

## 5.5. Exile

Since the publication of Breytenbach's first volume, his poetry can be typified as a portrayal of decay. The prose work *Om Te Vlieg* also figures forth a world of decay. In Zen Buddhism, things are dependent on the aspect of decay: decay in the sense of diverting-from-the-ordinary. The poetry, *Kouevuur*, centres on themes of decay and exile. Decay is not just on a physical, but also on a metaphysical level. As such, it can be linked to the theme of exile. Gangrene sets in, because there is no blood flow. The spirit of the exiled one rots, because there is no flow of blood between him and his country of birth. Exile and its resulting spiritual decay are the main themes in *Kouevuur*. To travel is to engage in spatial decay. The continual movement of the journey can be linked with the Zen aspect of change and the watery basis of consciousness (Vorster 1973).

Breytenbach has continually written poems about his longing for his country of birth, while in exile. The following most moving poem, *Die Hand Vol Vere*, from *Kouevuur* (1969) was written for his parents:

### **The Hand Full of Feathers**

**mommie**

**I've been thinking  
if I ever come home one day  
it will be without warning towards daybreak  
with years of hoarded treasure  
on the backs of iron cows**

**there's still a blueness on the world  
hush – softly I open the back-yard gate  
old Wagter growls**

but then his tail stirs in memory  
Fritz Kreisler will play sweetly on his violin  
ma knows  
a few Viennese waltzes of course  
and the startled windows start listening  
people whom I don't know at all  
or as yet from far  
lean out in nightrobes full of smiles and elbows  
people on whose laps I peed when small  
inside ma's heart is standing still  
(and where are the spectacles ?)  
pa awakes confusedly  
but mommie is already outside  
in dressing gown and red cheeks

and I'm standing there large as life  
on the lawn next to the small cement pond  
where the new outhouses have been added on  
somewhat worn by the long journey  
wearing a top hat  
a smart suit  
carnation in the jacket  
new Italian shoes for the occasion  
my hands full of presents  
a song for my ma a bit of pride for my own pa  
but mommie knows it's me all the same  
and behind me my caravan  
as befits an overseas traveller  
my wife and children dressed up in bow-ties  
each with three Boland words in their mouths  
my musicians  
the rifle bearers  
friends comrades

political advisors  
and road-managers  
a debtor or two

just this side of the vineyard there grows a tame rose  
goodness but the air is crisp  
there comes pa too what's up  
just like that on an empty stomach  
the mountains have turned grey  
the oak trees have thickened  
but never mind  
mommie  
I've been thinking I'll be there anyway  
like a coloured choir on Christmas morning  
mommie  
I've been thinking how we'll cry then  
and drink tea

it seems blind Wagter couldn't wait  
he's dead, apparently  
perhaps Fritz Kreisler won't take to such a long trip ...  
but if he can't come  
I'll hire Paganini ...  
sleep soundly, one ear cocked:  
unlike old Might-have-Been  
wherever I plant a little feather  
a squawking chicken sprouts up!

Exile or a “hiding-place”, as Breytenbach states in a letter to his friend, Ampie Coetzee, is not a movement in time, but a return to a form of origin of the self, which one only appreciates when it is experienced as irretrievably lost. When Breytenbach ponders on exile, he involuntarily thinks of the relativity of time and space. He uses the example of the Famadihana ceremony in Madagascar, where the remains of the deceased are brought up once a year for

a festive family meal and a waltz or the dancing of the bones! He also painted a beautiful work to commemorate this feast celebration, which he names *Moonlight Arab* (C-19). Sienaert (2001:80) writes of another instance where the remains of the dead are brought up – the annual festival in Ethiopia to honour the dead:

**This sinisterly beautiful work 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.**

Exile altered his perception of time and space. Time, he learned “can be stilled, warped, coloured, preserved, killed, suddenly speeded up, and sometimes it can be immaterial”. Space, he found out, “can be provisional or hostile or vibrant and textured and tactile” (Renders 1988:67).

According to Laumonier (1997:87-94) exiled memory is the slow art of forgetting and the colour of fire. Exile is as old as a desert map. In his reflections on exile, Breytenbach (1996a:42) in the essay, *The Long March*, (1990) wrote the following:

**In the beginning there is the hearth, the ancestral fire, and you are a native of the flames. You belong there and therefore it belongs to you. Comes exile, the break, the destitution, the initiation the maiming which – I think – gives access to a deeper sight, provides a path into consciousness through the mimicry of thinking you as part of your environment. Now you can never again entirely relax the belly muscles. You learn, if you’re lucky, the chameleon art of adaptation, and how to modulate your laughter. You learn to use your lips properly. Henceforth you are at home nowhere and by that token everywhere. You learn to live with the flies, and how to slide from death into a dream. You learn about creation – because you must compensate for not fitting in naturally with the environment – and thus transformation and metamorphosis, although you also come to realise that everything is since all time and creation may only be a reordering of existent images.**

He continues by saying that the exiled person is probably marked by a loss that he or she does not want to let go of, especially when this is occasioned by a political situation. One can replace the word “exile” by “refugee, misfit, stranger, renegade, drifter, squatter, foreigner, clandestine, heretic, stranger”. All these descriptions imply non-fixity regarding the Self.

Exile has provided Breytenbach with panoply of lessons. It has shown him, “like a flasher”, the mechanism of survival. He says: “It made my mother tongue into a homeland”. Exile gave him motifs for his work “silence, death, transformation, shadows, ink, games, the void, dreams, immobility, interchangeability, essence, breaks...” (Breytenbach 1996a:42).

One could become a master of dreams, since you had to recreate loss and articulate the void. He understands that to reflect on the act of writing is to follow the courses of consciousness and not be discoursing on the nature of the real. For him it is not possible to reconstruct the real, as the very process of memory becomes reality. Again in *The Long March* (1990) Breytenbach (1996a:39) writes about the conditions of exile. He says:

**Exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure. ... Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentred, and contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew....**

**Exile has stimulated my obsession with *métissage*, transformation, and metamorphosis.**

**Exile has brought it home to me that I’m African. If I live in Europe most of the time, it is not as a participant but as an observer, and underground activist for Africa. My pale skin and my Western garb make it possible for me to ‘pass for white’. But my heart beats with the secret rhythms of that continent which seems to have sunk below the perception horizon of the North ... the dip and veer of swallows at nightfall over the Niger river, the depth of the seeing without judging in an old man’s eye, the fly-embroidered smile of a child, the musky woman-smell of the locquout flower. ...**

In the paper delivered at the Press Club, Cape Town (1990), Breytenbach (1991a) says that exile liberates one from the illusion of even being able to become the other, or something else, or to be integrated (adaptation is not the same as integration). The removal of the reasons for exile destroys the mummified vision of the self and the self becomes the dead foetus one carried in oneself all these years. Exile perpetuates the illusion of motion.

