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“Labyrinth of loneliness”: Breyten Breytenbach’s prison poetry (1976–1985)

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Breytenbach’s prison poetry is first contextualized as part of a South African subgenre that flourished under apartheid, and then interrogated for its specificities: the singular prison conditions under which he wrote, the nature of the poetry, specific leitmotifs in each of the five volumes published between 1976 and 1985. A psychoanalytic approach is indicated to this strong middle phase in his extensive poetical oeuvre, comprising seventeen collections of poetry. **Key words:** South African prison poetry, depersonalisation, dissociation, *dread/debility/dependency* or DDD syndrome, solitary confinement, Breytenbach’s *ars poetica*.

“Try not to go to prison; it’s never worth it.”

Breyten Breytenbach

General themes and trends in South African prison literature

Under the apartheid regime (1948–94) South Africa became comparable with the Soviet Union, giving rise to a steadily growing body of literature dealing with the experience of solitary confinement, torture and detention, mostly written by political prisoners. In Jacobs’s classification it is remarkable that the earliest work he lists, *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs*, dates from 1966 (1986: 96–7). It is significant that most of this prison literature was written in the sixties, seventies and eighties, reflecting the intensification of political polarisation in these decades, the growing intolerance of the regime, and documenting the drastic measures the regime had increasingly taken against dissidents.

In Albie Sachs’s prison diary he records some of the psychological effects of solitary confinement: “*Sleep is a refuge*, for my anguish is during the day [...] Sleep has no geography. I could be at home”; “The loneliness, the spells of near *despair*, the hours and hours of aching unhappiness, the *contemplated suicide*. [...] Also the [...] disintegrative processes in my mind [...] the feeling of neutrality, of *depersonalisation* and the ridiculous terrors” (Sachs 1990: 49, 186; my italics).

The similarity of psychological pathology, induced by confinement, runs like a thread through all accounts of imprisonment. Escape in sleep, the problem of un-

structured time, loneliness, the torture of solitude, despair, disintegration of the self, and suicidal urges, occur in prison literature as common denominators. Psychologists, lawyers and sociologists have all turned their attention to various aspects of political imprisonment. Foster (1987) used anonymous cases to establish the psychological effects of solitary confinement on detainees. This provides a useful entry point into prison literature, as it enables the reader to recognize common experiential factors and to interpret their effects on the state of mind of the imprisoned writer.

Although there are various categories of prisoners (criminals, prisoners of war, political prisoners, et cetera), the focus here is on poetry by political prisoners, and specifically on verse written from prison. Most South African collections of prison poetry were written during the apartheid era, with a few early poems, such as Joubert Reitz's "The Searchlight" (prisoner of war on Bermuda in 1901) and Donald Snowdon's doggerel about the 1922 miner's strikes on the Rand (quoted in Van Wyk 1989: 173, 263–72).

Dennis Brutus's *Letters to Martha* (1968) and "Sirens Knuckles Boots" (in *A Simple Lust*, 1973) foregrounds disintegration of the self, or depersonalisation:

In the greyness of isolated time
which shafts down into the echoing mind,
wraiths appear, whispers of horrors
that people the labyrinth of self.

[...]
hooting for recognition as one's other selves
suicide, self-damnation, walks
if not a companionable ghost
then a familiar,
a doppelgänger
not to be shaken off. (Brutus 1973: 56–7)

Doppelgänger and "other selves" have strong psychoanalytical overtones. Depersonalisation, more commonly referred to as dissociation, may be defined as "an emotional disorder in which there is loss of contact with one's own personal reality, a *derealization* accompanied by feelings of strangeness and an unreality of experience [...] the experience of perceiving oneself from a distance [...] the terms *depersonalization disorder* or *depersonalization neurosis* are often used" (Reber 1985: 188, my italics). Under the entry "dissociation" in his *Dictionnaire usuel de psychologie* (1983), Sillamy gives a very explicit profile of this psychological state:

On the intellectual level the paradox as phenomenon opposes a potentially intact intellect with an incapacity of the intellect's effective usage. *Attention span is short*, memory is unreliable, association of ideas leads to incomprehensible mechanisms

