Review


The Cross Cultures series is an extensive one, currently comprising 77 titles covering a broad spectrum of topics relevant to the post-colonial study of literature, ranging from such general concerns as *The Politics of English as a World Language* (Volume 65: Christian Mair, ed.) to penetrating studies of the work of individual authors like Wole Soyinka, Mavis Gallant, Wilson Harris, Buchi Emecheta, Margaret Laurence, Eli Mandel, Patrick White, Salman Rushdie, André Brink and J. M. Coetzee. Acknowledging the interdisciplinary interests of present-day literary studies and the problematic nature of boundaries, the series also includes a volume titled *Canada's Best Features: Critical Essays on 15 Canadian Films* (Volume 56: Eugene P Walz, ed.).

Along with Canada and Australia, Africa is well represented in the series. a.k.a. Breyten Breytenbach brings together a collection of 14 essays by 12 scholars on the work of this remarkable South African writer, poet and painter.

Designating Breytenbach as ‘South African’ is, of course, already a highly contentious act. It relates directly to the central concern of this volume (and one of the central concerns of Breytenbach’s work), namely the question of identity.

The title characterises the artist’s proper name as but one in a series of constantly shifting and interchanging personas adopted in his art (and in his life, e.g. when working underground in the 1970s to contribute to the overthrow of the apartheid regime). The painting on the cover further explores the theme of the mask, with the white male figure’s face covered by a book-like object (although his eyes are partially visible through the object), and the presence of a burning hat floating in the air next to him serves as an additional link with many of his other paintings where headgear is associated

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with shifting identities, as pointed out by Marilet Sienaert in her essay, “The I of the Beholder: Identity and Place in the Art and Writing.” Like several of the other authors, Sienaert places great emphasis on the notion of movement or transformation as critical to Breytenbach’s thinking and creative practice. It is virtually unavoidable, given his background, that he should grapple with “the contemporary notion of ‘home’ being both everywhere and nowhere” (224), and that travel and nomadism should have become two of the most prominent themes in his poetry as well as his prose. Identity and creativity are both dependent upon the ability to constantly renew oneself and to “keep moving” (225).

It is to be expected that the relationship with Africa (and the definition of oneself as both an Afrikaner and an African) should be a preoccupation in so much of Breytenbach’s work. In the essay “Writing Africa,” J. U. Jacobs identifies four “points of transition” in “Breytenbach’s thinking about Africa and about himself as African” (153), from “an initial, dichotomous essentialism” to “a narrative embodiment of his nomadically merged African and Afrikaner identities” (153). Memory of Snow and of Dust (1989) and Return to Paradise (1993) are shown by Jacobs to be “rhizomatic” narratives without a sense of beginning or end describing a No Man’s Land, a Middle World whose inhabitants “live in the in-between, and are by definition peripheral, existing in the margins” (173). They are “culturally hybrid, and practitioners of nomadic thinking at heart” (173). This notion of a constantly re-invented Afrikaner-Africanism is hardly surprising, given Breytenbach’s view, expressed in the Preface to Return to Paradise, of all meaning as “métissage, a new mixture of existing truths” (177). Any reader who is familiar with Breytenbach’s oeuvre, including his earliest poetry, will realise that this is completely consistent with the perceptions of reality (and the interaction of language with that reality) which have always informed his work.

Descriptions of geographic exploration, dislocation and relocation abound in Breytenbach’s writing and can be traced as far back as some of the poems in Kouevuur (1969) and, of course, the “travelogue” ’n Seisoen in die Paradys (1976). Andries Visagie, in his essay “Breytenbach and the Masculine Subject,” points out that hybridization, bastardization and metamorphosis are part and parcel of Afrikaner identity as conceived by Breytenbach, and these two processes are inextricably linked to ever-shifting spatial relationships:

Any perception that for Breytenbach subjectivity can be established indefinitely on a solid basis and that the subject can consequently pursue freedom from a permanent attachment should
be scrutinized against the background of his views on the (transitory) spatial self. For the spatial self, the determining factor is not who you are but where you are. This implies that identity is relative and attached to circumstances that will change, inevitably forcing changes onto the identity in question. In the poem ‘ek se plek’ (‘the place of I’) from Papierblom (Paper Flower), Breytenbach refers to ‘I with my mutations and ruins.’ As soon as the self undergoes any mutation or transformation, he or she leaves behind the old self as a ruin which can be interpreted as a form of death expressed in spatial terms. This observation is followed eventually with the line: ‘the pronoun is not a self, it is a here.’ (303–304)

It is obvious that the discovery of merged (and still merging) identities should encompass not only an exploration of the I’s geographic experiences, links and situatedness, his “topo-tropography” as Jacobs refers to it (178), but equally importantly and traumatically, an interrogation of tribal, familial and ancestral links. In “Breytenbach and His Fathers: The Early Poetry,” Louise Viljoen examines four manifestations of fatherhood in Breytenbach’s early poems: the biological father, the poetic father, the divine father and the political father. The relationship with these “fathers” is never comfortable and always complex – not only because of obvious political and ideological conflicts, but also because at a very fundamental level the relationship influences Breytenbach’s position with regard to language and representation.

