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The Resurgence of Prison Imagery in Breyten Breytenbach's *A Veil of Footsteps*

This analysis of Breyten Breytenbach's most recent work, *A Veil of Footsteps. Memoir of a nomadic fictional character*, concentrates on the manner in which the prison and its related themes of alienation and death resurge in varied and surprising manners—the intimate, almost confidential nature of the text which involves the reader in Breyten Wordfool's world rendering the resurgence of prison imagery all the more disturbing.

In *A Veil of Footsteps. Memoir of a nomadic fictional character*, a work that is playful, light in tone and deceptively simple, Breyten Breytenbach offers a subtle overview of his literary and painterly oeuvre. It reads as a sensual celebration of life and more particularly of the things that Breyten Wordfool loves in life. The reader accompanies the nomadic Wordfool on his travels, and not only spends time with him in Barcelona, New York, Paris and Dakar, but is invited into the intimate spaces that the artist inhabits: his house in the Spanish countryside, the institute he is the director of on the island of Gorée, his favourite bistros and restaurants in the area close to his Paris studio, his working space in New York. The text is illustrated with “unprofessional photographs” (to use the author's own words) that the nomad took with his cellphone—this is the first time that Breytenbach (who is also a painter) includes photographs taken by himself in one of his works of fiction. In spite of its subtitle, it is tempting to read *A Veil of Footsteps* as a straightforward autobiography. The first interview with Breytenbach on the work, published in the Afrikaans newspaper *Die Burger* on 22 February 2008, largely falls into the trap of taking the text at face value. This is conveyed by the kind of questions the interviewer, Murray La Vita, asks the author. Many of his questions focus on Breytenbach's private life, rather than on the text. La Vita wants to know more about Breytenbach's daughter, who has been preserved from public exposure in South Africa, and about his friendship with Johannes Kerkorrel, a South African musician who committed suicide. That La Vita is often off target is conveyed by Breytenbach's polite sidestepping of the questions and by his playful answers. To the interviewer's final question about whether he knows Cesaria Evora, Breytenbach responds: “Deeply, deeply, she is the Ultimate Reader.” (La Vita 13; my translation of the Afrikaans)

A Veil of Footsteps is a deceptively “easy” read, which is not normally the case with Breytenbach, a notoriously “difficult” author. I had the privilege and pleasure

1. All quotations are from the South African edition of the work.

of reading the manuscript and of discussing the work in the making with the author, right up to the publication of the book. The following analysis will take this exchange into account. After a brief presentation of the work, its apparently smooth surface texture will be examined more closely. For closer scrutiny of the overall “picture” reveals not only rough areas, but also tears in the “canvas,” dark spaces one may get lost in. My choice of applying terminology to the text that would normally be applied to painting arose spontaneously—perhaps because Breytenbach is a painter who looks at the world and describes it with a painter’s eye. This analysis focuses on the surface texture—and tensions—of the work of art: the literary text. I would like to acknowledge Liliane Louvel’s argument that one can use the techniques of painting in order to make sense of a literary text: “utiliser les techniques de la peinture pour rendre compte du texte littéraire” (Louvel 230).

The reader’s guide is a nomadic painter and writer, Breyten Wordfool, whom I shall read as a character—complex, cunning and elusive—and not as the biographical Breyten Breytenbach, however tempting such a reading may be. Though the reader may have the pleasant impression of accompanying Wordfool on his travels, into a pub in Bantry Bay, Cape Town, or a restaurant on Gorée Island, Wordfool remains elusive. He is however the reader’s only guide through the shadowy areas of the text, over the obstacles that arise unexpectedly. I shall argue that prison imagery has not resurged in such a disarming manner in Breytenbach’s writing since the works he produced during or directly following his seven and a half years in prison: “On the Noble Art of Walking in No Man’s Land” (the second part of the novel *Memory of Snow and of Dust*), *Mouiroir: Mirrornotes of a Novel*, and *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*. Finally, by carefully considering the terms employed by the author in a conversation, namely “stocktaking” (*betsekopname* in Afrikaans) and “levelling” (*gelykmaak*), I shall reconsider my interpretation of the work as a whole, as well as my reading of the “resurgence” of “prison imagery.”