[...]. Language itself greatly deteriorates from a grammatical and syntactical point of view (telegram style, for example), also concerning vocabulary (the *creation of neologisms*, and in extreme cases, the creation of an impenetrable neo-language), which even loses its function as an instrument of communication. *This distortion totally and deeply affects the mechanisms of logical thought*, which stops functioning in the usual way and recedes to an archaic, magical mode of functioning (unreal thought) (Sillamy 1983: 217; my italics).¹

Dissociation is typified by a short attention span, an unreliable memory, a grammatical and syntactical deterioration of language, the creation of neologisms (to the point where a “neo-language” comes into being), and increasing lack of logical thought processes. Many of these symptoms involve the use of language, the poet’s medium of expression. This reversible process of “dissociative reaction” is brought about in traumatic situations (such as prolonged solitary confinement) and used “to characterize the processes whereby thoughts or memories that produce anxiety are cut off from consciousness” (Reber 1985: 208). Time is experienced as empty and unstructured (“In the greyness of isolated time, / which shafts down into the echoing mind” in the Brutus poem). Imprisonment also necessitates negotiating new concepts of space, as Davies (1990: 59; my italics) has pointed out Brutus writes about “the hunger to be thought of / to be remembered / and to reach across space.”

In his 1977 collection, *Pass Me a Meatball, Jones*, written in the Victor Verster Maximum Security Prison between September and December 1976, James Matthews foregrounds the loneliness, pain and isolation of his situation (“my cell a frost-bound place”; “entombed on the cement floor of my cell” (1, 36)). He refers to “the nakedness of / my hidden fear”; experiences his cell as “an unattended grave” and feels “the slow / disintegration of self” (Matthews 1977: 3, 5, 15). The same problem of time as a burden or an inflicted wound, so obvious in Brutus’s poetry, is expressed here as “castration of self by time inflicted”. The self-alienation which typically results from solitary confinement, is expressed: “i become frantic with desire / to identify myself” (Matthews 1977: 28). In *No Time for Dreams* (1981) the confinement of the body is juxtaposed with the freedom of the spirit, another central motif in prison poetry: “my body is / behind bars but / my mind rebels / and walks freely” (Matthews 1981: 3). Matthews (1981: 50) is also troubled by the auditory hell which prison has become for him: “the echoes of breaking / bones / are the bell-tones I hear” – which Breytenbach similarly describes in *Voetskrif* (1976).

Breytenbach’s *Voetskrif* (*Footscript*, 1976) was the first published collection of Afrikaans prison poetry. (Not under discussion here, but worthy of further investigation are the prison poems in *Skryt* (1972, banned in 1975), written before the poet had seen the inside of a prison). In 1983 Frank Anthony’s *Robbeneiland my kruis my huis* (*Robben Island, my cross, my house*) made scarcely a ripple, as the market was by then being

overflooded with Breytenbach's prison writings – appearing in quick succession after his release (*Eklips [Eclipse]* and ('YK') (*Ache*: this title is truly untranslatable as it consists of wordplay on pain and the "I", plus other connotations) in 1983, followed by *Buffalo Bill* and *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* in 1984, and lastly *Lewendood (Life-and-death)* in 1985). In 1967 Anthony was sentenced to six years under the Terrorism Act and served out his sentence on Robben Island. Although the poems are frail and ethereal lyrical flights of fantasy, written in telegram style, this collection has documentary value because of the detailed footnotes about living conditions and routines in the "Mandela University" on Robben Island. Anthony writes about the natural surroundings of the island, about his childhood in Stellenbosch (there are memories of, and dialogues with the dead), and about sexual frustration, framed within the same unremitting consciousness of time found in the work of Brutus and Matthews ("ons stap sel toe langs die jare", 'we walk to our cells along the years' (Anthony 1983: 62)).

Also in 1983, Jeremy Cronin published *Inside*, 63 poems which are the product of nearly seven years in prison as political prisoner (July 1976 – May 1983). During more or less the same period (1975–82), Breytenbach produced nearly four hundred poems, roughly seven times more than Cronin. Jeremy Cronin's aim is to "learn how to speak / with the voices of the land" to an identifiable, mainly political and oral audience (Cronin 1983: 58). He has a strong political literary agenda, whereas Breytenbach is primarily a poet. The Afrikaans poet's role as political activist only occasionally impinges on his primary calling, although the two do merge from time to time, in the sporadic expression of political intent throughout his prison collections.

