

## CHAPTER SIX: THE MIRROR.

Poetry is like leaving a pebble outside your front door to mark your residence and when you return in the evening you find a stone. And isn't the moon a stone (Breytenbach 1996a:14)

### 6.1. Reality and consciousness.

I repeat – and now I'm precisely talking about frontiers: the writer works with the essential and incomprehensible protomatter: awareness. He is consciousness - expanding agent (Breytenbach 1996a:70).

Both Breytenbach and Kitarō Nishida(1870-1945), the Japanese philosopher, are concerned with writing and thinking about reality. Both of them agree that reality is harboured in consciousness. There is, however, a degree of difference between these two thinkers. Nishida (1990: 20-27), when entering philosophical discourse limits himself to a single notion of reality as it presents itself in consciousness, while Breytenbach is concerned with many realities that are all aspects of consciousness. In an address in New York, *The Long March from Hearth to Heart* during 1990, Breytenbach (1996a:38-49) writes:

**My minimum definition of the writer would be: he or she who creates written things transformed into, as many realities as there are readers. Writing then is also the making of mirrors, the forging of hopes, the depository and deposition of memory, the insistence upon a guideline, iconoclasm, the making of prototypes from stereotypes, a grave game fraught with consequences, the small talks of sorrow, inventing sunsets, the sacred gluttony for the mother tongue, a way to redistribute differences, a flight of fancy. True, it is at the same time a glacialisation of guilt, and often the dream gets chucked out with the dirty water of art, and writing can be a plagiarism of thinking or silence made of bangs and snorts, and no poetry has ever allowed a paralytic to walk (except with the truth of the mind). But the white fire exists.**

Nishida (1990:44) states that the Eastern way of thinking is qualitatively different from the Western, with its emphasis on verbal and conceptual expression. This separation from language and rational thought is typically found in Zen, which conveys its basic standpoint with the statement: “Non-reliance on words or letters; a special transmission apart from doctrinal teaching”. The same attitude appears in Confucius (551 BC.) (Molino 1998:34), who claimed: “Clever talk and pretentious manner are seldom found in the Good”. We encounter it in ink drawings that negate form and colour, *Noh* Theatre with its negation of direct or external expression, and in Japanese *wake* and *haiku* poetry. The Eastern approach must be sought in non-thinking beyond thinking and non-thinking.

To generate a creative synthesis of Eastern and Western philosophy, one must include, but also go beyond, the demonstrative thinking that is characteristic of the West, both arriving at un-objectifiable ultimate reality and giving it a logical articulation by conceptually expressing the inexpressible. Normally, we believe that two types of experiential facts exist, phenomena of consciousness and phenomena of matter, but there is only phenomena of consciousness.

Breytenbach who is very much concerned with the notion of memory who sees images and metaphors as the building blocks of consciousness, says in *The Long March* that one should not discourse on the nature of the real. That, in fact, reconstructing the real is not possible, as the very process of re-memberment becomes reality. He also knows that dreams have a meaning, because their field of reference is the charted area of experience, “however warped the mirror”. He has become “hooked on the inner logic of dreams”. Dreams for him draw the outside border, a “means of *dépassement*” (overtaking) (Breytenbach 1996a:46).

For Nishida reality is established by means of that which opposes it, but opposition here does not come from other things. It comes from within reality itself. As it has been said before, reality is the activity of consciousness. According to the usual view, however, the activities

of consciousness appear only at particular times and then suddenly disappear, making it impossible for the same activities of consciousness of being eternally linked together. Reality comes into being through interrelationships and the universe is the sole activity of the sole reality. Virtue of unity establishes consciousness within a certain sphere. Many people do not believe that such a unity exists outside that particular sphere. For instance, some believe that consciousness is totally independent and that there is only a single instance of consciousness.

## 6.2. Zen and the direct pointing to reality.

Zen Buddhism profoundly influenced Breytenbach's thoughts regarding aesthetics and living in the world. In a volume of prose, *Die miernes swel op ja die fox-terrier kry 'n weekend en ander byna vergete katastrofes en fragmente uit 'n ou manuskrip van Breyten Breytenbach* (1980), Breytenbach states that reality is in itself the way of experiencing, of seeing. His way of writing is *New Writing*, his way of painting and drawing is *New Realism* and his way of social criticism is *New Criticism* (not to be confused with the literary movement of the *New Criticism*). He accepts pain as an integral part of the realities of life and sees life as a "shit-sandwich [sic] that is interesting". Yet the dreams of other worlds on the one side and the distortion or de-realisation of "reality" on the other, a Zen Buddhist dialectical principle, point to the intermingling of reality and fiction in Breytenbach's work.

Buddhism is the way of attaining a direct realisation of the truth. Based on the highest teaching of the Buddha, it was taken in the sixth century AD from India to China, where it became known as "direct pointing to the heart of man". This direct pointing is to the living experience of reality, to a life unmediated by words or ideas. Zen points to a specific state of awareness in which the mystery and beauty of life at this very moment are perceived wholly and directly and with pure objectivity. It is also a metaphysical path, but expresses reality. It does not offer theological explanations, but finds its notions of truth regarding reality in

everyday conversation. Advice is also important. On how to act to reality, Ummom (Molino 1998:67) says:

**When walking just walk,  
When sitting just sit,  
Above all, do not wobble.**

The age-old problem of how to live in the world and yet find liberation, is dealt within this fashion: Bokaju's disciples once asked: "We have to dress and eat every day, and how can we escape from all that?"

The master replied, "We dress; we eat".

"We do not understand".

"If you do not understand, put on your clothes and eat your food".

The usual conceptual mode of thinking is upset by the apparently unsatisfactory advice given in this last statement. The logical mind has nothing to feed on. Intellect and imagination are told to come to a halt, so that eating and dressing can be experienced as it really is.

### **6.2.1. Paradox.**

Bancroft (1979:22) states that because Zen wants to loose us from the grip of concepts (also regarding reality), to shatter the rigid thought-forms in which we seek to possess life, it also uses contradiction and paradox. When Joshy, a great Zen master, was asked what he would give a poverty-stricken man who came to him, he replied, "What is his need?" When he was asked once, "When a man comes to you with nothing, what would you say to him?" His instant reply was, "Throw it away!" Our intellect may make little of this, but our innate sense of being, which is what Zen is trying to awaken, will recognise immediately that this man is presenting "nothing" as personal belonging.

*Tortoise Step* was a paper presented by Breytenbach at an International PEN meeting in Lugano, Switzerland, in May 1987. In this address, Breytenbach (1996a: 10-19), embraces the notion of the Middle Way in his interpretation of reality. In his reflection about the nature of reality and the paradoxical aspects of the world, he thinks back to the time of incarceration and a verse written by a Buddhist philosopher, Maitreya. He writes the following:

**It is not suggested  
That all the elements are unreal,  
Nor that they are all reality;  
Because there is being  
And also non-being  
And (again) being:  
This is the Middle Way!**

He also writes that one should read these lines in the context of arguments on the nature of reality. He also asks if this is not the inquiry of our flow of awareness, this need to apprehend, explore and define reality? What strikes him about the Middle Way, the way he at least understands it, is the necessity of movement; it is a line along which one should *go*.

### **6.2.2. The denial of opposites.**

ThPi-Mo, a noted master of the tenth century, used to carry a forked *chu-pi* and, whenever a monk came up to him and made a bow, he would put the stick to the neck of the monk and say, “What devil taught you to be a homeless monk. What devil taught you to walk about? Whether you can say something or whether you cannot, just the same you must die under my fork: speak, speak, and be quick!” This “Speak, speak!” (used by many masters) is again an attempt to awaken the true person. Most of our days are spent responding to the world in ways, we think it expects of us. We have a number of characteristics adding up to a “personality”, but no acquired aspect of ourselves has a chance to respond to the peremptory,

“Speak, speak!” Only the person who confronts reality has a chance of survival here (Bancroft 1979).