By carefully examining four of Breytenbach’s early poems, Viljoen demonstrates several conflicts underlying these relationships. In her analysis of “n Brief van hulle vakansie,” the biological father is shown to be at once a source of closure or telos as well as providing the impetus for an alternate narrative characterised by indeterminacy or tukhê. Drawing on Harold Bloom’s views of poetic influence, she indicates how Breytenbach engages in an oedipal struggle with N. P. van Wyk Louw (about as powerful a poetic father-figure as one can imagine) in the poem “breyten bid vir himself.” The revolt against the divine father, also a perennial feature of Breytenbach’s writings since his earliest poetry, is discussed with reference to a well-known re-writing of the prayer “Our Father” from Lotus (1970), which Viljoen describes as “a powerful revolt against the father in general, as the divine father represents in a certain sense the apotheosis of father-figures” (20). This implies that the revolt is also, in part, a revolt against figures of political authority.
The political father is most unambiguously identified and challenged in the poem “Brief uit die vreemde aan slager” from Skryt (1972). Viljoen’s thorough analysis of the poem as an act of political revolt forms an invaluable supplement to André Brink’s discussion of the same poem in the collection of essays, Woorde teen die wolke (1980), which treats the poem “as poem” rather than as a political document. Drawing on Freudian theories linking political power to sexual relationships, Viljoen pulls no punches in revealing the full extent of the poem’s scathing attack on the then Prime Minister, John Vorster. With its healthy balance of theory and practical analysis, this is in my opinion one of the most engaging and academically useful studies of Breytenbach’s earlier poetry to have been published in recent times.

Aampie Coetzee’s chapter, “Poetry as the Presentation of a Representation,” also takes an early poem, “Drome is ook wonde” from Die huis van die dowe (1967), as its point of departure. Drawing heavily on the views of postmodernist theorists, the problem of referentiality is highlighted. While “Drome is ook wonde” is both love poem and literary theory, Coetzee maintains that it “is not about poetry and what it should attempt to do; it is a presentation of what the poem wants to do. Its poetics is its presentation. The process of reading is therefore also a process of construction of meaning, of rewriting” (42). These and other well-known tenets of postmodernism are encountered repeatedly in various guises throughout the book and, as useful as they may be in particular contexts, they do also at times give rise to a sense of déjà vu when reading some of the later chapters, an experience which is exacerbated by the fact that several chapters focus on the same texts: The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist, Mouroir, Dog Heart and Woordwerk, in particular.

Apart from this degree of repetition and sameness, the uncritical and almost universal adoption of postmodern and other related viewpoints when discussing Breytenbach’s work raises another question. At the start of her chapter, “‘I’ is a complex place,” Lisbé Smuts outlines her methodology as follows:

In this essay, a poststructuralist reading frame is used for a reconsideration of the ‘I’ references and the play on the proper name in texts by Breytenbach. These will be read in dialogue with selected texts by Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan, for however much Breytenbach himself might have been disparaging about deconstructive, psychoanalytic and poststructuralist paradigms, his work is nevertheless amenable to such readings.
A number of other authors also admit to being aware of Breytenbach’s critical view of postmodernism, yet not one of them makes any attempt at addressing this criticism. One cannot escape the perception that it is simply too easy to relate notions of a fractured and divided Self, of the continual “deferment” of meaning and the problematic nature of representation and referentiality to theoretical viewpoints and slogans that are by now so well-known (and well-worn) that almost no real effort is required in ‘applying’ them. Surely, it would have been refreshing to see a real interrogation of this apparent clash between Breytenbach’s views and those of mainstream Western intellectualism, especially since these theoretical frameworks have in recent years also come under increasing attack from other sources.

The fact that the use of mirror imagery is discussed intensively in several of the chapters exacerbates the sense of repetition, but this can largely be justified by the fact that the mirror is such a prominent symbol in Breytenbach’s work. J. M. Coetzee’s contribution, “Breyten Breytenbach and the Reader in the Mirror,” raises challenging questions regarding the moral force of some of Breytenbach’s texts. Referring to “Brief uit die vreemde aan slagter,” he says the following:

[T]he position of a speaker speaking ‘uit die vreemde’ (from strange parts, from abroad) raises difficulties of a moral as well as of a practical order. Both speaker and poem (published abroad) are operating outside the jurisdiction of the rival power (the police, the sensors), as they are operating outside the speech community and political community they address. Is the challenge therefore not morally empty? It is not farfetched to interpret Breytenbach’s return to South Africa in 1975 as an existential response to this question, an act by which the poet placed himself on the same footing as the enemy ready to play out the myth of humiliation, incarceration, and rebirth into the authority of the reborn – a myth not solely Christian in its currency – on which the poem draws.

(77–78)

If one goes along with Coetzee’s argument, this is a fascinating example of the way in which Breytenbach’s writing and public life are extensions of each other. But Coetzee’s concluding remarks on the prison writings are even more interesting and contentious:

It may during this period have been necessary to him, for the sake of his life’s enterprise, to denounce publicly his heritage and call himself a bastard, neither European nor African, afflicted with the
schizophrenic consciousness of the bastard. But the very gesture of blaming, so widespread in his writing, mirroring the blaming of him by censor and judge, belongs to an ultimately futile strategy of demonization and expulsion. The poems that emerged with him from prison into the fresh air point to a much harder task: that of living with his daimon and his demons.

Another contribution that deserves special mention is that of Ileana Dimitru, who finds fascinating elements of the carnivalesque in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* and Wole Soyinka’s prison memoir, *The Man Died*. While the thought of associating prison writings with the jubilation and light-heartedness of a carnival may at first seem rather perverse, Dimitru convincingly shows how ritualistic acts of renewal through transformation lie at the heart of both experiences, and how the prison writings of the two authors under discussion make use of many of the rhetorical and stylistic devices of the carnival, including irreverent humour and obscene language.

There is no doubt in my mind that *a.k.a. Breyten Breytenbach* is one of the most important studies of this author’s work to have been published in recent years. The editors have done an impressive job in the way they have managed to create a logical flow through the order in which the contributions are presented. Not only does the reader get a sense of the historical development of Breytenbach’s work, but there are also clear thematic and paradigmatic links which connect successive chapters. *a.k.a. Breyten Breytenbach* is essential reading for any serious student of South African literature.

Anton Vorster