essential inimicality to a fulfilled sense of human identity.

Accordingly this sort of experience is best conveyed and 'iconized'—in the sense of 'form enacting meaning' (Leech & Short 1981:242)—by a novelistic discourse that is open rather than closed, that relies on a circular or spatial rather than temporal arrangement of sequences, and that is chiefly made up of the metaphorical permutations of an interconnected series of problems remaining more or less static throughout the text⁶ rather than presenting the linear and dynamic resolution of any of those problems in the course of a well-made narrative plot.

The novel that had been, as genre, 'hybrid' or 'polysystemic' from its inception because its narrative base always had to carry a good amount of other discursive material, whether of descriptive or persuasive nature, is pushed with the advent of the (post) modern experimental novel to the very limits of its possibilities in that, as George Steiner (1979:342) argues, 'the classic divisions between poetry, drama, prose fiction and philosophic argument are deliberately broken down'. The

⁶ Cf. *Mano*'s/Breytenbach's insistence on 'patterns'.

literary work, conventionally taken to be a closed, finished, reliably representational object thus becomes a *text*, an infinite signifying process in which meanings are constantly in the process of being generated only to be subverted time and again (cf. Barthes 1984:69-77).

Where identity, for the reasons shown above, is never stable, 'the laws of metamorphosis' (p. 250) is the only generalisation that can be arrived at: the chameleon, the mythical *animal semper mutabile*, is the apt symbol for that ever changing quality of human identity that Breytenbach uses throughout the text, and the text itself with its 'disorderly' and at the same time repetitive structure echoes the constant mutability of '*une identité dynamique*' by continually vacillating, in truly metaphorical fashion, between 'sameness' and 'otherness' (cf. Ricoeur 1985:355). The deferral of meaning involved in this incessant sliding of signification along a chain of signifiers is bound forever to thwart (and thus reorientate) our readerly desire and expectations as to the 'true' nature of what is being said, or as Breytenbach has one of his characters say: 'The matrix ... cannot remain unchanging once and for all' (p. 250).

This deconstructivist insight into the decentred nature of structures and the resulting fluidity of meaning ('Nothing is eternal except transformation. Nothing is static except movement Everything is relative', Breytenbach 1986:251, states elsewhere) also informs the writer's concept of language, as is evidenced by the recurring use of the mirror as a symbol for reconstructing images of our own selves via a remembrance of things past⁷: 'We are the mirrors created by the system. The monkeys also' (p. 163), he says. The system referred to is, of course, language⁸, hence our memory mirroring the past is something not belonging to ourselves. Instead of authenticating ourselves we get alienated from reality by constantly having recourse to a symbolic order that is not of our own making and that belongs to the whole language community rather than being our own exclusive possession. A mirror that is more of a filter than a truthful reflector of the past is thus a highly unreliable affair, it is, to use Derrida's graphic image, a mirror without a reflexive coating at the back that transforms or distorts everything reflected by it (cf. Derrida 1972:359).

Therefore to understand oneself through the medium of language is inevitably to misunderstand oneself, which predicament is very succinctly expressed in Lacan's (1966:832) pun on '*me connaître—méconnaître*'. Reality without the mirror does not exist, and our attempts at reaching out for it resemble those of monkeys groping behind a mirror: 'You play the game, are played by it' (p. 25), one of the characters in *Memory* sums up this decentering of the subject as the maker of

⁷ Cf. Reckwitz (1996:165-204) for a more detailed discussion of this point.

⁸ Cf. Jürgen Habermas' (1975:120) dictum: 'was auch immer existiert, wird reflektiert im Spiegel der Sprache'.

himself. Linguistic representation, to use another French pun, invariably entails a *de*-presentation of the object represented (cf. Derrida 1967:344). Thus the act of speaking or writing is located half-way between speaking and being spoken or writing and being written, respectively (cf. Barthes 1984:21-32; Coetzee 1986:11-13).

V

An open, polysystemic, anti-teleological, deconstructivist novel like the one discussed here cannot help being dialogical rather than monological, to use Michail Bakhtin's terms (1979:251ff), and *Memory* fulfils this condition by being a veritable echo-chamber of voices interfering with one another.

A classic realist text may be defined as one where there is a hierarchy among the discourses which compose the text and this hierarchy is defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth

—thus Colin MacCabe (1989:134-146) defines the monological and repressive tendencies of the conventional linear story. Where, however, notions of reality are in the constant process of being exploded because the subject constructing its own past is forever deflected from its course by either a subconscious *alter ego* or the unattainability of a true sense of selfhood or the uncontrollable arbitrariness of language there is bound to occur a constant challenging of any kind of discourse assuming dominance in the name of an empirical rendering of what is supposed 'to be there'.

This challenge to a semiotics of representation is most impressively brought about, quite apart from the discursive multifariousness mentioned above, by constant 'frame breaks' (Waugh 1984:18ff), 'short circuits' (Lodge 1979:239ff) or 'metalepses' (Genette 1973:243ff), to use the terms currently most in use in order to describe the phenomenon of diegetic levels normally kept separate getting conflated. Thus the novel reveals itself as a Chinese box-like affair where the voices of the real, implied and explicit authors plus those of the various characters are intercalated to create stories within stories within stories forming an almost endless regress of narrative voices whose recursive embeddings it is difficult to keep track of.