In these ways, Zen denies all attempts to rationalise it, make sense of it, or turn it into a philosophy. It compares man’s desire to grasp life intellectually to a finger pointing at the moon. The finger is continually being mistaken for the moon itself. Breytenbach has used this metaphor countless times. He also made an enchanting painting *le Pêcheur (The Angler)*(BM-1), in recognition of the moon and the finger image he often uses. Zen shows an amused indifference to the worldly goals of men. The Zen outlook has it that all is equally whole. Even straw mats and horse dung. To distinguish one of life’s aspects from another and make it more important is to fall into dualistic error rather than reality. A famous Zen poem reads:

**The perfect way knows no difficulties  
except that it refuses to make preferences:  
Only when it is freed from hate and love  
it reveals itself fully and without disguise:  
A tenth of an inch’s difference,  
A tenth of heaven and earth are set apart.  
If you wish to see it with your own eyes  
have no fixed thought either for or against it.**

The classic instance of such an attitude is the arrival in China of Bodhidharma, a renowned Indian Buddha of the sixth century that came to teach Zen and stayed to become China’s First Zen Patriarch. On arrival, the Emperor Wu, a Buddhist convert, received him and related all that he had done in the way of building temples, translating the scripture, and converting men and women to monastic life. He asked Bodhidharma what merit this would bring him and was very put out by that uncompromising monk’s reply: “None whatever. A true deed of merit comes straight from the heart and is not concerned with worldly achievement”.

“What is this holy religion all about?” Asked the Emperor.

“Vast emptiness, and there is nothing holy in it”.

Such an answer is of the same nature as the one given to the novice who made a respectful remark about the Buddha. To one who practices Zen any such notion as “holy” or “Buddha” is a trap, implying the reality of such things when in fact they only exist as notions in the mind. The Zen way of teaching is to show reality rather than talk about it, and is always to be taken seriously. When Buddhism came to China, it brought with it strands of its own cultural background. The Buddha was an Indian prince of the sixth century BC, and Indian religion has always been characterised by the quest to find the one behind many, the absolute reality of the universe beyond all opposites. In ordinary life all things and experiences have opposites – life is opposed to death, night to day, pleasure to pain, light to darkness. However, in Hindu religion reality has no opposites, it is non-dual, and man is delivered from suffering and death, when he realises his identity with reality (Bancroft 1979).

In the poetry, *Die ysterkoei moet sweet* (1964a), Breytenbach wrote a beautiful poem *blomme vir boeddha* (flowers for Buddha), where he described the act of breathing in the void that leads to tranquillity. It reads as follows:

**flowers for buddha**

**(I) breathe in (I) breathe**

**out (I) breathe the all**

**in**

**and**

**out**

**and smell the clusters of minosa moons**

**yellow like summer**

**and the quiet quietness**

**before your forehead**

**like summer in the midday hour**

**(I) breathe in a summer of quietness**

**and the fragrance of clusters of minosa moons**

an all

in

and

out

and

in

### 6.2.3. Thahata (such- ness) and sunyata (the void):

In the second chapter of this thesis, Breytenbach's interaction with *thahata* and *sunyata* and the presentation of these notions in his art and writings were discussed. In this chapter however, seeing how the above notions interact with reality is important.

To speak about reality at all, Mahajana used the notions, *thahata* and *sunyata*, to describe emptiness as a dynamic living void-ness, ungraspable and timeless, the true nature of which is unknown. He sensed the such-ness of life, not by thought, and when apprehending it realised its voided nature. This state of non-grasping and freedom from craving is both spiritual and psychological (Bancroft 1979).

To enter the void implies eating up the "I", a notion on which Breytenbach wrote this poem:

nirvana

then the guatama buddha sat under a tree  
and said: I  
will not get up from here  
before I have  
eaten up my 'I'  
and by the evening of the umpteenth day  
the bodhi tree was covered with red figs



and he got up and made love to the sky  
and stuck flowers in the earth's hair  
and kissed the water and  
laughed at the reflection of his face  
so that his cheeks were wet

Only when the reality of the "I", the ego, personality and form have been eaten up, can the living entity experience, the reality of the moment laden with beauty. This was the secret of Breytenbach's experience of the prison void.

#### 6.2.4. Satori<sup>82</sup> and zazen<sup>83</sup>.

Zen came into being through the merging of essential reality of life (that the essential reality of life can be discovered through non-attachment to any of its particular forms) and the Taoist view that achievement of harmony of life can be realised by letting go of it. Life should be free to be itself. The aim of Zen training is to attain the state of consciousness, which occurs when the individual ego is completely emptied of itself and identified with the infinite reality of all things. This experience, known by its Japanese name of *satori*, is the state of consciousness in which noble wisdom realises its own inner nature. Noble wisdom is an immediate seeing into the nature of things instead of the usual understanding through analysis and logic. The miracle of *satori* harmonises all contradiction, and the experience involves the whole person and is not a mere psychological insight or highly charged ecstasy.

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Enlightenment; the moment of truth; of the realization that truth can not be known – unless in the implied duality of "truth-untruth": but this is impossible because duality is exactly that which is transcended by Satori

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"Sitting cross-legged in meditation" (Japanese). The body is immobilized in the traditional Lotus Posture, breathing is regulated, and all thinking, desires, attachments and judgments are suspended. Dogen, the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Zen master and founder of the Soto sect in Japan, considered *zazen* not only to be a method of moving towards Enlightenment, but ideally to constitute Enlightenment itself.

Strictly speaking Zen does not believe that any method can awaken the mind to reality, because this infers a self-conscious attempt to grasp something that is already present, and methods are considered as misleading as “putting legs on a snake”. On the other hand, the technique of *zazen* has emerged over the centuries, particularly in Japan, as a successful (many would say necessary) discipline that enables the mind to settle into itself in a way realised, yet attentive, free and yet concentrated.

In *zazen*, the usual stance of the pupil in the yoga position is crossing the legs while sitting on the floor. Slow, rhythmic breathing (sometime counting the breath is used as an aid) is required as he or she brings his mind to a state free from ideas and chatter (Bancroft 1979).

Breytenbach has made many art works where he depicts himself in the *zazen* position. In *Voice la saison (Here is the season) (BM-2)*, where he wrote the following words on the canvas:

*voici la saison où ceux qui doivent mourir mourront et les autres qui vivent encore  
ont vivre une peau continuera (here the season is the one who has to die ...)*

He painted himself in the typical *zazen* position. In this work Breytenbach is the androgynous figure carrying the sacrificial lamb in his arms. By using the biblical metaphor of Christ the Lamb, bringing forgiveness for mankind’s sins by sacrificing his own body, he infers his own role in the South African society. Another work in which the typical *zazen* position is assumed is the collage, *L’emballage (The wrapping) (BM-3)*, a nude male figure which suggests the artist’s vulnerability.

Zen is not concerned with the idea of the Buddha or God, but with the reality of the human being. The true human being is not concerned with what he can get out of life, but with what life is in itself, and he lives according to his knowledge.

### 6.3. Realities of utopia

Like art, utopian thought has always survived its premature burials and, at times, it has staged quite spectacular resurrection from the no-place, the no-where's on the maps of social and cultural life. In our century, the discourse of the end of utopia is endemic to the utopian imagination as versions of other worlds, other times, and other states of mind. Utopian thought survived the declaration in the *Communist Manifesto*. It survived its withering away in scientific Marxism, only to return within the Marxism of the Twentieth century, in the work of Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno (1903-1969), Jean-Richard Bloch (1884-1947) and Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) among others (Huysen 1995: 50-60).