Edward Said (1935-), whom Breytenbach mentions in *Notes from The Middleworld* (1996e) and who is noted with Breytenbach in Tucker's dictionary of literary exiles, was born in Jerusalem, Palestine, then under rule of the British Mandate and now lives in New York. He sees Palestinians not as "disembodied presence of Sorrow of Homelessness", but as finding their truest reality in the way they cross from one place to another. They are migrants and perhaps hybrids. Being Palestinian often entails mastery without domination, pleasure without injury to others. Palestine Palestinians, he claims, live in a protracted not-yet.

Said (1993:161) views exile as a condition of permanent duality; we are only in a country, never exclusively of it. Life as an exile is less seasonal or settled than at home. One's life, hopes and aspirations become bound to the inherent duality of being an exile. An exile must make connections and linkages with the multidimensional world he or she inhabits.

If true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has that loss transformed so easily into potent, even enriching, motifs of modern culture? One reason is that we have become accustomed to thinking of the modern period itself as spiritually orphaned and alienated. This is supposedly the age of anxiety and of the lonely crowd. Nietzsche taught us to feel uncomfortable with tradition, and Freud to regard domestic intimacy as the polite face painted on patricidal and incestuous rage. According to Said, the critic, George Steiner, once proposed that a whole genre of twentieth-century Western literature, a literature by and about exiles, among them Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), and Pound,

reflects on “the age of a refugee”. Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentred, and contrapuntal; no sooner one gets accustomed to it, when its unsettling force erupts anew. Exile is not a movement in time, but a return to a form of the one and only treasure, when it is irretrievably lost. Exile, unlike nationalism, is fundamentally a discontinued state of being (Hovesejian 1992:5). Salman Rushdie (1947- ) in his book, *Imaginary Homelands* (1991:10), writes:

**We will create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands and ideas for the mind. More defacement and face making, more disfiguration than identity formation.**

Said (1986:44-64) is interested in how ideas and theories are transformed when they cross borders. He asks the question: How can one situate one self on the border? What kind of space characterises it? Effectively, in practice, borders are neither inside nor outside the territory. They are not really spaces at all: as the sites of difference between interior and exterior, they are points of infinite regression.

A poetic equivalent for the exile is the figure of crossing over. The fact of migration is extraordinarily impressive: that movement from the precision and concreteness of one form of life transmuted or imported into the other. Then you get to the crossing over, and the whole problematic of exile enters it. People simply do not belong in any culture and lead to that great modern, or, if you like, postmodern fact of standing outside cultural boundaries.

### **5.5.1. The border intellectual – the Afrikaner Dante**

Breytenbach’s Afrikaner “self”-identity was deeply tied up in an almost idolatrous glorification and exaltation of the Afrikaans language itself, as distinct from both English and

the surrounding African tongues. According to Brink, Breytenbach is obviously the greatest poet of his generation, taking the Afrikaans language to places it had never been, breaking it down, breaking it open, opening it out. Ryk Hatting, a writer of the next generation, characterised Breytenbach as the Afrikaner Dante. Dante did the same thing: as a political exile he undermined the home regime by hijacking its vernacular, its very language (Weschler 1998:137-193).

As Afrikaner intellectual, Breytenbach has shared the platform with men like Bram Fisher and Beyers Naude. Early in his political involvement (before his incarceration), Breytenbach was convinced that the Afrikaner intellectual had an important role to play in the black liberation movement. In a letter written to Brink (1976:5) in 1963, he asked why the Afrikaner-intellectual was not taking on more militant or political stances. In the period after incarceration, Breytenbach again took up the task of a social critic and dissident intellectual. In an introduction to *End Papers* (1986:32) he writes:

**I must keep hold of Adriane's thin inky thread, even with the tongue-taste of defeat in the mouth, because every little effort may just contribute towards destroying the old labyrinth. I must hang there, hoping to help set off some alarms somewhere, and at least to add to the quality of the selection, to keep some options open by keeping some cells alive.**

By the middle of the eighties, Breytenbach (1986:99), in the essay, *The Writer and Responsibility* (1983) writes the following about the place of the writer in his society:

**He is a questioner and the implacable critic of the mores and attitudes and myths of his society, but he is also the exponent of the aspirations of his people. ... From these contradictory responsibilities come the dichotomies of the writer's existence giving rise to so much tension and ambiguity.**



Breytenbach (1986:184-194) in the essay, *On the ethics of resistance as a writer in a totalitarian state* (1985) writes that to be a witness, to be a revolutionary or a subversive or a heretic or a sceptic, to be a spokesperson, or a dreamer, or an interpreter: any or several of these roles may be necessary for the writer who is essential at a given moment, marginal or optional at another, depending of course on the history and the condition of the society he is part of. Always, however, the writer is a communicator. He always interacts with society.

The essence of an artwork for Breytenbach (including scepticism, irony, and doubt and questioning) is of resistance and struggle; revolt against clichés and lies of the community. If there were a moralising aspect in art, it would be in the formulation and the expression of the ethics and the aesthetics of resistance. In *Judas Eye* (1988:123-134), in the endnote, *Selfportrait/deathwatch. A note on autobiography*, Breytenbach writes:

**Aesthetics flow into ethics, which leads to action. An act of beauty is a political statement.**

This is living on the border and being the border intellectual. How can one situate oneself on the border? What kind of space characterises it? Borders are neither inside nor outside territory, but simply designate the difference between the two. They are not really spaces at all: as the sites of difference between interior and exterior, they are points of infinite regression. Thus, intellectuals on this site are not, so to speak, “sitting” on the border; rather they are forced to constitute themselves *as* the border, to coalesce around it as a point of infinite regression (Jouay Mohamed 1994:98).

Breytenbach (1986:128) is not only a dissident intellectual in South Africa. He is a border intellectual in Paris, New York, Amsterdam, Berlin, Essen, Stockholm, Mexico City and Africa. Of this continent he writes:

**Africa, the continent where the reality of metamorphosis is paramount, where you have the chance of seeing the simplest object transformed into a votive symbol or a still point for magic; where there is a humbleness traversed by flashes of extravagant glory like flowers suddenly bursting upon an arid landscape, and the innate knack of life on the zero horizon of survival.**

As border intellectual a new but more and more predominant branch of Breytenbach's work, concerns the philosophical essay, many of which are written for and in the context of the activities of the Gorée Institute. According to Sienaert (2001:82) "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 as 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 between West and South Africa, and between Zanzibar and the Centre Rimbaud in Djibouti".