A Diary of Words and Images

A Veil of Footsteps is, amongst other things, the *carnet de voyage* of an artist leading a nomadic existence. Interestingly, the narrator refers to the notion of a diary early in the text. The following conversation occurs between Breyten Wordfool and a lady sitting next to him on the train to Genoa:

It must be very difficult being a writer, she remarked; you need inspiration *all* the time otherwise you get blocked.

But no, it is not as bad as being an undertaker, it does not wither the hands and anyway one gets around the problem by writing short diary-like entries.

(Breytenbach, *A Veil of Footsteps* 10)²

2. Subsequent page references to Breytenbach’s *A Veil of Footsteps* will be preceded by the abbreviation VF.

The descriptions of cityscapes (streets, squares, buildings, but also pavements and rubble) and landscapes (sunsets, mountains, beaches, and a baobab tree decorated with “fetishes” like “armlets of plaited grass, garment shreds, maybe a little doll” [VF 188]) are detailed. The attention paid to space, perspective, line, colour and pattern makes the reader aware that the observations are made by a painter’s eye—the carnet also brings to mind a sketchbook. The designation of the text as a carnet de voyage is however nuanced by the following quotation from the opening page, in which landscape and page become inseparable and the eye is central:

The eye instinctively deciphers the land as if it were a book telling of riddles and of dangers. Nothing belongs to me and yet I am the proprietor of a slew of stars, of that wind now, of this direction here, of these very shadows snaking along the earth. Each journey will be into the unknown but even so routes are traced the way thoughts and dreams become words and the words become tracks and the tracks turn to sand. Sand moving in a haze over your vision will be a veil of footsteps—my own, those of the ancestors, those of my companions. Birds will remember me in the sky, their flight an arrow in the soil. That’s how you read the paragraphs of my life. (VF 9)

The title of the work is taken from the above quotation; looking at the titles considered for the work will reveal more about its nature. The working title was initially *Doggod*, then, by August 2007, it had become *Word Bird. On the Peripatetic Art of Writing an I*. In a long discussion between the author and his South African publisher (which could be followed thanks to forwarded e-mails) a list of titles was considered, though the subtitle, *Memoir of a Nomadic Fictional Character*, was retained fairly early on. After the first two titles had been vetoed, the author’s new list proposals in order of preference was: *The Lines Have Fallen Unto Me In Beautiful Places*, *Word, Bird, Wind* (or *Word Bird Wind* or *A Wind of Birds*), *The Middle World* (or *My Travels Through the Middle World*), *The Nomad’s Memoir* (in which case the subtitle would have fallen away), *Letting Go* and *The Open I*. This was followed by a second list: *The Emptied Space of the Dance*, *Progress Report*, *Paper Chase*, *Crossing to the Unknown*, *A Word Fool’s Travels through the Middle World*. And a third list: *A Veil of Footsteps*, *The Sounds of an Earth Turning Slowly*, *My Travels through The Middle World*. The final two titles were *A Veil of Footsteps. Memoir of a Nomadic Fictional Character* and *Word Bird. A Murmured Migration of Images*. These possible titles convey the key interlinked themes of constant movement, writing and painting, nomadism (note that *Memoir of a Nomadic Fictional Character* was retained at the very beginning) and fiction. The landscape of language or the language of landscape is a leitmotif of *A Veil of Footsteps*. The “middle world” would refer to a space the nomad—the “peripatetic” writer—enters when writing. *L’empreinte des pas sur la terre* is the title of the French edition, published in May 2008 by Actes Sud.