According to Galloway (1990) Breytenbach had an enduring interest in Marxism. During the sixties, he denounced capitalism as economic ideology and set himself against Afrikaner-Nationalism (as manifested in the Apartheid system) as political ideology. He identified himself with socialism and often by implication with Marxist political views in a broader sense. He stated, however, that he was not a member of the banned South African Communist Party. On the surface it seems as if his political statements and views on the function of art were not a systematic part of the orthodox Marxist-Leninist thought, but rather an eclectic gathering of the more basic points of departure of the young Marx before the interpretation by Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) and Lenin.<sup>84</sup> Tendencies in modern European Marxist theory, characteristic of the libertine-socialistic Anarchism and Maoism. Central codes in creative and political texts can probably be linked to the early Marx of human-directed and involved with relationships (dialectics). A further aspect is the annulment of the oppositions – tangible/intangible and spirit/body. There is the focus on the condition of estrangement and the debouching in the mutilated state of human existence; the materialistic view of history.

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Lenin in his work "On proletarian Culture", states that the art work should be imbued with the spirit of the class struggle being waged by the proletariat for the successful achievement of the aims for its dictatorship, i.e, the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, the abolition of classes and the elimination of all forms of exploitation of man by man.

Of the European Marxist theories, it is specifically the Marxist-humanistic views and themes that Breytenbach embraces. This points to an involvement with the character of consciousness and the view of man as a historical agent. Although he is unable to transform history according to his wishes, he remains the creator of social, political and economic instances. Secondly, there are the themes of estrangement, man in his relationship to nature and human suppression, as well as the role of those who regard aware-making as their mission.

Galloway (1990:44) also writes that Breytenbach is constant revolting against establishment and all its caretakers namely the rulers, masters, the rich, academics, critics, cultural leaders and other opinion makers. He is also against all tormentors, suppressers and exploiters of man. These he describes as members of the State, politicians, officials, soldiers, police, wardens, enquiring officials and “sharp judges” echoes the intrinsic characteristics of anarchism.

In light of his exploration and identification with Eastern philosophy, Zen Buddhism and Taoism, Breytenbach is receptive to the influence of the Maoist revolutionary movement with its religious inclination and strong conception of being involved with cultural phenomena. In some of his political texts, he writes about Mao Tse-tung.

Breytenbach (1984d:62) spoke and wrote against the Moscow variant of Marxism and against Stalinism. He was also very critical of the South African Communist Party–faction in the ANC that he saw as one of the most rigid and loyal followers of the foreign policies of Moscow.

**Stalinism, in this sense, means to be doctrinaire; always to follow ‘Mother’s line, however often it may be revised or changed; and to be bureaucratic in the extreme. Also to be non-democratic by means of the astute formula of centralised democracy.**

Breytenbach, who as young poet, writer, painter and political activist had high hopes of changing societies through art, has become disillusioned. When Breytenbach recalls the movements of a century in the play, *Life and Times of Johnny Cockroach*, he addresses some ideological stances and the main protagonist's disillusionment with these strong views, which shaped this century's history and its misery. In an address at Capri during 1994, "Writing the Darkening Mirror", (1996a:7) Breytenbach writes:

**As the ground of received wisdom gives way under your feet you become more painfully aware of inconsistencies in that made-up individual discerned in the mirror, the presentable one that you tried to memorise and project as the historical first person singular. We have been deceived by the big picture held up by prophets and charlatans – communism, fascism, nationalism, liberalism, democracy: this conspiracy of ideologies ostensibly imposing a pattern upon history. The big kill intended to confer a purpose upon small deaths.**

**I do know now that my painting and writing could not have made much difference to the struggle: you can neither sublimate nor console others in the rawness of their lives. Artistic creations do not reflect life, they are *lifelike* – and constitute a life of their own. I'd love to think that I participated in the making of dreams. The tracing of the true movements of the heart, though, is the drawing of a broken and twisted line of existence.**

In a conversation with Anton Basson after a lecture, *A Partial Reading of South Africa*, on 23 August 1990, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Breytenbach (Basson 1990:6-9) said that, in Spain, in the late Thirties, there was a strong, structured movement with a strong ideological basis, relatively near to the Communism of that time, but still quite separate. He was talking about anarchism. If he could identify in a way with anarchism it would be with older unions, labour unions that were working for political parties. In a sense, Duruti, one of the Spanish leaders during the civil war on the Republican side, tried to preserve certain desperate notions of purity. He and others could not allow themselves to be corrupted by compromise. They were interested in power and they never let go of their convictions. Nevertheless, he does not see himself as an anarchist. Basson wanted to know in which way Breytenbach reconciled the

flux of the Zen approach with the relative stability expected from policy making? The language of politics tries to contain reality while Zen questions this kind of action. Breytenbach answered that Zen tries to cut the roots as deep as possible.<sup>85</sup> Zen also appears as the “Mahajana-Buddhism”. Mahajana is a splitting of the whole Buddhist world. “Mahayana” is what Tibetan Buddhism calls the Tantra. In the “Mahayana” one remains part of normal life. All of us are the Buddha. In other words, there is no Marxism, but only a way of understanding such as Marx had. Zen is total commitment, which gives one a certain distance. In the interview with Basson, Breytenbach says:

**When you meet Buddha, kill him – in other words – there is no teacher. The same would be for anarchism. In the necessity of surviving, you are always called back to your own wisdom. The creative tension comes from the contradiction of the self – it allows you to go a certain distance because it is pure dialectic.<sup>86</sup>**

Coming back to the question of reality: in an essay dedicated to Tsitsi Mashanini, called *Fragments from a Growing Awareness of Unfinished Truths*, read at Stellenbosch in 1990, Breytenbach (1996:24-37) uses a quotation from Artaud:

**I have no consolation and I reek of contradiction.**

Breytenbach identifies closely with this stance. He does not embrace one stable view of reality. This is radicalism. Likewise when one enters the Zen Buddhist void, or works with

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Zen Buddhism is a unique tradition within Mahayana Buddhism resulting from the meeting of India's tradition and doctrine of Sunyata with the Chinese Taoist tradition, and brought to a high artistic expression in the culture of Japan. Although not against philosophical understanding, the study of Sutras, or the development of liturgy, it is quick to reject these as soon as they become objects of desire and thence obstacles to the one essential of Zen: achieving Enlightenment.

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Dialectic: in general an argumentative method that systematically weighs contradictory facts of ideas with a view to resolving or transcending them.. Hegelian-Marxist dialectics refers to the notion, shared by the German philosophers Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and Marx, that truth can be arrived at by means of a continuing dialectic, the exchange of logical arguments; change is achieved through the conflict of opposing forces; thesis and antithesis, opposing each other, finally leading to synthesis.

or looks for roots, or when one questions reality. They cannot encapsulate these in a dogma or school or party. All that remains for Breytenbach is a deep commitment to the conscious-making process.

The way he follows is the Middle Way. For him this is the dialectic encompassing continual movement and engagement, for one can be neutral and unattached only if one is completely part of the process. This does not mean that one can while away time in the fig tree's shade. Liberty must be realised, and this requires method, discipline, and application with the urgency of a death-struggle. The guidelines remain, even when they sound paradoxical, the solution or dissolution of self and the total respect for the Other. His advice is to let go, normally, naturally, with humour and tenderness, without clinging, not even to the letting go. Breytenbach believes that time will teach, if one is ready, receptive and humble enough to learn. This is how he deals with the realities of life.

#### **6.4. The simulacrum and simulations (resemblance, double, twin, doppelgänger, or images, representation, icon, depiction, portrayal, reflection, photograph.)**

In the graphic work, *ghazal alors un beau matin le miroir s'est foutu de mon teint : non mais des fois pour qui tu te proues – breyten breytenbain ?* (BM-4). Breytenbach introduced us to the mirror, which he uses as an image in his painting and metaphor in his writing and poetry to reflect societal conditions. He is very aware of the illusions that we are subjected to.

**We are always dealing in illusions: we're illusion junkies, as it was. In fact, reality is a perception. It is important to do the shift in perception, to see the attempt of making others believe that the illusion is a real thing. It is this sudden shift that interests me. Besides, I also believe that we're lazy, essentially. I know it for myself. We don't recognise it; rather we don't know we recognise it. We don't discover, we remember, we go by the familiar. We move with the known. We don't like to be**

confronted with the unknown; it may be painful to uncover the known. And I think that if one can have these disruptions these breaks, these discontinuities, it will be like extracting yourself from the security of the continued discourse. If you can do that, I think you have a better chance of coming into contact with, or coming within viewing sight of, what one could call “reality”; the real, the unknown face of the real, to be more exact. And, of course, then quite simply, the discontinuities, the ruptures, the breaks, the jumps can sometimes be very beautiful.