## **5.6. The nomadic novel: *A Season in Paradise* and *Return to Paradise*. A dialogic approach**

**Multiculturalism is not the difference between cultures. But the difference within the same culture - within every self** Think T. Mink-ha –Vietnamese-born, French-educated, Californian filmmaker (Said 1986:44)

The self-conscious and self-reflective work of Breytenbach's style of "New Writing"(1995:339), with the central characteristic creative nonfiction, where the teller testifies of firsthand experience, where there is a longing for the ghost of a moral centre (based on non-hegemonic reading) and where lateral vision operates, which sees God as "Die Gat" (The Hole) and Utopos as Continual Movement, is typified by nomadic thought.

It can also be defined in terms of decentring, collage and deterritorialization. The Nomad's itinerary is one, which knows neither a beginning nor end. All this implies a new conception of identity, namely one, which is displaced, plural, heterogeneous, unstable and reconciled to the other, metaphor for a travelling identity, sliding through boundaries and roaming the world freely. Thus the self in its endless manifestation becomes open to the other, easily reconciled to strangers. This can happen when the self becomes a stranger to itself. An appeal must be made to the poetic idea of nomads, for visualising a never-ending motion in space that is defining some elusive sense of identity in the midst of its very centre. It is this nomadic, floating, even anarchic, senses that we should understand the multiple acts of renaming, a rebirth, becoming the animal, becoming a tree that populates the world of Breytenbach's paintings.

*A Season in Paradise* and *Return to Paradise* are autobiographical travelogues in which Breytenbach records the places he visited and the events and the people he encountered in his 1973 and 1991-visit to South Africa. His self-conception and self-presentation, as a nomad traversing different continents physically and linguistically, is played out in the autobiographical discourse of each text. He invents himself as the text, writing about his relation to its locale. The Afrikaans people and a dying culture to which he is still deeply attached gave him his poetic voice and his became an African experience. "To be an African is not a choice, but a condition" (Breytenbach in Rizkalla 1994: 141-143).

Breytenbach's journey, however, becomes a search for the other, so that he can position himself in terms of what has been left out. He cannot relate to South Africa and its history as it stands, so he replaced his South African mask within a map that notices the other. In doing so, he translates and integrates the other back into South Africa. The autobiographical act of writing a fictionalised travelogue of a journey through South Africa was a way for Breytenbach to confront his South African Self. The autobiographical "I" in the text, is divided into a projection of self (the mask or image), which undergoes the influence of the community (Squire 1996:8-12).

### 5.6.1. Notes on A Season in Paradise

“Post-structuralism has opened our eyes to the strange non-presence of all seemingly positive terms and to the concept of identity. The travelogue, *A Season in Paradise*, serves as an allegory. As Derrida (1988:84) says: “it constantly says something other than what it actually does say”. This work is a bold re-assemblage of an irremediably shattered, highly complex reality a linguistic experiment for arriving at new and startling visions of the world. In truly artistic fashion, the text removes itself from the ordinary circuit of communication because the language game it takes part in is clearly not the information-giving one. The self-exploration and literary stylisation of Breytenbach’s ego is deliberately artistic and self-reflective to the extent that the text can justifiably rank as an autobiographical novel. The novel goes against the grain of our habitualized linguistic articulation of reality so that it fulfils the dual purpose of being both referential inscription and imaginative invention of a world.

A childhood reminiscence bearing the bizarre title, *Scenes from a first death in the houses of the morning*, describes his various deaths in the following manner: in a car accident he is catapulted out of the still-moving vehicle into a field, where he gets in the way of a plough drawn by a team of donkeys. The following (an early dream of shamanism) happens:

**First [the donkeys] trample me and the ploughshares sliced me up all over the place on my body, but particularly through my neck, so that my head is left lying there loose to one side thus my blood soaked little body was decapitated lifelessly.**

This grotesquely bizarre childhood reminiscence can also be explained semiotically, whereby it becomes an indexical sign pointing like a signpost to a fragmented, deeply disturbed memory of the “I” speaking. Such mental state, it seems, is typical of the émigré who, along with his language, is also deprived of his past. In keeping with this, Breytenbach writes of “the castration which exile is”, and because of this he regards himself as “the disintegrating seer”

equipped with “a broken vision”.

Breytenbach’s schizophrenic identification with, and dissociation from South Africa finally reaches its climax in a visit to what used to be his parents’ farm. The “I”, completely losing itself in its memories of days long past, evoke intact images of childhood from a variety of aspects. The remembrance of things past occasionally becomes so vivid as to bridge the gap, fusing the now and the then in one precious moment of wholeness at which point the two temporal dimensions coalesce:

**I hear the beating of my heart, and then I listen carefully, for beyond those beats of a heart attached beat by beat to the heart of long ago, lie orchards, people, worlds, I. Then all that still exists.**

At such moments Breytenbach experiences a deep feeling of affinity with “Afrikanerdom”. On the socio-political side, he is confronted with the darker side of South Africa that, he feels, is “screaming hell”. On a visit to Robert Sobukwe, a leading figure of the banned Pan-African Congress, he gets into conflict with the powers of the law. Though he is only briefly detained for interrogation and eventually let off with a caution by officers of the Bureau of State Security, the “dark angels” guarding South Africa’s hellish paradise, he is seriously frightened. The sudden realisation that the security police are recklessly omnipotent, which BOSS really does constitute the effective rulers of the South African police state and that a mere executive branches, and the legislative and the judiciary rolled into one. This caused Breytenbach to feel so utterly helpless and alienated from himself that he quite literally lost his sense of identity. He turned into a truncated, Kafkaesque abbreviation of himself, namely Breytenbach, who talks of himself in the third person:

**Well, Breytenbach was quaking in his boots. In spite of his big mouth, he had but little experience at this kind of game. Had the angels decided to hack their victim to bits right then and there – who would have been the wiser? For there is no law to curb the angels.**

“Identity: because of the problematic nature of Afrikanerdom, personal and collective, can never be a pre expressive or preexistent entity that is just “there”, but it must continually be made anew in acts of literary creation where the author wrests a precarious, even fluid sense of himself. That the literary projections of self should be neither coherent nor unequivocal is not surprising, in view of an ego, which conceives of itself as an “I-conoclast”. If the ego, in its autobiographical self-assessment, were to stick to one coherent level of discourse, it would, against its own intention, get ensnared in a fixed identity because of the simple pragmatic rule that an identifiable speech act requires an equally identifiable subject of utterance conforming to certain discursive rules. An ego, however, that can define itself only in the measure of its distance from its Afrikaner-identity is forced to work against such a definite absorption into the social institution of language (which, of course, it cannot quite escape) by seeking refuge in the maze-like complexity of a text where it can assume most discursive roles without reaching some final anchoring point. The ego’s consciousness, through being made to shift from one subject position to another, such as that of the poet, the narrator, the social analyst, the seer, the prodigal son, the political activist, the Afrikaner patriot, to name but a few, becomes a highly complex and elusive affair” (Rechwitz1993b: 1-23).