Single poems by different authors mostly dealt with the cruelty of police captors, or with the inhumanity of solitary confinement. "A cry from the cells" by Ujebe Masokoane (in Couzens and Patel 1982: 293) describes the helpless prisoner's traumatised reaction at overhearing a torture scene:

A cry from the cells
in the eerie chambers
i hear a voice scream
tearing my stomach

i fear
and grip, and clutch
my head
between my legs
my heart with fear
kicking between my ribs
and the banging
noise

cell-door
in the iron cell
i hear a voice scream
i hear the voice scream [...]

The violent description of torture contrasts sharply with the unexpected conclusion to the poem of dying eyes filled with tears. The use of Afrikaans in this poem is restricted to the single “Baas!” at the end, (expressing the powerlessness of those at the mercy of the powerful), and the communication between the prisoners (“Jong, het jy hom gesien? / Hom gat is stukkend geskeer!”; “Boy, did you see him / his arse is torn apart”). This is a shrewd linguistic device, evoking the linguistic divide between warders and prisoners in the South African penitentiary context.

Pertinent to round of this overview, is Moloise’s “Poem written on death row” (in Couzens and Patel 1986:123), since “*death row*” is one of the central motifs in prison literature and also an ever-present reality in Breytenbach’s *Voetskrif*, *Lewendood* and *Buffalo Bill*. This poem is unique in that it offers the last words of a prisoner on death row:

All the armies that ever marched,
All the parliaments that ever sat,
Have not affected the life
Of men on earth as that one
Solitary life.
I am proud to be what I am
The storm of oppression will be followed
By the rain of my blood.
I am proud to give my life,
My one solitary life.

Benjamin Moloise (executed 18 October 1985 for murdering a policeman)

Breytenbach’s prison poetry in perspective

In 1984 Jacobs identified as “internal exiles” those “who have transgressed the rigid social and political (South African – HvV) frontiers [...] and have consequently been exiled from the larger community by way of detention, imprisonment and banning [...]” (Jacobs 1984: 244). The theme and condition of *exile* (plus the genres of *prison literature* and *autobiography*), increasingly became the focus of South African writers in this late apartheid era. In a later essay on Breytenbach’s prison autobiography Jacobs identified two aspects of the effect of imprisonment, namely the disintegration of the self, which often occurs as a consequence of the *dread / debility / dependency* or

DDD syndrome (see West 1985: 69–80), and the splitting of the self during depersonalisation (Jacobs 1986:104). Both aspects are extensively reflected in Breytenbach's prison poetry.

Harlow (1987: 132) sees Breytenbach as "perhaps the most introspective and self-conscious [...] as writer among the political detainees." For her the function of the prison memoirs of political detainees lies in "'the power of writing' [...] which seeks to alter the relationships of power which are maintained by coercive, authoritarian systems of state control and domination" (Harlow 1987: 133). The writing of the writer in prison has two functions in her view: to sustain his memory, and to sustain his "sense of self and purpose" (Harlow 1987: 131). Clearly as an outsider she was unaware of the extent of Breytenbach's oeuvre and his importance as a leading poet and fiction writer, if one has to judge by this rather facile and over-simplified view. Whereas Cronin was a political detainee who wrote poetry, Breytenbach was an established poet who became a political prisoner. The impetus for their writing differs, as do their priorities when writing. Breytenbach would have continued writing outside, as major leading poet, as unlike Cronin, he entered jail and produced prison poetry with his poetic style and technique already well-honed and established. Cronin's poetry tends to be more community-orientated, partly because he was isolated for only a month (against Breytenbach's two years). Cronin also had access to a prison community, working in the workshops. These vastly differing conditions of imprisonment had strong and differing impacts on the versification of both poets. Rather than comparing their work, it would therefore seem more appropriate to differentiate between them: the one is spurred on to write by the extraordinary experience and his political beliefs, while for the other poetry is a natural medium of self-expression.