The reader is warned that the work is not a novel: “My publisher objected that all these loose ends could hardly be strung into a novel.” (VF 10) Thus the work playfully eludes definition. Consisting as it does of fragments, its structure inevitably reminds the Breytenbach scholar of *Mouiroir. Mirrornotes of a Novel*. The two works have in common the notion of travel through landscapes or mindscapes, and the crossing of fictional or meta-fictional borders. The major theme that *Mouiroir* works with—and defies—is enclosure. The main theme in *A Veil of Footsteps* is travel. The descriptions in *Mouiroir* are characterized by the predominance of the non-colour grey; in *A Veil of Footsteps* colour abounds.

Fragments dealing with the same place are grouped together. Roughly, the reader accompanies Breyten Wordfool on the following itinerary: Spain – Paris – Spain – South Africa – Senegal – New York. It is place and not time that structures the work, time being dealt with in a circular manner. For example, the long third group of texts dealing with Spain has Don Espejuelo, Wordfool’s “neighbour,” as central character: the story of his wild love affair with Lola, of his old age, illness and death, forms a leitmotif but is not told in a linear manner. We learn of his death in one of the first texts, yet Wordfool and Golden Lotus leave him in his house, old and ailing (and protesting), upon their departure—the scene is described in the last of the texts of this group, which deal with Spain. It is true that Don Espejuelo is also present in the prison texts, but here the reader has the impression not of resurgence, but of postmodernist “transmigration of [a character] from one fictional universe to another,” to quote Brian McHale, with reference to Umberto Eco’s definition of “transworld identity” (McHale 57). The term “transmigration,” rather than a simple *retour de personnage*, would be applicable to Don Espejuelo’s case, because Don Espejuelo, the protagonist’s imaginary cellmate in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, is not the same Don Espejuelo that is referred to in *Memory of Snow and of Dust*, nor is he the mysterious D.E. of “Re: Certain Papers Left in my Possession” (*Mouiroir*). In *A Veil of Footsteps*, Don Espejuelo is, we are told, Wordfool’s eccentric Spanish neighbour. Characters too migrate in Breytenbach’s texts.

Texture: “The principal subject is the surface”

While tidying his study in Spain, Wordfool rediscovers a postcard from the American painter, Guy Harloff, who quotes Bonnard on the “surface” of paintings, (if Wordfool is “not mistaken”): “The painting is a succession of blotches that are related and form links and end up shaping the object, the part over which the eye will wander without impediment. [...] The principal subject is the surface, which has its color and its laws over and above the objects.” (VF 104) When one stands back from *A Veil of Footsteps* as from a painting, the overall impression (“over which the eye [wanders] without impediment”) is that of a celebratory description of the world. In “Letter to a friend,” written to a dead friend named Petit-Loup, Wordfool exclaims: “Ah yes, but the world is a beautiful place! Even

where it is ugly and polluted and exhausted, mucked up by man in a fury of desperate destruction. Ah yes, this country is beautiful.” (VF 63) In the same letter, the following sentence encapsulates the work’s tone of quiet celebration: “Beyond the indignity and the pain and the terrible deception there is still this, and only this: a sunset, a bird, a hand, a song, a drink, a kiss, a worm, a dog...” (VF 67)

The passage below, dense with visual metaphors and striking due to the rhythm created by alliteration, reads like prose poetry. Note once again the painter’s eye pointing out detail, but also the source and angle of the light:

There’s a magical moment early summer mornings when the world is awake but its inhabitants still asleep, apart maybe from a walker stumbling to work or to bed, perhaps a late stalker, they may as well be talking through their dreams. The world breathes then: it is whispering to itself. Light comes in at a low slant igniting protuberances and carving the grottos of time and space. Believe me for I have seen it—cities also take time out. Wind will shake the treetops silently. In the sea, if there’s a sea, you will see sudden spurts and spouts and spigots of water, white exclamations against the light as reminders of whale fish long since gone.