Che Guevara said that revolution is when the extraordinary becomes ordinary. And there’s a poet who said that poetry is when the normal becomes the extraordinary. I think they are essentially saying the same thing. But it’s an interesting correlation it’s an interesting shift (Breytenbach in Dimitriu 1996:90-101).

The mirroring of reality developed as a concept, as well as confrontation with the mirror image, is not strange about Breytenbach’s oeuvre. The important conversation with “Don Espejuelo”, the Knight of the Little Mirror, started while of incarceration. The mirror is taken up in the title of the prose *Mouiroir* dedicated to his old cell-mate and master, Don Espejuelo. This dark-mirror-brother “I” also figure in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*. (This work is the first definite indication in the post-prison period of the shift from Europe to a renewed and healing groundedness in Africa. Although here the narrator writes from Sicily and thus strictly speaking still from Europe, he is acutely aware of the way in which the light around him evokes the colour and quality of the African soil). In *Eklips* (1983b) there is a letter to Don Espejuelo and in *Boek* (1987), Breytenbach writes the following:

**And in the meantime I have acquainted Don Espejuelo who helped me to see further, on the one side to experience the demarcation between inside and outside (between the personal-historical inside, the mirror and the outside ‘I’ or historical society) and otherwise to see that the two mirror each other and that demarcation melts together.<sup>87</sup>**

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Translation by M. Grobler.



Breytenbach subsequently wrote a prison prose titled *Mouroir*. In French, the word *Mouroir*, means “hospice” or “home for the elderly”, a place where people await on death. The word is also a compilation of *mourir* – to die, and *Miroir* – mirror.

Within each text are messages, codes of the prison situation (*Mouroir* situation), written texts friends, and testators, delivered for safekeeping and decoding; the book as a whole is handed over to the archetypal French prison. This is Victor Hugo’s *Jean Valjean*. The text is a labyrinth of mirrors, and reading the book, *Mouroir*, is like seeing through a mirror, the riddle. The book is a mirror image of reality leading to the imagination. The doppelgänger here is Don Espejuelo, to whom everything is dedicated. The mirror is also death. The reflection of images is repeated in the echo of sounds, names, lines, adjectives, and situations returning repeatedly. One of the most moving echoes is when the prisoner calls out to his father “Oubaas! Oubaas!” with the echo returning – “Ou haas! Ou haas!” There is no sense of reality and thus everything that remains is signs, images, shadows and metamorphosis. Gregor Samsa from Kafka’s, *Metamorphosis*, is the figure treading his way through the labyrinth of mirrors.

The relationship between incarceration and the liberating word comes to a climax in the section *Boek (Book)*. It is a mirror of storytelling. The visit of Samsa and his wife Elefteria “Vryheid” leads to the discovery of the moths’ room, incarcerated winged insects, a loss of self, and an experience of such-ness, *thahata* that is the void. ... This is depicted on the front cover of the collection of poetry, (*Yk*); the prisoner, hair shaven, eyes closed by the moth resting on them. On the back cover, the prisoner is depicted with his beard and hair, the moth again resting on his eyes, a wound on the forehead.

Many paintings and drawings containing the emblem of the mirror would follow the period of incarceration like *Hommage au Mirroir (BM-5)*, where the impossibility of the reflection of reality is depicted. The bird-man is looking into a mirror, but the image caught up in the mirror differs from the image holding the mirror up to his face.

The finest allegory of mirroring is to be found in the Borges tale, where the cartographer of the Empire draws a map so detailed that it ends exactly covering the territory. With the decline of Borges's Empire, the map becomes frayed and finally ruined, a few shreds still discernible in the deserts. The metaphysical beauty of this ruined abstraction, bearing the witness to an imperial pride and rotting like a carcass, as it returns to the substance of the soil, rather as an ageing double ends up being confused with the real thing (Baudrillard 1992:166-284).

Another allegory of mirroring is to be found in a book of fictions and images, *All One Horse*, written by Breytenbach (1990:75-79) where two tales that mirror each other: *Brother* and *Mirror*. As he enters the landscape of the story, Brother is cruising on his ancestral motorcycle on which he has, in flowing white lines over the petrol tank, painted *Pegasus*. The road between Uzbar and the capital has been closed. Squatters are on the march again and flags and drums and fifes and kids cartwheeling and ululating. Brother had to come "the Garg way". The storyteller meets his brother and the main conversation concern nicknames that Brother had painted on his official passport. Van Dood Graf, Garbman Abdul, de Graaf Reinier, Hermes, Horse, fathelp, Eklô, mumble Mfowethu, Watsenaam Babe, Watsenaam Brother, Watsenaam Chuch Huntingdon, Watsenaam Nascimento – to name a few. Then Brother hands his brother a notice of execution, which he has, according to the blank spaces left on the official form, to fill in. Brother gives his regards to the mirror, which is the horizon for further, or perhaps a continued reflection, on consciousness and identity.

Holding a mirror in his hand, Breytenbach enters the landscape of the desert - the landscape that is left of the frayed maps of deserts in the fable of Borges. One which opens a field of emotions; the function of the eye is to scan this unfolding landscape where illusions are called up. Abstraction today is no longer that of the map or Brother and the art of Motorcycle maintenance or that of the map of the Empire, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulations are no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality, a hyper-real. The real, and not the

map, or Brother on the motorbike covering the territory, whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map, whose fragments subsist here and there, in the desert that are no longer those of the Empires, but our own. *The desert of the real itself.*

In *And this Mirror*, the writer introduces the reader to his twin brother who lives in Urbos. His favourite painting is the *Mona Lisa* or *la Gioconda* as some people think they know it. Brother says the *Mona Lisa* is a portrait of himself. “Why do you like that one best?” I ask. “Because it is a self-portrait”, he answers. “More precisely: because it is a painting of myself. I mean it. You smile? Look at my smile and then try to remember. Isn’t it exactly the same? And the trees and the rocks in the background, the dead fish light all over – are they not elements of my mind?” Some people claim that the thing was done by Leonardo painting himself without a beard. Leonardo is a figment of the communal imagination. One can no longer see the painting because it has become invisible and too many people with framed expectation have looked at it. When a thing is looked at too often, it loses its reality. Too many eyes kill the light and fade the pigment. In this way it has become a mirror. The original black mirror. The mirror (*speculum*) opens a space of feeling, which reflects the constant tension between the original image and that, which is the depiction or mirrored image.

Breytenbach holds up a mirror to the stratified society. This is a life long task, to cultivate an awareness of illusions. He is the one whose image the mirror has clouded, and who is pointing to a concept of reality where images, events and political experiences must be seen as changing and mutating acts caught up in a multiple reality, that which we could call inter-rhythmic reality. Things and events are not merely interwoven. There is a nearly impossible network of connecting images, which could be interpreted as reality. This is a rhizomatic reality. The functional spaces of the mirror are not just found in a conventional utility – things of the world, stones, paintings, your ancestors, friends or enemies become a mirror. Through reflection on the simulacra, our interpretation of the things of the world is placed on the cutting edge of today’s conception of reality. Breytenbach writes in *No Longer*.

**Then there is the description of the man and his image. The man has a mirror in which he tries to locate and capture the sun. It is the other. The mirror is black, but as the man leans forward to think, he imagines seeing in its depths the mythical beast always at the back of his mind. The White horse.**

That which is supposed to be the reality only becomes reality when connections and impossible relationships are uncovered – this is the moment at which the theme of the mirror recurves and becomes black – it is then that poets bend under their heartbreak and cast their sorrows on paper.