Wilkinson's rather unbalanced comparison of Brutus's poetry in *Letters to Martha* (1968), with the prison memoirs of Molefe Pheto (*And Night Fell*, 1983) and Breytenbach (*The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*) tends toward political sensationalism. Sweeping aside all differences in genre, style and technique, she argues rather unconvincingly that "despite their individual differences a common quality is imposed upon these authors' writing by the very fact of their imprisonment and by the similarity of their position as opponents to the South Africa regime" (Wilkinson 1989: 13). A useful insight is however that she points out the centrality of the metaphor for prison as "the archetypal labyrinth" (Wilkinson 1989: 14) in the work of Brutus' and Breytenbach's conception of prison. In Breytenbach's autobiography "the *mirror* is at the centre of the opaque and tangled labyrinth" (Wilkinson 1989: 23; my italics). These two images, the *mirror* and the *labyrinth* are also intrinsic to his prison poetry.

In a further contribution on prison literature Jacobs (1990: 4) showed how prison writing had become in the early nineteen nineties a significant genre with identifiable contours, a distinctive semiotic system with a characteristic central metaphor of "the stripping away of the prisoner's humanity". Davies (1990: 159) identified Breyten-

bach's familiarity with "a very extensive literature on incarceration" as an important characteristic of his prison autobiography. In blending this "acquaintanceship with his own experiences and into his own art" Breytenbach's writing becomes "masterfully parodic". Davies (1990: 159) stresses that he does not imply that the works are parodies, but that they often leave the reader uncertain about the extent to which Breytenbach's work "is either mimetic or parodic, because the composite effect is that of self reflexive autobiography". All prison writing has this self reflexive quality, according to Davies, indicative of the writer's situation induced need to attempt to make sense of themselves and others.

This short survey of criticism on Breytenbach and prison writing indicates an increasing concern with the contextual situation. It seems unsatisfactory to deal with Breytenbach's prison poems purely as literary artefacts which are the conventional focus of a semiotic analysis. The circumstances of an established writer imprisoned for nearly eight years, force the reader to explore the entire communication situation in order to comprehend the emergent poetry adequately. Why was he imprisoned? What were his living conditions like? What were the conditions for writing? How did this influence his psychological state? What does he write about? To whom does he address his poems? How is his prison poetry clarified by his prison memoir? How does this poetry compare with other collections written in prison, specifically in South African prisons? It is in the answers to such questions that the key to Breytenbach's so called inaccessible prison poetry lies.

Key approaches to meaning in Breytenbach's prison poetry

A significant aspect of Breytenbach's prison collections is the fact that the sequence in which they were published does not coincide with the chronology of their creation. *Voetskrif* contains poems written during the poet's initial detention (19 August 1975 to 25 November 1975), and is the only work published soon after being written, as he records in his autobiography: "Even during the period of detention I had been allowed to write. It was something I could not ignore. A voice said, "Write", and I wrote [...] *These all originated over a period of hardly six weeks and were published not long afterwards under the title of Voetskrif, meaning 'Footscript'*" (Breytenbach 1984c: 156; my italics).

The conditions for Breytenbach's writing were defined as soon as his nine year sentence under the Terrorism Act was passed. As a special concession the prisoner, due to his reputation as an established, leading Afrikaans writer, was granted free access to paper and writing material. But it was stipulated that all writing produced had to be handed in to the jail authorities upon completion, and would only be released for publication once the prisoner was set free. Upon release (5 December 1982) the poet published the collections in a chronological order: the poems dating

from the last period of his incarceration were published first, in ('YK') (1983). Using the dates given and events described (such as his transfer from Pretoria to Pollsmoor prison) in the oeuvre, it is possible to establish a chronological order of their genesis: *Lewendood* (1985) = November 1975 to May 1976, *Buffalo Bill* (1984) = June 1976 to June 1977, *Eklips* (1983) = middle 1977 to late December 1979, ('YK') = October 1979 to November 1982.

A chronological approach to Breytenbach's prison poetry seems crucial to trace the development of motifs and the introduction of new themes, whilst hypothetically such an "ordering device" should enable the reader to gauge the cumulative influence of incarceration on the mind and psyche of the poet. One would expect motifs to change depending on the poet's circumstances (whether in confinement or with access to the prison community) and his psychological state. Motifs would plausibly be intensified or abandoned as the years pass, and new ones can be expected to be introduced with the passage of time. When dealing with prison poetry two main issues play a role: the socio-political and the aesthetic. It can be assumed that in the writing of political detainees the poems would reflect two different preoccupations: an ideological intent and a linguistic and aesthetic concern. It is noticeable in all collections of prison poetry by individual poets that nowhere does one only find political poems, but these are always intermingled with other themes and motifs, often of a more personal nature, such as love poetry, memories of happier times, and even verses on the art of writing.