A few instances may suffice to show the essential duplicity⁹ or multiplicity of meanings resulting from this technique. Mano, the character plus explicit author of his own memoirs comes from a small town in the Boland region of the Cape, just like Breytenbach, the real plus implicit author of *Memory*, and just like Breyten he lives

⁹ Cf. Julia Kristeva's (1969:82-112) definition of 'le double'.

in his Parisian exile with a woman regarded as non-white (according to South African racial terminology), and again like Breyten he returns to South Africa on an undercover mission to get arrested on a trumped-up charge. The two levels get further entwined, beyond the perhaps not so unusual similarities between an author and one of his central characters, in that Mano, the actor, is to play the part of Breyten, the author (who frequently intrudes into both the narration and the story under the alias of Barnum), in a film on Breytenbach. One of Mano's reasons for returning to South Africa is, so to speak, to retrace Breytenbach's steps with a view to studying the antecedents of the film's hero. It is one of the many ironic duplicities of the story that he is forced to do so quite literally and to the bitter end—a fate Breytenbach, incidentally, was spared.

In one of his intrusions into the story itself Breytenbach alias Barnum makes clear his role as creator of his fictional world. Thus he informs Mano: '... I have all the attributes of God, but none of his responsibilities. I can create people out of paper and ink ...', and he goes on to say: 'The magic of the writer is that he can slip into the skin of his making' (pp. 62f).

In the same discussion he enlightens Mano as to what his actions in the further course of the story are to be:

I shall send you, Mano, back on a supposedly political mission to South Africa, commissioned by some all-powerful organization. Down there, I'm afraid, I shall have you caught, betrayed perhaps inadvertently by a close comrade. You will be put in prison (p. 63).

The conflation of both levels is perfect when Barnum ponders Mano's fate: 'My past may be his future' (p. 87).

Elsewhere he talks with Meheret on the art of writing, especially the writing of the memoirs of her life with Mano. It frequently introduces two choric figures, Ka'afir and Polichinelle, who freely comment on the story's dynamics. These two later reappear again as characters, just like Barnum who, in his capacity as Chief Judge Breytenbach, presides over the court that sentences Mano to death. Towards the end Mano remonstrates with Barnum over his fate: 'Why did you do this to me? Why me? Why did you want me to walk the rope to get to this stage?' (p. 292). It is certainly not for nothing that the text elsewhere (p. 262) contains a reference to Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, another work of fiction where characters become readers or authors of the fiction they are in, and vice versa.

A different metafictional device employed is the coincidence of Meheret's story, as it is unfolded, and her on-going preparations for, or hesitations about, writing the selfsame story, both of which processes run parallel with the gestation of the child she has conceived from Mano. Hence her book bears the title of *Utéropia*—

it is nourished by the 'placenta of words' (p. 87) and it is therefore, in a metaphorical sense, also a child of hers, which is as clear an instance of a 'self-begetting novel'¹⁰ as one could wish to come across: 'Nine months full. You are not a book. And yet you are nearly written' (p. 209)—with these words Meheret concludes her story, and the double meaning of her remark resides in the fact that it is doubtful whether she is thus addressing her child or her book. *Memory*, in being the story of coming into its own existence, really resembles a snake swallowing its own tail.

'None can tell teller from the told'—this quotation from John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* most suitably conveys to what an extent narrative voices and levels are scrambled together in such a way as to raise doubts about whether there is any tale at all to be told. By the same token the novel reveals itself as something totally artificial, something made that does not invite the reader to mistake it for reality, quite the contrary: The intrusive author rather unashamedly postures as the 'puppet master' (p. 265) or circus director (hence the name of Barnum) of his narrative universe and its creatures, both of which he constructs only to dismantle them over and over again. All of this amounts to the conscious display of a non-representational imagination completely unbounded by 'the way things are', thereby making us realize 'the fictional aspect of our own existence' (Barth 1977:80) as it is presented to us by our own slightly more conventional life stories in which we also participate as characters and authors alike. Identity, or what remains of it, is obviously only possible, as Norman Holland sees it, in terms of a plural or relational 'divided me' (Holland 1983:303) maintaining a constant dialogue with itself about what is going on in its life and reinterpreting itself anew whenever the necessity arises.

VI

What then, to ask the final question, is the meaning of a postmodern text like the present one in the South African context? Fanie Olivier (1989:8) provides one possible answer:

if the reader was hoping to find slogans and improbable easy answers, and another session of Boer-bashing, *Memory of Snow and of Dust* will come as a big disappointment.

Obviously an introverted, self-exploring novel like *Memory* does not fulfil, at least not at first sight, the demands made on poetry at the 1987 *Culture in Another South Africa* conference in Amsterdam which urged 'the continuing development of poetry as a mobilizing force in our people's struggle against apartheid, exploitation, oppression and repression'¹¹. Breytenbach (1990:192f) himself has repeatedly

¹⁰ Cf. S. Kellman (1976:1245) for a definition of this term.