**These verses too are the clods of secret soul-eruptions, still warm and wet, at times consisting solely of an ooh or an aah. They would watch the undigested truths hit the black mirror like so many sobs, to sink into eternal oblivion, leaving neither phosphorous wake nor echoing ripple nor flip nor fin. In effect, joining the other disappearance.**

This is the nomadic way, where the poetry of the map and the charm of twin-brother, the magic of the concept of the mirror, the exquisiteness of the real and the cartographer's mad project have not disappeared. Here metaphysics remain.

In the *desert of the real* itself, where hyper-reality is the order of the day, there is no more mirroring of being and appearance, of the real and its concept. The real produced from matrices, memory banks and command models no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is not longer real at all. It is hyper real: the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a cyberspace without atmosphere. A hyper-real from now on sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference (Baudrillard 1992:67).

## 6.5. The simulacrum<sup>88</sup> of the theatre – Breytenbach and Klossowski.

Both Breytenbach's paintings and drawings and the drawings of Klossowski have a certain feel of a theatrical setting about them. There are elements of the stage, lights, and intense debate and indecent stories frozen in motion, as if posing for photographs to be taken after the show. The viewer, who has witnessed the production, knows that his life has changed, that metamorphoses has begun, which will lead the "self" out onto the desert.

Klossowski was born in Paris in 1905 into a family of aristocratic and artistic Polish émigrés. He is the elder brother of the painter Balthus, or Balthasar Klossowski de Rola. His long career brought him into contact with an extraordinary range of people. He was at various times an associate of Gertrude Stein, Bataille, Masson and Walter Benjamin, and is one of the very few people to have been close to both Gide and Foucault. Klossowski's career was a curious one. Immediately before the Second World War, his quest for a religious life led him to begin a noviciate with the Benedictines and then the Dominicans, but he left the community after only three months. In 1947, having abandoned his religious quest, he married Denise Marie Roberte Morin Sinclair, a war widow whom they had deported to Ravensbrück because of her resistance activities. From now on, all his work would be dominated by and dedicated to her haunting beauty. She is the "Roberte" who figures in his novels and so many of his delicate drawings.

Klossowski's novels and drawings have a theatrical sense of humiliating encounters between Roberte and characters from a threatening *commedia del'arte*. Roberte becomes an object of exchange, circulating endlessly in an erotic economy. She is raped and assaulted, is seduced

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According to the Webster Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, simulacrum is an effigy, image, or representation

and seduces, and takes on many different identities, but remains un-possessed, inviolable. Like the *tableaux vivants* imagined and staged by de Sade's libertines, Klossowski's words and images betray an obsession with representation itself: representations of plays, of drawings (Macey 1993). In an interview with Rémy Zaugg, Klossowski emphasised his taste for the enigmatic and the unexpected (Lascault 1988).

Although Breytenbach never refers to him, there is a certain feeling, especially in *le Cheval (The horse) (BM-6)*, suggesting a similarity between their art (Klossowski's work, *Roberte and Gulliver* were done in 1980) (Fleck 1986:100-101). A correspondence between their work can be found in the sense of theatrical staging of the painterly scenery. There is a profusion of these in Breytenbach's paintings and drawings. They are theatres of simulacra in which everything is represented, nothing real. Both Breytenbach and Klossowski captured the experience of the double, of the exterior of simulacra, of the theatrical and demented multiplication of the ego.

The drama and stage director, Marthinus Basson, recognising certain aspects in Breytenbach's work, transformed and used these in the three-dimensional theatre space of both *Boklied* and *Life and Times of Johnny Cockroach*. The prison drawing, *Les gens de la rose noire (The people and the black rose window) (BM-7)* is a simulacrum of protagonists in a theatre production doing the curtain bow. Other examples are *Three Figures (BM-8)*, where three naked men are staged in a theatrical stage-like setting. Stage props are the traditional "bowler hat of power" and the communist sickle. One figure is wearing a nun's cap. Likewise, the drawing *dis trouens hoekom te aarde so veel vlieë is* (that is why there are so many flies on earth) where Breytenbach, while sitting at a table, wears the dunce cap while conversing with another masked figure.

In the court dramas of Shakespeare, the dunce<sup>89</sup> or the bard, the wearer of motley, was the one who enjoyed a very special relationship with the king. He was the only one in the court who could openly talk to the king and criticise him without being afraid of extermination. It was his role to inform the king of things that he did not want to hear. This could be Breytenbach, *die lappiesman*, (the rag-man), as he refers to himself, or the keeper of the colours, the one who tells the Afrikaners and others in South Africa, what they do not want to hear. He paints himself as the one wearing the dunce cap. *Untitled (BM-9)* is a depiction of himself as a white-faced dunce, the one wearing the cap, clutching another figure. The figure in *El Rey de nada (BM-10)*, is the one wearing the dunce cap, or the clown's or the carnival-goer's hat. In the acrylic work, *Judges Kiss (BM-11)*, two men in carnival clothes are embracing each other. In the background Breytenbach has painted the typical Spanish cypress tree of Can Ocells. In *Untitled (BM-12)*, we find the portrait resembling a former South Africa, State President, F.W. de Klerk (1936 - ). Instead of painting him with the typical bowler hat of power, the de Klerk-figure is depicted with a carnival hat. He is sitting in front of a table, clutching its edges and staring away from the green object that is resting on a cross. There is a trace of red that could imply blood. Freely interpreted, this work might mean that to vote for this political candidate by drawing a cross, the sign used by those who are not able to write, might lead to disaster.

The true role of the clown in the ritual, is one of identifying irregularities in society and then playing it out in public (Grobler 1998:45). Clown performances of the Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico, during the previous century, encompassed the drinking of each other's urine and eating of faeces, also the eating of live rats. In this instance, the clown personified revolting and inhuman behaviour (Gills 1982:95).

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Dunce: One slow at learning. The word is derived from the middle name of John Duns Scotus, Schulman, who died in 1308 and whose followers were ridiculed by 16th century Humanists and Reformers as enemies of learning. Depicted on the Shakespearean stage as a figure wearing the dunce cap.

When confronted with the loathsome aspect of the clown's role, we begin to get a better indication of his original ritual and religious role, and his potential to bring more than just comic relief. The clown is the one who crossed the border and entering the perilous terrain of the psyche and has the power to bring the death wish of a society in the open. Previous societies regarded the clown as an important figure, which could bring spiritual balance, both collective and individual. The domain of the clown is the unconscious, negative impulses of the human spirit.

In this sense the clown could be compared with the shaman. However, the clown does not enter the trance space. He also does not meet the gods in heaven. The clown is the one who reaches the death wish that lies in the underworld or the unconscious. This is one small step away from Breytenbach's own death wish. In South African society, Breytenbach often plays the role of the jester – it is an integral part of his public appearance. The dunce or the bard is the one who criticises the king's conception of reality. The clown or the jester or the carnival-goer, is the one who ridicules the fixed conceptions (realities) of a society.

There is a profusion of masked figures in both Breytenbach's drawings and paintings. An interpretation could be that of the carnival, another would be to see it about the theatre. The theatre is the space *par excellence* of transformation and simulacra. All transformations are invested with something at once of profound mystery and of the shameful, since anything that is so modified to become "something else" while remaining the thing that it was, must inevitably be productive of ambiguity and equivocation. Therefore, metamorphoses must be hidden from view and thence the need for the mask. Secrecy tends towards transfiguration: it helps what one is to become what-one-would-like-to-be. This is what constitutes its magic character, present in both the Greek theatrical mask and in the religious masks of Africa or Oceania (Cirlot 1981:205). The transformative interpretation is a very viable one in terms of Breytenbach's use of masks.