Foster (1987: 136–7) identified four psychological ways to cope with solitary confinement: the use of fantasy and time-structuring, memory, an intense interest in natural minutiae, plus free association about things outside. This list overlaps with Sillamy's description of dissociation. Lack of concentration leads to free association and intense memories, when the attention span is short, memory is unreliable, association of ideas leads to incomprehensible mechanisms. What Foster's results show is a slow disintegration of the personality into various "selves", caused by the emptiness of space and the unstructuredness of time in isolation. In Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* he states that the "individual to be corrected must be entirely enveloped in the power that is being exercised over him", through prison's internal mechanisms of repression and punishment, taking "possession of man as a whole" (Foucault 1979: 129, 236).

Isolation is central to prison authorities' exercise of power. Remarkable is the consciousness of a different kind of space which the prisoner occupies, in Foucault's survey of writings about prison. The prison "would constitute the 'space between two worlds'", between the crime and the return to virtue (Foucault 1979: 123). In Breytenbach's prison poetry he is continually trying to create new space to make up for the absent "outside". In his poetic manifesto written in prison, *Boek*, he describes his journal as an effort to create "inner space" and the purpose of his writing as an

immersion in the “unlimited inner space” (Breytenbach 1987: 9, 67). Consciousness of the restrictedness of the prison cell and the absence of the unrestricted “outside” is thus a central idea in all prison writing. In various ways the prisoner searches to create new space within which to move, whether it be within memory, stream of associations, dreams, or writing, as in the case of the prison poet.

According to Davies (1990: 16), “Prison writing is centrally about violence. The beginning of the sense of violence is the awareness of death. Prison writing [...] is contemplation of death [...] most of the theology of incarceration is coupled with the theology of afterlife [...] concepts of heaven, hell and purgatory are bound up with our concepts of otherness, separation, discipline and judgement.” In this passage violence and death are suggested as central *topoi* in prison literature can be deduced: violence and death. Davies (1990: 44; my italics) also suggests four other central themes: “the philosophical debate within prison literature is often about *sexuality* and *revolution* and *violence* and *community*.”

But of utmost importance when surveying prison writing is “to understand space and the reading of that space. The space in prison (is) both familiar and hostile [...]” (Davies 1990: 59). The juxtaposition between “inside” and “outside” has to do with the conception of space. A remarkable psychological phenomenon which is common to most literature produced by long term prisoners is the fear with which they contemplate re entering the free “outside” world after many years of imprisonment. After a long stretch of time the abhorred “inside” becomes a familiar surrogate world, which is unconsciously associated with safety. Although the prisoner craves freedom, there is intense anxiety concerning the moment of release from “inside” to “outside”. Breytenbach (1984: 319; my italics) describes this moment in his autobiography upon his imminent release: “Often I wondered: what would happen once the day of release was at hand: not afterwards, not from there *on*, but immediately before [...]. Despite what happened today I cannot permit myself to hope. It would be horrible [...] if nothing came of it. Like climbing down from the stake, half consumed by the fire.”

How the prisoner copes in jail, which Davies (1990: 78) describes as “the encapsulation of violence in spatial, ideological and inter personal terms”, is also an important concern in the study of prison literature. Strategies of survival are linked, according to Davies, “partly [...] to the strength of one’s identification with movement, with writing and with self” (1990: 143). This depends also on whether the prisoner is a committed political activist as prisoner, or a creative writer “who has been imprisoned for political reasons” (Davies 1990: 150). It is clear that Cronin’s “identification with the movement” was a sustaining strength, largely absent from Breytenbach’s frame of reference. The Afrikaans poet relied heavily for survival on his writing, his *zazen* and *Tai Chi*, as well as fantasy (e.g. “by escaping through the walls and walking up the mountain to smell spring with its first warmth being wafted down the trees growing on the slopes”) (Breytenbach 1984c: 304).