### 5.6.2. Notes on Return to Paradise

In this travelogue, which echoes Fanon’s notion of “white superiority versus black inferiority”, the aphoria of his fellow South Africans has been expressed in very strong terms by Breytenbach (1986:60). He writes that the protection of one’s purity implies the straining of one’s surroundings through a simplifying eye. By defacing others, we deface ourselves, which leads to a loss of white identity. A central chapter of the text contains his now famous address, *A View from Outside*, given at the University of Cape Town. This shows him to be one of the first white South African writers to have realised how fatal the repercussions of this faulty perception of the other will be for the whites themselves.

The problems of South African reality rooted in the *Apartheid* ideology of a mythical superiority by the whites, in the sense of a Barthean “ultra-signification” (Barthes 1957:90), are dealt with only implicitly. This means that the deformity of human identity we are confronted within the text dealt with here refers, almost, to the absurdities of this situation in South Africa, where the formation of a viable white identity is rendered almost impossible, because the identity of the other has been systematically negated right from the start.

The necessity of discarding the white monologue in South Africa in favour of an open or dialogical relationship with all other racial groups thus finds its aesthetic equivalent in a type of novel that is truly dialogical, to use Bakhtin’s terminology. Only through multiplying the numbers of questions and answers such unabashedly polymorphous novels can generate diction (a manner of uttering) upon the reader. A particular aesthetic attitude is then both the identification with, and distance from the fictional universe. Its characters coexist, side by side. It is this dual “set” that gives the readers’ egos the opportunity ‘to realise, through the reading process, the otherness of the alien one, by that experiencing in turn the own ego as enriched’(Robert 1984:75).

In the monologic novel, where the ego is capable of identifying with what is already known and where no vistas of the unknown or unknowable are opened, this opportunity simply does not exist because the reader remains within the safe confines of his own “normal” identity and the ideology supporting it.

In the polymorphous novel there are increasingly felt fluidity, and temporality of experience that results in an open future and the experience of historical existence as non-synchronous or discontinuous the multitude of different perspectives this causes. This is where memory is set into motion and this obliterates the fixed conception of history. Finally with the realisation of living in a state of transition it becomes more difficult to reconcile the traditions handed down with the innovations that are becoming necessary (Rechwitz1993b: 1-23).

## 5.7. Other spaces

**Who are you? Even when you know the answer, it is not an easy question.**

(Leon Wieseltier. *Against Identity* in Said 1984:161)

According to Laumonier (1997:20), the nomad in his search for a satisfactory place finds it in a very specific space, namely the “in-between-space”. This in-between-space will be between two worlds. It is a fact that nomadism is a “matter of the border”. They expelled Ovid for instance to the frontier between the Empire and the Barbarians. Nomadism will thus be the thoroughfare of the in-between, in the sense of “between two”.

Handke (Laumonier 1997:21) writes about the *Images of Re-taking*. In the *Chinese of Suffering*, Andreas Loser (Laumonier 1997:22) defines himself as the “seeker of a threshold”. He uses his free time to clean the thresholds of antique villas during which he considers the role of these places of a thoroughfare, which cannot be defined in any another way than in relation to the centre. On the threshold, experience is different. If you feel the pain of thresholds, it is not because you are a tourist. The experience of pain is a necessary thoroughfare to the Place.

The stroller, from Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) to Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) past Louis Aragon (1897-1982) and Leon-Paul Fargue (1976-1947), encompasses the journey in the nearby, known and ordinary worlds, a precise scouting of the ordinary banality of life. It is only when the wandering nomad is freed from communal walking that he or she can experience the real world. It is probably at the end of the nineteenth century’s strolling (*flanering*) that modern walking (nomadism), started. This is a Eurocentric condition. Breytenbach’s nomadism is not an anthropological enterprise (except in drama). Nevertheless, the other traditions are there, waiting in the wings.



The Romantic wanderer traversed through a stormy landscape to recover his own inner space. The main motif relating to the postmodern nomad (wanderer) however brings us to the notion of the outside. In this “idea world of the outside”, one has to distinguish between the subject and the “world place for the self”, probably Breytenbach’s land of MOR, which in itself is a border. The self is usually divided into two, the inside and the outside, but the nomad is not at home in either one of these spaces. Beckett (Laumonier 1997:23) testifies to this painful situation. In *The Unmentionable*, he describes the outside and an inside, and the self in the middle. All modern wandering or nomadism, from Baudelaire to Handke, rests on this notion of the outside and the subject and the self, which has become the in-between-space (Laumonier 1997:20-5).

There are many paintings in which Breytenbach conveys this concept of inside and outside. This is a transgression of traditional barriers between inside and outside. There is *The Albino (C-20)*, *Painting the eye (C-24)*, *Autoportrait (C-22)* and *Hommage devant la fenêtre (C-23)*. In these works all barriers between private and public, human and animal, female and male (compare the androgynous code in *L’oiseau tombe*), painting and writing, freedom and bondage, have been removed. The removal of barriers is also a political statement. It works subversively, because of the infiltration into the viewer’s consciousness and the resultant shifting of his or her views and concepts. In this way, a petrification of thought is held at bay. In *Judas Eye* (1988), Breytenbach writes “there is a refusal to the bringing of some new orthodoxy, some school of cultural terrorist and atrophy, another power monopoly”. This is the embodiment of anarchy.

Derrida (1995:89) writes about the *khôra*, a space that cannot be pinned down. It becomes a space for new discourses. *Khôra* is not a name. It becomes the placeholder of a space. It is not a non-place, but rather a slipping space. He writes about it in the following way:

**What is this place? It is nameable? And wouldn’t it have some impossible relation**

**to the possibility of naming? Is there something to think there, as I have just so hastily said, and to think according to necessity?**

Instead of leaving the space empty, as Derrida and Laumonier do, Breytenbach embodies a space he calls the Middleworld. The conceptualisation of this notion probably began in the early nineties, when Breytenbach and Rushdie – who was at that stage under Moslem “fatwa” instigated by the Ajatola Ghumeni for his blasphemous writing regarding Mohammed in “Satanic Verses” – were chosen to chair and co-chair the *Writer’s Parliament* which once gathered in Portugal. At that meeting the *Writer’s Parliament* considered the possibility of the idea of shelter cities, which were willing to take in writers and poets who were persecuted for expressing imaginative and factual states of their relevant societies. Here, in the shelter cities, it was thought they can write and live in a more normal way. This was one step away from the notion of the Middleworld as conceptualised by Breytenbach for the *Fernando Pessoa* lecture at the University of Natal.