## 6.6. The divine irreverence of images.

According to May (Boundas & Olkowski 1994:102) favoured terrains of simulation go back to religion and the simulacrum of divinity: “I forbade any simulacrum in the temples because the divine that breathes life into nature cannot be represented.” ... But what becomes of divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme authorities, simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or is it volatilised into simulacra, which alone deploy their pomp and power of fascination – the visible machinery of icons being substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God. This is precisely what the Iconoclasts, whose millennial quarrel is still with us today, feared. Their rage to destroy images rose precisely because they sensed this omnipotence of simulacra, this facility they have of erasing God from the consciousness of people, and the overwhelmingly, destructive truth that they suggest, that ultimately there has never been any God – that only icons (simulacra) exist. Indeed that God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum. ... But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the images concealed nothing at all, and that in fact they were not images, such as the original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra forever radiant with their own fascination. But this death of the referential divine had to be exorcised at all costs.<sup>90</sup>

New Realism, the art movement that Breytenbach was part of, is an act of irreverence towards images traditionally condoned by the bourgeoisie and the stratified order with their particular taste and aesthetic inclination for beauty and non-beauty. New Realism is a post apocalyptic

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According to May (Boundas & Olkowski 1994:110) it was the iconolaters, who saw in the icons only reflections and were content to venerate God at one remove. The iconolaters possessed the most modern and adventurous minds, since, underneath the idea of the apparition of God in the mirror of images, they already enacted his death and his disappearance in the epiphany of his representation (which they perhaps knew no longer represented anything, and was purely a game, but that this was precisely the greatest game – knowing also that it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them.)

art movement, which indirectly expressed the horrors of Dachau, Korea, Tibet, the Congo, Biafra and Vietnam. Therefore, it is an art of the grotesque and the gruesome. Nevertheless, the artist is also interested in expressing the other, paradoxical side of the human being as vulnerable and tender (Brink 1971). Breytenbach in an interview with Sienaert (2001:106) says the following about [new] realism:

**...we have to employ words and letters and also images and sounds) if we wish to move beyond the ordinary conditions of being human. The task of realism is pursuing reality beyond metaphor, which will always have to be accompanied by endless battles against metaphor fought through metaphors.**

New Realism also reflects the absurdity of reality as one finds in the work of Camus and the Existentialists. Writing in 1965, very much in the shadow of the Algerian war, Sartre, argued that the only way to learn to say “no” to one’s fellow citizen was through “a perpetual self-criticism” (Walzer 1988:140). The life of a social critic must begin with the rejection of his own socialisation, the refusal of society-in-himself.

In 1939, the young Camus visited the Kabyle Mountain and wrote (for a socialist newspaper in Algiers) a series of articles on the suffering of the Berbers and the indifference of the colonial regime. The article, the most important of which are reprinted in *Actuelles III*, constituted a powerful piece of social criticism, and led, a year later, to Camus’s exile from Algeria. His cry of indignation made him a suspect in the eyes of the authorities (Walzer 1988).

Breytenbach’s brother, Cloete Breytenbach, a photographer for *Time/Life* reported on the war in Angola and the heart transplant by Chris Barnard. A South-African newspaper contacted Breytenbach to discuss his opinion of the transplant. He answered that the acts of heart transplants were obscene in a country where the mortality rates of children were the highest

in the world. He also referred to this statistic and again using the word “obscene” when reporters questioned him on the provocative nature of his work. Further examples he cited were that from June 1966 to June 1967 half a million black Africans were arrested for breaking the Pass Laws. In such circumstances intellectual provocation used the obscene image and metaphor (Huf 1968.3). Paintings of obscene and grotesque nature became an enduring *Ars poetica* and are still visible in recent works like *Taalmonument – Doodsberig (BM-13)*.

The work is a political commentary, not only on the holy phallus-like icon of the Afrikaners built on the mountain of the Boland town of Paarl, historically the site of the First Afrikaans Language Movement, but also a troubled expression of the rights of Afrikaans as a minority language, which are not respected by the ANC Government.

It comprises five sections (a collage of four postcards and a watercolour) with the monument erupting and gradually changing into a phallus. The following words are written on the watercolour.

**You are invited to the dying of a language  
the whole country is dressed up in nakedness  
burn over the paper the hand turns to charcoal  
the corpse in the mountain bound to a pole**

In a similar way as in *Old King Breyten*, painted in the earlier sixties Breytenbach, in *Taalmonument* depicts obscenity through the phallus. True to his paradoxical nature, the phallus could also be a sign of male vulnerability.

## 6.7. The utopia of sur-reality and the nomadic unreality

Brink (1971), when describing Breytenbach poetry, says that it plays back to the Surrealism of Paul Eluard, the association art of Bert Schierbeeck and the mysticism of the Zen Buddhism. The Surrealists wanted to break the ordinary, learned, conventional structures and norms of reason by discovering the natural connection between things, like one would experience it in dreams.

Breytenbach's imagery and depiction of space, changed after the time of incarceration. He lost a sense of spontaneity with which he used his paint and his work became more hard-edged and more typical of the traditional Surrealists. He subsequently engaged in effacing the borderline between dream and reality, between conscious and unconscious, wrote violent explosive manifestos, and art of otherness, the dream style of the way of Ernst – the magnificent lure of lust, Ernst's renewal of the collage process, the lifelike and mysterious world of Magritte and the lifelike and a mysterious world in which reality is questioned.

The "Sur Realists" are interested in the reality of a super-rational world, in the notion of imagination as formulated by Guillaume Apollinaire(1880-1918). Breytenbach (1989:33) writes continually about this notion in his aesthetic views, in poems, travelogues, novels, and interviews with the media and philosophical essays. When he writes about memory as an act of imagination or as a prerequisite to a truer reality of the conscious, he turns to "imagination as a necessity for inventing a future". The Surrealists are interested in the dream and imagination and the New Realists in finding the most gruesome reality within the self and by that portraying some facets of society. These are modes of art, which place us against the interminable silence of things.

Although he dips his wings into modernism, Breytenbach in his questioning of reality is a postmodernist. Confining the word Postmodern to one meaning is difficult. This term does not imply a certain philosophical stream, nor is it a thought system, but rather a specific way in which man currently experiences his life, and how he embodies his experience with reality. While the modernists returned to the origin, exploring the self, the postmodern approach encompasses the falling away of the centre, leading to a life of multiplicities. There is an awareness of a multitude of possible realities.

The main aim of the modernist search for a new beginning was to liberate vision from conventional ways of seeing and to free the mind from fixed conceptions about reality. With the Surrealists we find the discovery of the “authentic” self that requires a mystical backward-looking return to the source and produces static conceptions of origin, turned into ritual. Fantasy often accompanies the Surrealist notions of origin, which complicates the whole modernist discourse of origin.

God of the Middle Ages was the centre of the universe. The man who sees himself as a free subject making his own choices replaced this position. Nevertheless, Nietzsche formulated the falling away of the centre, with his significant statement: “God is dead”. This was not a triumphant outcry, but rather a voicing of a state of collapse of the human being. The human being no longer having a centre outside himself that makes sense of what he does and feels or provides an explanation for the way things happen. Nor has man become the centre. No comfort of a centre exists anymore. There is only a terrifying chaotic movement of powers, which call upon and oppose each other.

Thus, a disseminating play of multiple meanings replaces the reality of single origin. The search for origin turns against itself and reveals its humble beginnings. From art history we know that different Surrealists turned to different sources of origin. In contrast to today

interpretations of history, which teach us to laugh at the solemnities of the origin, de Chirico's works depicted the world as "an immense museum of strangeness", to reveal the mystery in insignificant things. Clearly his *topos* are estrangement of repression that reveals itself in the enigma, an enigma that he once called the great question one has always asked oneself – why was this world created, why are we born to live and die. His metaphysical terms are thus riddled with questions about origins. From de Chirico, Breytenbach does not take the lesson of returning to the origin, but a borrowing of the typical small heads and mannequins that he depicts in works like *T/17* (BM-14).

*L'Amour fou*, André Breton's (1896-1966) surrealist views and art are a grid inscribed with "letters of desire".<sup>91</sup> Implicitly the artist does not invent new forms so much as he retraces the phantasmagoria. The *L'Amour fou* metaphor also suggests a "tracing" of trauma, which Breton so typically projects from the past to the future. Castration complex, to which the Surrealist typically responds with scenarios –fetishist, voyeuristic, and/or sadistic in import (Foster 1991)<sup>92</sup>. Breytenbach shares these facets with the Surrealists. A work in which masochism and dismemberment is found, is *The Bat*, also the fetish of the African green parrot.