A poetic manifesto from prison

Strange as it might seem, while in solitary confinement Breytenbach wrote his *ars poetica* (Boek, 1987). The “albino terrorist” (“misfit” and outsider) was cloistered in a cell, isolated from the “outside” world, writing poetry and defining his *ars poetica*. How different is this situation in reality from the dark and despairing Rilke alone in his borrowed castle on the abyss above the raging ocean, writing the *Duino Elegien* (1923)? Rilke’s depression and self doubt must have come to the poet’s mind, as he sat there in Pretoria Maximum Prison, in his own abyss with the hanging place of the “condemned” prisoners nearby, translating Rilke’s Ninth Elegy for his *Boek* (Breytenbach 1987: 64–5):

Tussen die hamers lewe voort
ons hart, so soos tussen die tande
nog die tong, wat, alles ten spyt,
nog aanhou prys

(Between die hammers lives on
our heart, as between the teeth
the tongue, which, in spite of all,
still continues to praise) (Leishman & Spender 1981: 84–5)

The “tongue” becomes metonymical reference to the poet’s survival through his word craft – using language as a means of creating space and escaping from the harsh surroundings. This is why there is a marked absence of referential language to the specifics of prison or history or politics. These prison collections are in reality a continuance of the poetical project of the established poet who is on his own private trajectory, regardless of variance of space and bleakness of circumstance. The poetry is also very “writerly”, with a high concentration on the word – also the words of other poets. This high “writerliness” is most concentrated especially in *Lewendood* and *Buffalo Bill*, the two collections written during his two year long period of solitary confinement. A whole pantheon of great writers make their appearance through naming or intertextual reference: Rilke, Villon, Baudelaire, Yeats, Holub, Lucebert and lengthy translations from Heinrich Heine’s *Der Buch der Lieder* (“The Book of Songs”). In the accompanying manuscript of what later became *Boek* the poet refers to the three types of poetical “manoeuvres” which he uses: conversational poems, fragmentary dream poems and “lace-work”, “crocheting [...] sometimes on old forms or patterns” (Breytenbach 1987: 9–10). Clearly the concentrated use of Intertextuality and translation (as in the case of Heine) falls under the category of “lace-work”, “crocheting [...] on old forms or patterns”.

If one reads Breytenbach’s volumes of prison poetry in chronological order, it becomes clear that *Voetskrif*, written before sentence was passed, is by far the most

positive in atmosphere and the lightest in tone. In *Eklips*, the next collection, this atmosphere is initially sustained, but then the psychological effects of solitary confinement and depersonalisation begin to manifest themselves. *Death, labyrinth* and *the condemned ones* become obsessive themes. The tone grows progressively more sombre and is intensified in motifs such as *winter* and *Judas Eye* in *Buffalo Bill*, also characterized by linguistic disintegration into incoherence (see Sillamy's description of linguistic and syntactical derailment as of one of the symptoms of dissociation).² In *Eklips*, crucial new motifs are *rotting, skeleton, maggots and mortality*, and in ('YK'), *steel wall, steel grave, tungsten bars, Nomansland, Necra, necropolis* and *grayland* recur in poem after poem.

The poet is conscious of what he calls (in a recent poetic creed, *All One Horse*, 1989), the "horrors of our daily reality" and the fight against injustice, but he also recognises another reality, that of the "primordial poetry", which is intimately connected with the natural world. Away from the crumbling political structures his search is also psychological, aspiring individuation and an integration of the psyche with nature. This is, in part, the rationale for the centrality of Zen Buddhism and Taoism in his work: "Let us be where water flows and a tree grows, where there's no conflict, where snakes make us dream and touch the deeper layers of integration. We must be intimate with ourselves, we must uncover the earth in us [...]" (Breytenbach 1989: 39).

Two topics are central in these four hundred poems: firstly, Breytenbach writes about himself, his life and expected death, and his condition of imprisonment; and secondly, he deals extensively with various aspects of his art and his condition as a poet. Poems of love to his wife and his parents, philosophical poems about God and about the human condition, and political poems complete the combined collections. Poetry functions as a lifeline to him in jail; he calls it the "syllabic cord" with which he is linked to "outside", to life and experience. Through his poetry he searches for the unconscious, tries to create space, and tries to find communal ground with other human beings. At times, however, the therapeutic value is obscured by scepticism. "Playing the poet is playing the fool in this word prison", he writes in the fourth collection, *Eklips*. Also: "I have been occupied again with the anti social uselessness of producing poems" (Breytenbach 1983a: 21). In *Lewendood* he sees the poet as "the wart on the feeling places inside the palm of society's hand" (Breytenbach 1985: 128). Yet Breytenbach's cynicism about his art surfaces only sporadically, and at the end of ('YK') he describes his poetry as "making a diamond out of my breath". Judging by the number of such poems in the prison collections, this idea of the permanence of poetry, which will survive the vagaries of life and the poet's mortality, seems to be the overriding one. Whom does Breytenbach address in his poetry? He talks to himself in an attempt to fill the silence; he addresses his wife (or relatives) in love poems; he talks to other poets, and he even converses with animals (a dove, spiders, a grasshopper, an