Breytenbach wrote this essay at Thekwini in Natal and used it to contain his thoughts of a space where politics of the identity could be conceptualised. Ideas about art, consciousness, the watery basis of things, and political options are also aired. Although he seeks the creative moment of becoming in the spaces of consciousness and walks the nomadic way, he chooses to embody a place – the Middleworld. The space differs from Derrida’s empty *khôra* and Laumonier as endless wanderer. Fluctuations in identity, identity unravelling, tumbling national states, global capital processes are taken into account, as Breytenbach embodies a definite space (de Kock 1999:181-194). How does the painter/writer/revolutionary “philosopher” thus see consciousness as that shifting transforming event, which leads to a self that is a constantly open-ended process? The danger exists that the Middleworld itself might become a power base of the exiled or and utopia, where exiles can experience a sense of belonging. Breytenbach in the unpublished lecture (1996e) describes exiles thus –

**In a recent piece of writing, typically dense and brilliant – Jacques Derrida speaks of ‘the first evil’, the night from which so many anonymous people are**

struggling to emerge. Derrida goes back to Hannah Arendt's description of the *Heimatlosen*, the stateless ones, the nations of 'minorities' and the peoples without a state, and her analyses and how the principles of human rights have deteriorated. He decries the erosion of 'universal hospitality', that axiom which Kant had considered a 'cosmopolitan law'. But perhaps the situation is worse now. Derrida goes on in Walter Benjamin's words to illustrate how, in civilised states, police violence has become faceless and all-pervasive (*gestaltlos* and *nirgend fassbar*), like phantoms directing life from the shadows. ... He draws attention to the present situation in France, for instance, where there is now talk of a new legal dispensation to be called 'Thighbones law' (after Jacques Toubon, the Minister of Justice), in terms of which hospitality offered to 'illegal foreigners' (*étranger en situation irrégulière*) or simply 'without papers' (*les sans-papiers*) will be decreed a 'terrorist action'. The purpose of Derrida's text, called *Cosmopolites de tous les pays un effort!* (Cosmopolitans of the world, try one more!) is to explain and extol the proposal of 'shelter cities' (*villes-refuges*), as in Biblical times or during the Middle Ages, and to argue for their application.'

In terms of the question regarding the identity of the un-citizen, Breytenbach writes the following:

The un-citizen (Morican) will bristle with contradictions. He will have a conflictual relationship to identity – mourning perhaps the loss of it while multiplying the acquisition of other facets.

Culturally, such a person will be a hybrid. 'Purity is the opposite of integrity' (Wieseltier). This is both a precondition and a consequence. Is the hybrid (or the bastard) more tolerant? Not sure. There will be a greater understanding, yes – because he ought to have a 'natural access' to the different strains of his make-up. But often the hybrid can be very discriminating, pernickety in the itemisation of the grades of distinction.

The Middleworld person will have a vivid consciousness of being the Other, and probably be proud of it.

He will more than likely be the practitioner of nomadic thinking; at heart, most probably, he will be a nomad even if he doesn't move around much. The best

seasoned nomads are those who never travel.

In any given country he or she will be a Southerner.

If he is a writer or artist or warrior, he will practise an inventive and transformative reporting of fact, using the *self* (the 'identity') as a transient and mutating guest in his work.

He will be obliged to create concepts – the security of repetition is forbidden to him, and this is why fundamentalists of all stripes will abhor him and will want to expectorate on the very name.

He will *have a fascination for metamorphosis*: James Joyce ended up living in Mor.

He is superstitious: all gods need to be placated and survival is a matter of nurtured luck.

For him culture is a matter (the matter) of food, markets, street life, drinking parties, and he has a keen interest in clothes; he is less attracted to concert halls and to academies.

He will assiduously practise the necessary art of being invisible among the poor, but he will have nearly no patience with bureaucrats. He will have no loyalty to the state, although he may sometimes pretend to be loyal to the state, although he may sometimes pretend to be loyal to embarrass the authorities of the day. He will be attracted to fetishes. The chameleon and the parrot are emblems.

To him (her) the form – more correctly, the *posture* – is as important as the contents: He will learn the Oriental way, by imitation.

A role-playing may be significant. We can say that consideration of 'bourgeois honesty' is secondary. Appearances matter a lot. When you're blind, you don't know what 'straight ahead' means.

Consciousness, even when it is centred, is multiple.

He may be considered a criminal, and the world of thievery and pride may be his environment or predilection – as happened to Jean Genet, a prime protagonist of Middleworld un-citizenship.

He will inhabit the *nada*, and have a lifelong intimate dialogue with death. He will recognise affinities with other Middleworlders; there will be a code of sharing.

## 5.8. Post-colonialism

**In the sky there is no east nor west. We make these distinctions in the mind, then believe them to be true** (The Buddha *Lankavatara Sutra* in Molino 1988:46)

According to Welchman (1998:16-18), the sixties are regarded as the watershed in the discourse of the nomadic other, which is part of decolonization. During these years Breytenbach became involved with the quest for liberation and became familiar with feelings of displacement, peripherality and isolation. During the Apartheid years of South Africa, a further extremely crude simplifying of the other compounded the inevitable self-simplification necessary for the formation of any social system. This failure led to the system's becoming alienated from itself. The first step would be losing one's own carefully constructed identity. The paradoxical result is a sense-making operation that is increasingly uncertain about what the elements are. Negated elements are bound to become nonsensical (Rechwitz 1993:1-23).

In recognition of this strong connection Breytenbach later made a graphic work of Biko. The drawing *Untitled (C-24)*, depicts the strong persistent theme of the gallows-rope of Breytenbach's post incarceration period. It stretches behind the freedom martyr, the decapitated Biko, who had blood dripping from his neck. The drawing was used as a poster for the exhibition, *Självporträtt och andra förfäder*, (Self-portrait and other ancestors) at the Kulturhuset in Stockholm, Studio 1, which ran from 26 January to 17 March 1991. This drawing not only shows Breytenbach's excellence as portrait/self-portrait, drawer and painter, but is also a pointer to his long involvement with "the Other" and with freedom..

After Breytenbach's period of incarceration came a new alternative: the chance to root peripherality, isolation and silence in the action of resistance, to abandon all fixed ideas of settled identity and culturally authorised definitions. Breytenbach shares with the Post-Structuralists, Derrida, Jacques Lacan (1901-) and Foucault, a disappointment in the politics

of liberation: narrative, which posits an enabling *arché* and indicating *telos*, is no longer an adequate mode for plotting the human trajectory in society. Said, whom Breytenbach selects as un-citizen in the *Middleworld* essay, writes in a disillusioned way about the whole process of decolonisation. After years of support for the anti-colonial struggles in places like Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, Palestine, Iran, that came to represent for the Western Left, their deepest engagement in the politics of philosophy of decolonisation, a moment of exhaustion and disappointment was reached. This is when one began to hear and read accounts of how futile it was to support revolutions, how barbaric the new regimes that came to power were, how much to the benefit of Moscow decolonisation had been.