Breytenbach took Yves Tanguy's (1900 - 1955) world. The work *T/9* (BM-15) testifies to this. It is the mind-scape of consciousness, which spans time and place. Breytenbach painted the space of the unreal and fabulous, a floating word, antecedent to birth postulating death. In this

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Freud distinguished three primal fantasies. (*Urphantasien*): that of seduction, the primal scene proper (where the child witnesses parental sex) and that of castration.

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Adorno, no friend of Surrealism, once argued that images are object-fetishes on which the subjective, the libido, was once fixated. The process does not occur through self-submersion but the images bring back childhood fetishism.

space he placed two embryonic forms hugging and sucking each other down to the pit of one incident. They merge to become one and thus grow into a new body. The knotting is momentarily for soon they will be on their way to the ever-receding horizon.

Both artists share the notion of memory, which becomes an abiding thread running through their work and an awareness of death and willingness to enter the process of movement that takes one from one landscape to another. Tanguy's mind-scapes are unquestionably pervaded with childhood memories of his native Brittany; its *erode dé breid* may even allude to the submerged ruins of the legendary Breton town of Ys. Nowhere has memory been more tellingly merged with imagination or with presentiments. In these subliminal depths, the autonomies of Euclidean space are overcome. With Tanguy the horizon line is always nearly there, but it does not stand divisively between two distinct elements like earth and air: it floats amid the shifting interacting levels of a single original element.

An uncertainty of inside and outside, psychic and perceptual, is fundamental to the talismanic notion of Surrealism. The distinctive character of surrealist art may reside in the different ways that it works through psychic trauma in scenes that register as both internal and external, endogenous and exogenous, fantastic and real - in a world that is surreal. In Breytenbach's work there is a constant transgression of traditional borders: between inside and outside, private and public, human and animal, female and male, painting and writing, freedom and bondage.

A play of multiple meanings replaces the modern reality of a single origin in Breytenbach's work. As nomad he seeks a line of flight from all totalizing notions of reality. What this infers is a new conception of reality, namely one, which is displaced, plural, heterogeneous, unstable and reconciled to the other. We need to make an appeal to the poetic idea of the nomad for visualising a never-ending motion in space that is defining some elusive sense of

reality. It is in this sense that one should understand multiple acts of renaming, rebirth, becoming an animal, becoming three that populates the worlds of Breytenbach's art and thoughts. He adopts new names and personae and by that the names themselves lose their codifying and confining power. If the stratified space is broken up, then it becomes possible for the fixed realities to collapse into each other, to see difference as part and parcel of what is called the shifting reality. Nomadology is celebrated because it tends to break up the system and free things from the notion of essence, hierarchy and/or reification. It is an acceptance of displacement as a way of life, a chronic displacement that we now call nomadism. For the nomad the island becomes the place of utopia, as Breytenbach (1993b) writes of Gorée Island.

**island (1)**

that island then, hills shine where wind  
stretches out blue ribbons, the tongues continue the  
peeling of olive trees a thousand years old  
planted by the Arabians  
or Carthaginians or Phoenicians, seafarers  
and merchants, invaders over the horizon

for ages generations struck trees and pressed oil  
for a long while now its not longer profitable  
and fruit remains cover the ground like gray molar teeth  
– the image must become pith – like sanded  
phenomena or eye sockets dried out from looking

the wind cultivates the landscape permanently  
wind is not dependent on water of day butterflies  
the mountains are dark shimmering mirrors  
for always reflecting the silver wind's invocation again  
and sand of eons have filled the stones  
to the engraving of repetition  
a rhythmic pattern of speech defect



de-humanized, empty: here you sometimes see  
a black salamander sly like a scar-drawing lefthand  
the sun shines and where the airline becomes vision  
a forgotten earth god lips through the breathing space  
between calling and the memory of going further  
a blind Bacchus, an infertile Pan, a mouldy Ga

long ago travellers here knew of perishing  
and of clinging to the shell of life  
or a decaying mask  
the black knife, it was insight with which the priest  
could cut a long wound in the side  
to remove the cadaver's inner works  
and to stop the cavities with a learned mixture  
of honey, bees wax, aromatic plants  
mumbled prayers a rhythmic speech defect  
to still the shadows

each one coaxes the landscape in himself  
in interaction with the reasons for shadow and rest  
layer upon layer of what the eye has caressed  
a life-line through the priest's pulse  
mouthed out in the restless mumbling  
of tides, spaces, birdsong which never dims  
and death alone then an island  
where it is no longer worth the effort  
to tie water down, and you can give yourself over  
to de-bowling, an eclipse of time

you! you! where you walk you are a guide  
I see your movement along the slope of shimmering hilltops  
and when the light dies your hair becomes black  
but more: I follow you with the movements

heart and search for all the cadences  
where I can encounter you  
*that* is how the sun is going to be made  
and freed in the dark  
how a shining hand might catch the black salamander

Through the act of imagination, the reader and the poet can experience the island as a utopian space, where both are free from confrontation with realities. Reading and writing this nomadic poem becomes a place of rest.

According to Sienaert (2001:82) Breytenbach's overriding connectedness with Africa has also influenced his views of reality. In tribal context, and in African art, there are a blurring between subject and object. This infers that in Africa, art – whether as an object, music or dance – is not seen as separate from the person who experiences it. Breytenbach similarly insists that the act of painting or writing become both the approximation (or reflection) of reality and the energy that brings it into being. It represents a single process through which the subject-object dichotomy of the artist (or observer) and image dissolves. This vision of reality requires the active participation of an observer and can metaphorically be seen as a kind of confrontation: an interaction between object and viewer that challenges conventional perception and leads to its transformation or renewal. The notion of art as constitutive of the subject rather than constituted by the subject offers a Eurocentric theoretical counterpart to this tribal assumption of art practice.

### **6.8. The utopia of memory and forgetting: Memory of Snow and of Dust.**

“Remembrance” or “memory” is an important concept in Breytenbach's writing, painting and philosophical discourse. The artist-writer is also fascinated by the process and mechanism of the transference of memory from one generation to the other. In *Memories*, it culminates in

the theme of a rite of passage. Concerning the Greek tragedies, he places emphasis on the fact that the passage from one layer of consciousness to another is always accompanied by a sacrifice, a fatal choice or the denial of one self – an insight embodied in his paintings.

The only thing that can be done is to give an account of the rite of passage of the self. Anything else is an abuse of power. Anything else is a lie. The past happens. Once events fail to take firm root and can be expunged from memory; the past thus perpetually threatens to dissolve beneath the heel of the present. Memory is a kind of research that has one principle subject “existence”.

In *Memories* it is shown that 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 undermine semantic and syntactic procedures involved in processing material. What is at stake here is not *mimesis* but semiotics, not a passive rendering but an active production and therefore transformation of the world. This is precisely what Breytenbach has in mind when he states:

**I tried writing subversively ... What I could and did try to do ... was on the one hand to undermine the petrified position the cultural stratagems and institutions, the retarded conceptions of the dominant Afrikaans culture, and on the other hand to sharpen the knowledge of the implication of the South African regime (Breytenbach cited in Coetzee 1990:192-193).**

Reality is obviously not the “real” real. In *Memory*, Breytenbach (1989:86) repeatedly castigates European society for being besotted by a mass-communication that ends in a misinformation:

**We have entered the age of instant amnesia. No more information only staged propaganda and commentary from postmodernist city rats.**

This Baudrillardian analysis of a grotesquely alienated reality applies even more to South Africa. Here the entire political and legal system, and the police and prison authorities, are engaged in playing the “reality” game (Breytenbach 1984d:199). 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, is advocated while this is blatantly not so.