ant) and Eastern gods. In *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Breytenbach explains the difficulty he experienced as a writer attempting to communicate intimately and explicitly in a situation devoid of privacy:

A bizarre situation, Mr Investigator, when you write knowing that the enemy is reading over your shoulder; when you have to write as deeply down in yourself as you can because you need this to survive; writing in a desperate attempt to communicate with the outside, with the world, with the people closest to you, knowing beforehand that it cannot reach them and knowing also that you are laying bare the most intimate and the most personal nerves and pulsebeats in yourself to the barbarians, to the cynical ones who will gloat over this. Bizarre situation also when you cannot remember what you have written before and you have no means of recovering the previous jottings so that you can know whether you are writing in circles [...] (Breytenbach 1984c: 159–60).

This passage arguably sheds some light on the strangely ‘clouded’, inaccessible quality of many of Breytenbach’s prison poems. Writing in the prison situation was an extremely self-conscious exercise for Breytenbach: because of his constant awareness of “the enemy [...] reading over (his) shoulder”, as well as his need “to write as deeply down in (him) self” as possible, it is as if these poems are doubly encoded. Being a “desperate attempt to communicate with the outside” as well as an effort to prevent the “enemy” making sense out of it, the result is sometimes obscure. One can see this obscurity or inaccessibility as a conscious effort on the poet’s part to ‘shut out’ the obtrusively ‘closest’ readers – the warders. In apocalyptic and satirical poems, he addresses the governing white class predicting the end of the capitalist *status quo*. Sometimes he talks about “us”, which identifies him as part of the larger group of South Africans; at other times, especially towards the end of the prison collection, he calls this same group “you”, implying that he does not belong to it. From the shifting form of address, one can deduce an uncertainty about his identity, a distancing of self. Unlike Brutus, Matthews, Cronin and Anthony, there was no clarity in this imprisoned exile’s mind about where he belonged. He remained the perpetual outsider, quintessentially the wordsmith preoccupied with words.

Conclusion

Breytenbach’s prison period (1975–82) can be described as an existence “in exile from exile” (Breytenbach 1969: 54), because in many ways so little had changed with regard to the poet’s relationship with his motherland. During the previous fifteen years of exile in Paris (1960–75), his poetry reflected the tension between the “here” of Paris where he was forced to live, and the “there” of South Africa, the country he longed for as geographical entity and hated as political state. As a political prisoner inside the

country, he was still cut off as pariah, and the same tensions remained between the two worlds, even more fragmented and distant. His poetry was, as it still is, a means of survival, a last defence against the abyss ...

Notes

1. My translation. "Sur le plan intellectuel, le paradoxe oppose des capacités potentielles intactes à une incapacité de les utiliser efficacement. *L'attention est mouvante*, la mémoire est capricieuse, l'association des idées aboutit à des mécanismes incompréhensibles [...]. *Le langage lui-même est très altéré* du point de vue grammatical et syntaxique (style télégraphique, par exemple), du vocabulaire (*création de néologismes* et, à l'extrême, d'un néo-langage hermétique), style (style pseudo-poétique, par exemple), et perd même sa valeur d'instrument de communication. *Cette distorsion touche globalement et au plus profond les mécanismes de la pensée logique*, qui cesse d'obéir aux règles habituelles pour retrouver un mode de fonctionnement archaïque de type magique (pensée dèreelle) [...]" (Sillamy 1983: 217; my italics).
2. "Language itself greatly deteriorates from a grammatical and syntactical point of view [...] the creation of neologisms, and in extreme cases, the creation of impenetrable neo-language." ("Le langage lui-même est très altéré du point de vue grammatical et syntaxique [...] création de néologismes et, à l'extrême, d'un néo langage hermétique") (Sillamy 1983: 217).

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