With Gayatri Spivak (1942 - ) and Homi Bhabha the need arose to enable a radical re-conceptualisation of the relationship between nation, culture and ethnicity. This is the soul-searching quest for identity and coming to terms with the “Other”. As Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1930), Spivak’s *The Last Colonial Critic* (1990) and *Outside the Teaching Machine* (1993) and Bhabha’s<sup>81</sup> *Nation and Narration* (1990) and *Location of Culture* (1994) appeared, so the debate about identity, politics, purpose and status have grown. Precursors were Breytenbach, Du Bois and the South African, Sol Plaatje (1932-1977). There was the Haarlem Renaissance of World War One (1920) and the Negritude movement of the 1940s and 1950s. Such a history would experience the need to address figures as geographically, ideologically and culturally varying as the Trinidadian C.L.R. James, who lived much of his life in London; Fanon, whom Breytenbach selected as un-citizen, was originally from Martinique but became a revolutionary activist in Algeria; African critics as differing as Chinua Achebe (1930 - ) and Anta Diop and Ranajit Guha, the Indian historiographer, long based in Australia and involved with the break of the colonist rule. There is a “multiplicity of margins”, which perhaps inevitably accompanies the “coming to voice” of increasing numbers and kinds of national linguistic, religious and ethnic groups and communities on subcultures in the contemporary era (Moore-Gilbert 1998: 1-33).

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Homi Bhabha is also included in Breytenbach’s selection of probable un-citizens.

One thinks of Faiz Ahmed Faiz in Pakistan, or Nguni wa Thiong'o in Kenya, both major artists, whose suffering did not impede the clearness of their thought, nor inhibit the severity of their punishment. In their work, a trajectory, which mimics Europe's aggrandisement of space and its penetration into Africa, is staged by the passage of a steamboat making its way into the recalcitrant interior.

Breytenbach's post-colonial concern is with perceptions of Africa and his country, South Africa. He wrote an essay, *Africa on my Mind* (Island Notes), at Gorée in March 1993. According to Sienaert (2001:80), the presence of Africa to the north of his homeland escalates in his work, as in the haunting novel *Memories of Snow and of Dust* that unfolds mostly in Ethiopia. *Return to Paradise* is similarly situated in North and West Africa, mostly in Senegal. His poetry also became imbued with themes and images from that part of the world. His paintings, too, assume a starkly brightness, displaying the warm, clear colours of Africa, and lacking all signs of the foggy greys and murky green shades that characterise his earlier European work. However, these linkages with the African soil are more than a superficial presence on the level of themes or images. He has strong views of the discourses concerning Africa. To write about Africa is to go on a journey, to be confronted by the endlessly unfolding conjugations of an elusive reality.

For Breytenbach to be in Africa, is to travel into a mythical world of invisible forces, to be among miracles, taboos and "drum-talk and water spirits and court singers and magicians unrolling before one the seamless cloth of witchcraft and "reality". The ancestors are important. For Sienaert, they have had a "profound effect on Breytenbach's understanding of the creative act of writing and paintings, and in particular on the sense of self constituted through this process. Breytenbach identifies with the African concept of ancestors and its role in ancient and contemporary forms of worship. As tribal peoples relate to their world through the prism of kinship, so Breytenbach refers to the act of writing or painting as "a dancing of the bones", thus recalling how art practices in Africa traditionally serve to confirm one's links

with the ancestors. Creative practice thus has a specific function: through one's art, a return to the ancestor creates a sense of belonging and becomes an opportunity, to renew the relationship with oneself and the world".

For him there is the discourse concerning Africa and until recently the dominant opinion in Europe was that African is the mysterious, but a well-worn link between animal and man. In the essay *Cold Turkey* (1992) Breytenbach (1996a:99) mentions the writing of Olfert Dapper and writes:

**Or let us consider Africa. A few months ago I finished an African journal. In the process of writing I came across some old documents – including ‘The Large Illustrated Description of Africa’ by Olfert Dapper, publishers in Amsterdam in 1668. In it are to be found the most outlandish descriptions of exotic animals, like the unicorn, or another with the body of a wolf and a man's legs, and of tribes who walk on their heads with their feet in the air, as also others with their mouths and eyes in their bellies. The thought struck me that to the world at large Africa has always been a dark hinterland of the psyche, perforce unexplored, a sunken continent of the unknown or the subconscious upon which to project all the delicious phantasies of magic and death. An updated variation of this fabulation is, to the outside world, the depictions of present-day Africa as a continent where dying is a mass pastime, best left alone to its starvation, desertification, tribal wars, AIDS, and the implosion of its social structures.**

Sienaert (2001:84) states that “when Africa is enriched and not dispersed by its inherent diversity, it mirrors the identity Breytenbach aspires too 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 polyphony of voices in a poem or painting which offers no reassuring sense of closure, but a wealth of possible readings. It is a subject position that 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, this African diversity offers a form of identity which promotes the “Middel Way”: an awareness of the world”.

We continue our post-colonial discourse and return to the great representative of the process of awareness of the “the other”, Fanon.

### 5.8.1. The Other

**To love the Other is to speak of the lost space of memory.**

The real revolutionary question is What about the Other? To hold onto one of the essential frontiers, the navel-string running between you and me, this quotation from Leopoldo Maria Panero in *El País* of 25 April 1987: ‘Here then already the perception of other is a question of life and death’. We must avoid the pitfall of one unique reality where the other is nothing more than a symptom of nothingness (*la nada*). Thus, when a man is cured, he pretends to have forgotten. Freud, on the contrary, wrote “Wo es war, soll ich werden” – there where it was, I shall become. ... Which means to say that I’m neither mad nor cured but rather a man who, like Jonah comes naked and frightened from the chemical whale, carried as a memory to all the people I know. (Breytenbach 1996:117)

One of the founders of the Black Liberation Movement was Fanon. He continues to play an important role in the expression of ideals by black intellectuals. The current President of the South African Republic, Thabo Mbeki’s (1942- ) address, given on the occasion of the *Oliver Tambo Memorial Lecture*, in March 2000, testifies to this. His lecture, which is a plea for the development of black intellectualism during the current Renaissance Mission in Africa, is based on Fanon’s work and thought.

Breytenbach shares this respect for Fanon with Thabo Mbeki. As philosopher and psychoanalyst, revolutionary and writer, Fanon is regarded as the voice of the Third World.

He dedicated his short but eventful life to freedom, being one of the twentieth-century's most important social philosophers. The following important stadia can be identified in his work. Firstly, the search for black identity in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he makes an analysis of racism, while studying psychiatry in France. Secondly, the struggle against colonialism as explained in *A Dying Colonialism* and *Toward the African Revolution*, essays Fanon produced when he was actively engaged in Algeria's War of Independence. And thirdly, the process of decolonisation is analysed in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The book extends insights gained in Algeria to Africa and the Third World (Wyrich 1998).