Against the fiction of reality that is typically embodied in the discourse of the classic realist novel, reconstructive art sets itself up as anti-fiction, as an instrument for unmasking it to the dialogical sham it is, or as Breytenbach puts it.

**Language is 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 recognise. Seeing should be rupture. The eye, to survive intact, must break** (Breytenbach 1986:151-152).

It is in this light that we look at art works, like *les oeufs de d'été (summer eggs)* (BM-16) where Breytenbach has painted two brown male figures positioned under a tree, one in a suit, sticking out his tongue to the naked male. In *Dakhaas* (BM-17), a black male in a suit in a squatting position, with the now familiar female cleft between the legs is depicted. We experience a rupture (early works done in the mid sixties). The female clefts became an enduring memory, which Breytenbach frequently reexamines. The memory of this “self” conscious “art devise” recurs in the late nineties again in the *Angel fish* series.

If “ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality”, then the writer must break with language and art conventions to established literary forms (de Man 1982:355-371). Though he cannot entirely get away from the constraints imposed by language, he can at least twist the iron bars of its prison. To gain a certain degree of freedom, he created his own “textual and intra-textual and infra-textual contexts” where new configurations triumph over

outworn meanings (Breytenbach 1986:185). Coetzee has summed up Breytenbach's anti-ideological meta-approach to both literature and reality as follows.

**Hy het nie veel oor politieke sake geskryf nie; meestal bespiegelend oor die wyse van produksie van 'n teks, en of die vraag of skryf enige funksie het binne 'n onderdrukkende stelsel. (He had not written much about political matters; mostly speculated over the way of production of a text and over the question if writing has any function within the suppressive regime.)**

Of course, Breytenbach is far too sceptical, as had been evident by his 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 *mâitres-penseurs* of our times. He no longer subscribes to the European *cognito*-tradition culminating in Husserl's idea of "*Erinnerung als Selbsterkenntnis*" (Sommer 1990:204). Following this tradition, human beings always remember and present their lives, as Umberto Eco (1932-) has shown, as a conventional, unified story from which all accidental and distracting elements have been removed. Accordingly, *Memory of Snow and of Dust* cites this tradition by constantly referring to the novelistic qualities of autobiographies: "Each life is a novel". If, therefore, "memory is a faculty of the imagination", as Mano observes, if "people invent themselves", human beings must have an almost inbuilt 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 (Rechwitz 1993:138).

Breytenbach obviously involves this tradition 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, which transcends everything of which the conscious mind may be cognisant.

In the utopian memory, we find the same tendency. From Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" to the realisation of the May '68 graffiti proclaiming *l'imagination au pouvoir* (power to the imagination), the sixty's concept of utopia has led to a cultural environment of disillusionment. One would have to ask oneself the question whether the utopian imagination has been transformed in recent decades, reemerging in formerly unpredictable places such as the new social movements of the seventies and eighties and being articulated from a new and different subjective position.

### 4.2. The power of reality

Utopian thought survived the declaration in the *Communist Manifesto* and it survived its withering away in scientific Marxism. It returned fiercely within Marxism itself in the twentieth century, notable in the work of Bloch, Adorno, Benjamin and Marcuse. In the essay *Tortoise Step* (1987) Breytenbach (1996a:17) writes:

**The responsibility of the writer is not so much one of literal *meaning* but of social and moral implications. Do we still remember how moved we were by the incendiary of a Mailer or a Marcuse? We justified our stance or our cowardly dance in the light of such writings. They wrote and we lit the fires. Some of us waved Mao's little red thoughts about our heads as excuses for not thinking.**

It does not require much theoretical sophistication to see that all representation, whether in language, narrative, image or recorded sound, is based on memory. However, rather than leading us to some authentic origin or giving us verifiable access to the real, memory, even and especially in its belatedness, is itself based on representation. The past is not simply there in memory. It must be articulated to become memory. The fissure that opens between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable. Rather than lamenting or ignoring it, this split should be understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity. It is the tenuous fissure between past and present that constitutes memory, making it powerfully alive and distinct from the archive or any other mere system of storage and retrieval. The twilight memory, then is not merely the result of genealogical

forgetting that could be counteracted through some form of a more reliable representation. It is given in the very structures of representation itself.

Twilight is that moment of the day that foreshadows the night of forgetting, but seems to slow time itself, an in-between state in which the last light of day may still play out its ultimate marvels. It is memory's privileged time. In the political realm, the issues of memory and forgetting, memory and repression, memory and displacement resurface. How do we understand this newest obsession with memory? How do we evaluate the paradox that novelty in our culture is ever more associated with memory and the past, rather than with future expectations? There is a shift from history to memory but this time, memory as a concept. Instead it is a sign of the crisis of that structure of a temporality that marked the age of modernity with its celebration of the new as utopian, as radically and irreducibly other. Memory represents the attempt to slow information processing, to resist the dissolution outside the universe of simulation and fast speed information and cable networks. It wants to claim some anchoring space in a world of puzzling and often threatening heterogeneity, non-synchronicity and information overload (Huysen 1995:50).

### 6.9. *Ars poetica* of reality.

Nietzsche saw society as a "hall of distorting mirrors". Pirsig<sup>93</sup>(1994:297&418) in his book, *Lila - an Inquiry into Morals* reflects on the outsider's estrangement from society and others and writes about mirrors in the following way:

**Maybe all you ever see are reflections. Writers, painters – maybe it's their jobs to hold up mirrors. But what controls all these mirrors is culture ... if you run**

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Writer of the book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

**afoul of the culture, it will start throwing up reflections that try to destroy you, or it will withdraw the mirrors and try to destroy you that way ... Mirrors take over and soon you don't know who you are.**

The mirror in Breytenbach's work does not point to reality. As speculation on the nature of things and realities, the mirror leads to a search in areas where things become mirrors in themselves. It is also a symbol reflecting Breytenbach's nomadic consciousness. The mirror is not representative of things, ideas or the concrete mirror itself. The mirror is the knot in a network of ideas. Things of the world, stones, paintings, your mother or father, friend or foe – the landscape – all become mirrors reflecting realities.

### **6.10. Summary**

Breytenbach's image of the mirror again introduces the notion that there is no fixed reality and thus also no fixed meaning of structure. This chapter is an inquiry into the nature of reality. A comparison has been made between Breytenbach and Nishida. Both of them agree that reality is harboured in consciousness. There is a difference between the two thinkers. While Breytenbach is concerned with many realities that are all aspects of consciousness, Nishida, limits himself to a single notion of reality as it is presented in consciousness.

Breytenbach as a Zen Buddhist subscribes to Zen's direct pointing to reality. Breytenbach embraces the notion of the Middle Way in its interpretation of reality. What strikes Breytenbach about the Middle Way is the necessity of movement. It is a line along which one should go.

Utopian thinking is part of the Marxist thinking with which Breytenbach identifies. Breytenbach also states that Buddhism led him to understand the dialectics of Marxism. All



of us are the Buddha. In other words, there is no Marxism, but only a way of understanding such as Marx had. Zen is total commitment, which gives one a certain distance. Because Breytenbach does not embrace one stable view of reality he is radical. When one questions reality, one realizes that there is no fixed reality, which can be encapsulated in a dogma or school or party. All that remains for Breytenbach is a deep commitment to the consciousness-making process.

The mirroring of reality developed as a concept, and confrontation with the mirror image, is not strange about Breytenbach's oeuvre. The notion of the mirror was developed while Breytenbach was incarcerated. The mirror became a very important aesthetic and artistic notion that Breytenbach uses to confront the South African society with their own distortions of reality that they accept as an unmoveable truth.

Over the last few years, Breytenbach has written three disparate dramas in which he revealed a hidden talent for the space of the theatre. Over the years Breytenbach, however, has dramatized some of his paintings and drawings. Both Breytenbach and Klossowski share this insight to portray the dramatic situation.

New Realism, the art movement that Breytenbach is involved in, is an act of irreverence towards images traditionally condoned by the bourgeoisie and the stratified order with their particular taste and aesthetic inclination for beauty and the non beautiful.