After the squall a sprawl of silence once more. Then there is nothing better than to go down into Spain where swallows will tumble through the sky and the laurel toss its blooms. Olive leaves are a shivering of tiny silver fishes on their branches there. (VF 59)

Breyten Wordfool, an Unlikely Guide

The reader becomes aware, fairly early in the text, that his guide is accompanied by a shadow or double. Though we are told that Breyten Wordfool prefers to travel alone, he is always shadowed by “I” or by “Breyten Breytenbach.” In this extract of “Paris,” Wordfool is confronted by a stranger who wants to know who he is:

“Are you family of Breyten?” she inquires. (She uses the formal *vous* as pronoun.) I shake my head and mumble. “A friend then? You look a lot like him.” Breyten Wordfool tells her she must be mistaken and makes a show of returning to his notes. Behind my back one hears her saying something to the bird sitting alone but apparently he’s not reacting either. So she returns to shyly confront me. “What are you doing?” I answer that I’m writing, frowning my serious absorption. “What? A book?” I admit that yes, it is a book. (A book of leaving to let go of illusions, I think, and how the hell did she pick on *that* random name? But this I keep to myself.) (VF 40)

The shift from “Breyten Wordfool tells her” to “she returns to shyly confront *me*” (as opposed to Breyten Wordfool, or *him*) occurs almost imperceptibly. In the final line, the reader does not know whether “myself” is “Breyten Wordfool” or “Breyten,” or “I,” Wordfool’s shadow. Although the protagonist is called “Breyten

Wordfool” most of the time, he is introduced early in the novel as “Mister Wordbird,” but also goes under other names like “Wordprick” or “Doggod.” As always in Breytenbach’s oeuvre, the “I” is multiple, or multiplies.

It is worth taking a closer look at the name “Wordfool”: “fool” is phonetically close to the Afrikaans *voël*, deliberately “misspelt” as *woordfoël* in the collection of poetry, *Die Windvanger*, published by Human & Rousseau in 2007. This collection of poetry was awarded the 2008 Hertzog Prize, which is the most prestigious Afrikaans literary award in South Africa. Wordfool/foël also carries the connotations of “prick,” *voël* being Afrikaans slang for the male sex. On the one hand, this wordplay denigrates the protagonist; on the other, it playfully alludes to Panus (formed from “penis” plus “anus”), the protagonist of Breytenbach’s short surrealist Afrikaans novel published in 1971, *Om te Vlieg*. Thus the author not only takes stock of an early work, but develops the continuing leitmotif of the bird. *Om te Vlieg* means “to fly” and its main character is indeed obsessed with the desire to fly. The bird has been a central theme in Breytenbach’s literary and painterly oeuvre since the 1960s. In the early 1970s he sometimes signed his paintings with a small image of a bird, rather than a signature, on the back of the canvass. After his imprisonment (1975-1982), he systematically signed his paintings in this way for a few years. Even when the bird becomes a jailbird, it always carries the notions of flight, freedom and creativity. Interestingly, the Dutch edition of *A Veil of Footsteps* is entitled *Woordvogel*.

Breyten Wordfool is a Fool or jester, and a traveller. As Shaun de Waal points out in his review of *Die Windvanger*, Wordfoël who migrates to *A Veil of Footsteps* as Wordfool, is “the Fool of the Tarot, always just embarking on a journey (inner or outer),” with a patchwork “harlequin outfit” and a dog yapping at his heels (de Waal, online). The dog image or metaphor, overtly present in Breytenbach’s literary oeuvre since *Dog Heart* (and in his visual oeuvre since the 2001 exhibition *Dancing the Dog. Paintings and Other Pornographics*), is present throughout *A Veil of Footsteps*. As stated earlier, the work’s first working title was *Doggod*.