Those remembering Fanon invests him with mythical status. Since his death he either has been regarded as a prophetic voice of the Third World or reviled as an exterminating angel, the inspiration to violence in the Black Power Movement. The future will show if the persona of Breytenbach takes on similar mythical and archetypal meaning in the mind of the Afrikaner.

The work and concepts of neither Breytenbach nor Fanon can be allocated to one political movement or moment nor can they easily be placed in the seamless narrative of the freedom movement. Both Breytenbach and Fanon, in their perception of external alienation of the individual have come up with a restless urgency in their writing and a search for a conceptual form that is appropriate to the social antagonism of the colonial relation, as suggested by Benjamin (Wyrich 1998:101). For both Breytenbach and Fanon it is not the exception but the rule; the language spoken is the revolutionary awareness of the state of emergency, in which the alienated, those who have to live under the surveillance of a sign of identity and fantasy, have to live under circumstances that denies their difference. For both of them memory is a process of disorientation; it is the putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present. It is the memory of the history of race and racism, colonialism and the question concerning cultural identity. By shifting the focus of cultural racism and politics of nationalism to the politics of the other, Breytenbach and Fanon cross a border, which causes a subversive slippage of identity and authority. Nowhere is this slippage more visible than in their works.

Reading Fanon, as with the reading and viewing of Breytenbach's work and paintings is to experience the sense of division that prefigure and fissures any sense of identity. With both men we find the emergence of a truly radical thought that never dawns without casting an uncertain shadow. For Fanon, man and society is fundamentally undermined in the colonial situation, where everyday life exhibits a "constellation of delirium" that mediates the normal social relations of its subjects. The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man by his superiority; both behave according to a neurotic orientation.

Fanon's psychiatric method involves curing the inhabitant to experience himself as a stranger in his own country. The Arab, living as an alien in Algeria, which has been, colonised by the French, experiences a continual state of depersonalisation. For Fanon there is a certain condition that underlie an understanding of the process of identification in the analytic of desire. Identities are never an *a priori*, nor a finished product. They are only the problematic processes of access to an "image of totality".

Breytenbach's art illustrates this problematic of the image of totality. Both Fanon and Breytenbach use the image of the mask to convey the complexities of identity. Breytenbach adds the image of the mirror. As elsewhere in both his art and writing, these images of interchangeability and metamorphosis persistently foreground the question of identity. The theme of the androgynous also absorbs and dissolves the notion of opposites contained in *Other and I*. The series of *mirror angles* testify to this.

For Breytenbach identity has become transposable and is in every way just as problematic as Fanon's quest for understanding the white "I" and the dark "Other". Fanon's questioning of identity opened the way to a much more complicated network of questions regarding post-colonial identity. "When Breytenbach paints his *king breyten* series (C25-28), the nomadic aspect of the painter is fore-grounded. The series forms a unit because of the similarity of size

and the medium (watercolour on board), but as suggested by the portrayal of masks, the different headgear worn in each portrait underlines the idea of a shifting persona, or the way in which identity can be assumed and then again discarded. Although all five portraits bear the same title, none of the facial features portrayed here, are recognisably those of the artist” (Sienaert 2001:70). All of them, however, are “king”. All are superior and there is no hierarchical placing. They are the fugitive *nadaists* and nomads on their way to keep their appointment with death.

There is a constant fascination with the “Other”: in women, ethnicity which represents modern European thought (the Jewish and the Blacks) and the non Western world, instances of the repressed languages. The whole issue of the Afrikaners’ language, which has become a minority issue, is an example of this. Voices, which are never heard in the mainstream of the Western modernising process, are becoming important. Public discourse is constantly represented by the “Other” or confronted with the “Other”. These new discourses that are post Nietzschean, point to the end of traditional critique. The new alternative stems from a communal point of departure. It is almost unnecessary to mention that Breytenbach has a lifelong commitment to “the hermeneutics of suspicion” and to unmasking perceptions of reality. Breytenbach is continually becoming the post-colonial intellectual, for whom Orwell’s division of the intellectual’s place in society into “inside and outside” the whale, no longer applies. Post colonial “reality” for Breytenbach can best be described in Rushdie’s terms of “whale ness”, meaning that he now finds himself in a world without quiet corners, where there can be no escape from history, from the hullabaloo, from terrible, unquiet fuss. Rushdie (1947- )(1986:51-52) writes about being “outside the whale”:

**Outside the whale is the unceasing storm, the continual quarrel, and the dialectic of history. Outside the whale there is a genuine need for political fiction, for books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world. Outside the whale we see that we are all irradiated by history, we are radioactive with history and politics; we see that is**

can be as false to create a political free fictional universe as to create one in which nobody needs to work or eat or love or sleep. Outside the whale it becomes necessary and even exhilarating to grapple with the special problems created by the incorporation of political material, because politics is by turns farce and tragedy, and sometimes both at once. Outside the whale the writer is obliged to accept that he or she is part of the crowd, part of the ocean, part of the storm, so that objectivity becomes a real dream, like perfection, an unattainable goal for which one must struggle in spite of the impossibility of success. Outside the whale is the world of Samuel Beckett's famous formula: *I can't go on, I'll go on.*

It is from the position of being “outside the whale” that Breytenbach for his “exhibition of selves” at the Durban Art Gallery in 1998, paints/writes a poem written in a circular form that recalls the shape of both a hand-held mirror and a fingerprint. “It thus poses the question of identity to the poet-as-artist and to the viewer (*head fish - C-29*). The recurring image of the mirror used with mirror writing is exemplary in this regard. The notion of mirroring is essential to Breytenbach's perception of creative practice. In both writing and painting, whatever one depicts or describe becomes a mirror of the self, it reflects who and what one is, that which one has consciously recognised and assimilated (Breytenbach 1991:76). Like the recurring image of the mask, the mirror persistently problematised the question of identity as it arises through art practice; it is an image that evokes the ultimate mysteriousness of being, and the absurdity of trying to establish the sense of a fixed ‘I’” (Sienaert 2001:69).

“In a similar vein, *self times six (C-30)* is divided by lines of mirror writing into two equal parts, each containing three separate and nonidentical self-portraits. The side view of a bird head in the top left corner is clearly self-referential, as it not only caricatures Breytenbach's own profile, but also evokes the “Mr Bird” he often uses to refer to himself. The lines of mirror writing in this work replace the pictorial image of the looking glass; they literally function as a mirror to reflect the various portrayals of self to each other” (Sienaert 1998:43).