¹¹ Cf. Malvern van Wyk Smith (1990:126-131) for a brief discussion of this point.

warned against white South African writers wholeheartedly embracing the latest intellectual fads imported from Europe—in this case deconstructivism and postmodernism. There seems to be a contradiction here: On the one hand he quite obviously employs—as has been shown—most of the ideas and concepts propounded by the French postmodernist thinkers, and on the other hand he deplores the ensuing lack of contact with socio-political reality.

At this point it seems appropriate to call to mind Paul Ricoeur's insight that no novel, be it ever so removed from reality, can ever remain a totally self-contained aesthetic construct. On the contrary, every novel somehow refers to reality because it is a processing of that reality. As such it is a deviation from the world as we know it, but it also invites us to look back at the world in the light of the fictional universe as a kind of metaphor of reality, and hopefully a fresh and unexpected one (cf. Ricoeur 1975:173ff), or in Robert Scholes' (1974:27f) words: 'the literary work ... refers to the "real" world by interposing an "imaginary" world between its audience and reality'.

This is particularly true of a postmodern, metafictional novel like the present one. Even though it does not engage with reality as such because it is mainly concerned with discussing and exposing its own literary or linguistic conventions, it refers to reality, even though at one remove, or as Patricia Waugh (1984:11) puts it:

Metafiction converts what it sees as the negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of potentially constructive social criticism. It suggests, in fact, that there may be as much to be learnt from setting the mirror of art up to its own linguistic or representational structures as from directly setting it up to a hypothetical 'human nature' that somehow exists outside historical systems of articulation.

Since, as has been shown, reality is never accessible as such because of the conventions of cognition imposed by the powerful social institution of language, it is an eminently social function of literature to show up, problematize and undermine the semantic and syntactic procedures involved in processing material reality. What is at stake here is not *mimesis* but *semiosis*, not a passive rendering but an active production and hence transformation of the world. This is precisely what Breytenbach (1990:193) has in mind when he states:

I tried writing subversively. What I could and did try and do was on the one hand to undermine the petrified positions, the cultural stratagems and institutions, the retarded conceptions of the dominant Afrikaans culture, and on the other hand to sharpen the knowledge of the implications of the South African régime.

Reality is quite obviously not the 'real' real. In *Memory* he repeatedly castigates European society as being besotted by a mass-communication that ends up in total disinformation:

We have entered the age of instant amnesia. No more information, only staged propaganda and commentary from postmodernist city rats (p. 86).

This Baudrillardian analysis of a grotesquely alienated reality applies even more to the South Africa of the late eighties, where the entire political and legal system plus the police and prison authorities are engaged in playing the 'reality game' (Breytenbach 1984:199) of a just and democratic society where due process of law is the rule everyone abides by and where individuals with intact identities can lead fulfilled lives, while this is blatantly not so.

Against this fictitious reality that is typically embodied in the discourse of the classic realist novel, deconstructive art sets itself up as anti-fiction (cf. Marquard 1973:35-54), as an instrument of unmasking it as the ideological sham it is, or as Breytenbach (1986:151f) puts it:

Language is a blindness. Form is a limitation, a construction of our basic condition of laziness. It is tradition made concrete The tongue looks for the familiar, for the taste of wood. Normally we don't *see*; we recognize. Seeing should be rupture. The eye, to survive intact, must break.

If 'ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality', as Paul de Man (1988:365-371) formulates it, then the writer must break with language and established literary forms. Even though he cannot entirely get away from the constraints imposed by language he can at least twist the iron bars of its prison in order to gain a certain degree of freedom to turn what is normally a sociolect into his own ideolectic version of the world, thus asserting his individuality against all the intertexts he is compelled to live with by imaginatively creating his own 'textual and intra-textual and infra-textual contexts' (Breytenbach 1986:185) where new configurations triumph over outworn meanings.

Ampie Coetzee (1990:44) has summed up Breyten Breytenbach's anti-ideological meta-approach to both literature and reality as follows:

hy [Breytenbach] het nie veel oor politieke sake [geskryf] nie; meestal bespiegeland oor die wyse van produksie van 'n teks, en oor die vraag of skryf enige funksie het binne 'n onderdrukkende stelsel.

This eminently postmodernist as well as deconstructivist perspective is the specific contribution to Breytenbach, who designates himself as 'an off-white

Afrikaans-speaking South African living temporarily abroad' (1990:195), with his famous 'n *Blik van buite* (*A View from Outside*) (Breytenbach 1980:151ff.) is capable of making to South African literature. If human identity is predominantly dialogical in that one's own conception of oneself is only possible against the background of another's consciousness of oneself (Jauss 1984:681), then Breyten Breytenbach's achievement as a mediator steeped in the knowledge of two cultures lies in having brought about that mutually enriching dialogue between South Africa and Europe by expressing the schizophrenia of postmodern South Africa in European deconstructivist terms—or perhaps vice versa, if we presume that the old distinction between centre and periphery no longer holds (cf. Hutcheon 1988:57ff).

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