Wordfool is difficult to visualize and when he is (briefly) described, he does not resemble the biographical Breyten Breytenbach (aged sixty-nine at the date of the publication of the work, who is not balding, but whose previously black hair and beard have turned grey and who wears glasses only to read): “My blonde hair has thinned and is now fairer with white streaks, like ash really, the fire gone, and you probably never saw me with glasses. [...] When I start writing the present letter I’m of middling age and build and imagination, with a slight limp due to one leg being distinctly shorter than the other.” (VF 63) The uneasiness the reader experiences in the presence of this shadowy guide is underlined by an American publisher’s request to Breytenbach to remove the Wordfool character and to replace him with the biographical Breyten Breytenbach,³ making the text an autobiographical telling and removing its mysterious dimension, which

3. Email correspondance with the author, between 5 and 21 October 2007.

is explored in the passages evoking what is called “the middle world.” One wonders then what the publisher in question planned to do with a text like “The Catastrophe.”

Resurgence of Prison Imagery

As sometimes happens when moving closer to a painting, a closer look at *A Veil of Footsteps* reveals a rougher texture in spite of the smooth overall impression. It is partly the unexpected resurgence of prison imagery that spoils the surface, sometimes tearing it to reveal dark patches underneath. “The Catastrophe,” a text of one and a half pages, is situated almost in the middle of *A Veil of Footsteps*, a work of 300 pages. From the beginning it is clear that the text evokes a nightmare in which the cosmopolitan Breyten Wordfool’s aeroplane is forced to land in Johannesburg, not his initial destination “by any stretch of the imagination!” (VF 130). Wordfool is described as hanging onto the wing of the aeroplane, alerting the reader to the unreality of the narrative world. And then, in an arrival hall suddenly and inexplicably emptied of people, he finds himself at the immigration official’s table, face to face with “colonel Huntingdon,” the interrogator the reader knows from the autobiographical prison novel, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*:

“So you came, Dog,” the dark one says with the sepulchral voice of the security policeman. “I knew you’d do so sooner or later. I waited. Everything comes to him who knows how to wait. Even death. And now we have time.”

The deserted hall is dark except for the cone of light on his table. Eternal night has folded around us. Soon now, with gestures that are scorched indelibly on that part of Breyten Wordfool which is deliriously mad, those gestures which I have tried so hard to forget remembering, soon the predator will tip back the chair on its hind legs and start cleaning his fingernails fastidiously. (VF 131)

One notes the careful accumulation of detail: the “security policeman,” or “predator,” identified above as “colonel Huntingdon,” qualified as “the dark one,” addresses the protagonist as “Dog,” in a “sepulchral voice.” The zone-, or no man’s land-quality of all arrival halls is amplified by the sudden, inexplicable emptiness in which “Huntingdon” and “Wordfool” face each other. Again a subtle shift from Breyten Wordfool to “I” occurs. The evocation of a “cone of light” underlines the darkness (“eternal night”) that surrounds the protagonist, emphasising a solitary “I.” It is as if the text were drained of colour, leaving only darkness and light. The cone of light in a dark hall, combined with the interrogator’s anticipated body language, announces an interminable interrogation. The helplessness of the interrogated (“prey”) is stressed—and the reader, together with the “I,” is plunged into another, frightening, dimension.

This is not the first text in *A Veil of Footsteps* in which a shift from reality to dream or nightmare occurs. A short text entitled “The Dream” occurs towards

the beginning of the work (VF 27). “In the Middle of the Night” (VF 69), a dream, or an exercise in surrealist writing where the condemned characters are hybrid creatures with the heads of cats, ends with: “And then Breyten Wordbird consciously wrenches himself from the dream (I think). He doesn’t want to go deeper; it is too dark and painful there. I’m lying on my side under the sheet, knees pulled up in the foetus position.” (VF 72-73) Instant relief is offered by the next text. “It is good to be waking up,” a description of Can Ocells, Breyten Wordfool’s house in Spain, starts with: “It is good to be waking up in a familiar room when morning is already yellowing the dark crests of surrounding hilltops.” (VF 74)—returning Wordbird and “I” (and the reader) to the familiar and the reassuring. (Note again the reference to the quality of the light, the source of which is natural here.) Both “The Dream” and “In the Middle of the Night” have titles that warn the reader about the possible dreamlike character of the text. Neither, perhaps significantly, occurs in South Africa.