“With Breytenbach, self-representation exploits the process and questions the way in which *self* relates to *other*. In the etching, *Dr Livingstone, I presume (C-31)*, opposition between the two figures facing each other is pre-empted by the fact that both are half-white and half black (and hairy), thus each contain a part of the other. The white mask on the black face and the ‘savage’ darker mask on the white face stress the same point. The “I” is contained in the other, similar to the way in which the moon is contained within the sun floating above the two figures. In Breytenbach’s work, cognition has always required this play of opposites, the *other* acts as the necessary opposite through which *I* can know myself. The mirror-writing in the lower half the work underscores the understanding that in the constitution of self we are not only mirrors of each other, but also act as mirrors *for* each other. We constitute each other and the world. No single person is an autonomous entity” (Sienaert 1998:44).

### 5.9. *Ars poetica*

In this chapter, the inter-textual “events” of the hybridist, the exile, the un-citizen, the nomad and the nadaist are called Breytenbach. The aspect of Zen Buddhism, which he embraces, must not be forgotten, as it is one of the important organising principles of the dialectical process. According to this notion the “I” is also not the “I”, nothing is everything, death is life, love is hate and black is white. In *Lotus* (1970b), Breytenbach describes this nothing that flows over as “the eruption of light/which brings darkness”. Furthermore, every work he wrote and painted constitutes a number of “gestures” in his quest for exploring an identity in a history he has lost. Fragments of his own numerous identities are placed in a palimpsest of images, where they become fugitive pieces. Just as Kierkegaard’s as aesthete flourish on fragmentation, so does Breytenbach. There is no way he will allow the ticket of identity to be hung around his neck. His memories are contingent and a provisional record, and his longing are for Africa. The “memoir” of his life can no longer construct a full portrait of its biographical subjects and his country of birth. Already he has settled in the utopia of the Land of Mor. Never does he write or paint about a coherent identity. Said (1994: xxix) has argued

that identity is too static and centripetal a concept to accommodate the merging of cultures in the post-colonial world. Partly because of an empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure. All are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinary, differentiated and unmonolithic. Cultural forms are hybrid, mixed, impure.

Any linear narrative leading to closure would falsify the combination of cultural discourse. Mongrel subject, mongrel text and mongrel paintings are mutually constitutive. The mirror and the image and the metaphor, become the vessel, which accommodates “the Other”. Lastly, a post-colonial epistemological approach to Breytenbach’s *œuvre* could be summed up in the epigraph Michael Ondaatje (1943- ) chooses for his novel, *In the Skin of the Lion* (1988).

**Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one.**

For Breytenbach (1996a: 166) in *The Memories of Birds in Times of Revolution* (1989),

**We are split personalities – sequentially, often simultaneously. We may turn our back in disgust on previous selves, but they hang around our neck like lovesick shadows. Like Rwandese attempting to walk away from disappearance. Like Cuban *balseros* paddling towards Babylon’s shore of neon-lit illusions.**

**What I call ‘self’ can only be the thread stitching change to change. And death is no ending, it is the final self. The end product when light at last falls short.**

**In other words, what one brings forth from the self – which is change incarnated – is death. The words exhaled constitute the breath of death. ‘Life’ is anyway only the illumination of the infinite variations, nuances, explorations, back tracking, and slowness of dying.**

## 5.10. Summary

Breytenbach portrays his “sharded self in his paintings. He does not depict the stable self. “Sharding” stands for nomad life and growth. A self that is not fixed, multiplies. Multiplicities enhance Breytenbach’s point of departure of being against fixity.

Zen Buddhism forms a primary inter-text in Breytenbach’s work. According to Buddhism, our grasping intellect, which subdivides the universe into individual, fixed concepts, presents a major obstacle for the attainment of Enlightenment. Differentiation of an object, which includes the constitution of a separate individual ego, is considered to be an illusion and an enemy to overcome. Within the Zen tradition, the intuitive knowledge is often compared to the opening of a third eye. Numerous paintings and drawings of Breytenbach depict the third eye.

Breytenbach refused to accept a specific identity during the time he was imprisoned. This caused utter confusion for the warders. However, it revealed how dependent regimes are on fixed identities. The conventional idea of identity is based on the existence of a structure, which remains more or less the same throughout life. The teleological structure of the self and of life was shattered by Breytenbach’s prison experience. He had to rely on rhythms and routines to understand his experience. Numerous alter figures and aliases were developed to give voice to his experience. Breytenbach plays with the notion of the eye in his paintings. He uses it to refer to his own transposable identity.

The notion of an unstable identity is currently an important point of debate in art, literature, politics, cultural studies, and is voiced by the words hybridity, Creoleness and bastardness. Breytenbach opts for an aesthetics of pluralism and hybridness. His oeuvre takes on a mongrel



form and he writes that culturally he is a bastard. All these notions imply mixed breeding. According to this point of departure there is no such thing as a pure race. The concept of purity cannot be applied to Breytenbach's aesthetic outlook.

Breytenbach is the painter, writer and thinker about death. The deepest structures of the psyche are found in the themes of descent to the realm of death. In old societies it was the shaman who descended to these regions in order to heal the psychic malaise of his people. Although Breytenbach seldom refers to the shaman, he is aware that he has a certain trickster role to play. The trickster can be associated with the clown. The image of the androgynous clown is one which Breytenbach is continually portraying. Breytenbach is addressing the question of fixity by depicting this emblem as both male and female.

As an exile it has provided Breytenbach with numerous working motifs of which memory is perhaps the most important. Exile perpetuates the illusion of motion and destroys the mummified vision of the self. Exile is life led outside the habitual order. It is nomadic, de-centered and contrapuntal. Exile, unlike nationalism, is fundamentally a discontinued state of being. To be in exile implies crossing the border. Breytenbach is not only a dissident intellectual in South Africa. He is a border intellectual in Paris, New York, Amsterdam, Berlin, Essen, Stockholm, Mexico City and Africa.

Breytenbach conceptualized an important space for those who have left fixed and comfortable zones behind. He refers to this space as MOR. This is the Middleworld. The Middleworld person is usually an exile who bristles with contradictions and has a problematic relationship with identity. He is a hybrid who is the practitioner of nomadic thinking. He often uses the self as a transient and mutating guest in his work. He has a fascination with metamorphosis.

Breytenbach's post-colonial concern is with the perceptions of Africa, and his country. Also, his relationship with the "other". In his essay on Middleworld people, Breytenbach refers to Fanon, one of the founders of the Black Liberation Movement. For Fanon, man and society is fundamentally under minded in the colonial situation, where everyday life exhibits a "constellation of delirium" that mediates the normal social relations of its subjects. The Negro is enslaved by his inferiority and the white man by his superiority. They behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation. Identities are never a finished product. They are only engaged in the problematic processes of access to an "image of totality". Breytenbach's art illustrates this problematic of the image of totality (fixity). Breytenbach sees the self as a thread stitching change to change.