“The Catastrophe” is situated between the series of texts dealing with Spain and the series of texts dealing with South Africa. Between the end of the text and before the first text dealing with South Africa, an image is inserted (one of many photographs, “taken with an old mobile telephone, deliberately unprofessional,” was Breytenbach’s answer when I asked him about the picture). This image is frightening and resists analysis, partly because one cannot know what one is looking at. A ghostlike figure with an oversized head like a large cabbage and no features can be seen from just below the waist upwards. The figure is slightly off-centre, seems to be leaning forward just a little and is lit from above by an invisible source of light. In both the black-and-white print in the novel and the colour print in the manuscript, strange shapes are visible to the right and left of the figure. The sterility of the blue-green light, combined with the tube-like shapes to the right and to the left of the figure, are reminiscent of a hospital—an association that is strengthened by the impression that the figure is wrapped in bandages (hence the cabbage-like shape of the head). Instantly, a torture chamber comes to mind, followed by prison drawings from *Vingermaan*: condemned prisoners with sacks over their heads (stooping slightly forward), figures devoid of necks, the absence of colour in the prison drawings. And yet the image, the light, the colours (in the digital image of the original manuscript) are otherworldly—from outer-space or under the sea. This very academic analysis leads everywhere and nowhere. When asked about the picture, Breytenbach answered that it was a photograph of a mummified baboon, taken in a museum in Cairo.

Resurgence? The eighteenth-century meaning of “resurgence,” to “rise again,” comes to mind. It is the unexpectedness with which the interrogator “rises again,” or the situation of interrogation “arises again”—and the underlying threat of violence—that makes this passage so powerfully disturbing. This is reinforced by the use of the personal pronoun, “I,” and by the visual quality of the passage—the reader can indeed picture the scene. The insertion then of a real image

reinforces the power of the visual description. It also confirms the impression of otherworldliness the text leaves the reader with.

“The Catastrophe” is followed by a short series of texts dealing with South Africa. The first text of this section, “Mother City,” evokes the gangs that rule South African prisons. The description has a documentary tone from which the “I” is totally absent. It is replaced by a neutral, distant “one” and “you”: “One would tear out the heart of the victim and eat it with blood slobbering over the chin. One forced fear and respect. One was somebody. You were Number One.” (VF 133) In spite of the unbelievable violence (which is explicit, as opposed to the underlying threat of the previous passage), the reader maintains the distance of an observer. One text later, in “Mirror Note 1,” Wordfool denies and playfully rewrites the main storyline of *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*: “The reality is that I was never arrested for political activities back in 1975. It did not even happen at the City of Gold’s international airport as I pretended in later texts, but upstairs from a dingy club in Mother City. [...] Here is the story and the final truth.” (VF 158) The “final truth” is an absurd story of a money smuggling racket in which “I” is a courier. The changing of hands goes wrong and as a compromise, “Breyten” accepts “political charges”: a “general ‘white-wash’ [...] to be painted ‘terrorist’ in order to save some vestiges of honour!” (VF 158-159). But then the airport is mentioned in passing seven pages later, in the text “Maputo,” leading the reader in circles: “Johannesburg International Airport building, this is where he [Breyten Wordfool] had been arrested so many years ago.” (VF 166) Here, as elsewhere (the fourth and fifth, last surrealist texts deal with escape and interrogation), the references to the prison world seem to form part of the personal world that is written and re-written. The presence of these references and recurrent images (the prison, the labyrinth, search-lights, cage-like constructions, the mountain behind the prison) create patterns and an underlying tension, but do not leave the reader with the impression of a violent, unexpected resurgence of prison imagery as in “The Catastrophe.”

“Stocktaking” and “Levelling”

A Veil of Footsteps takes stock of an individual’s world and of his life. As the nomad cyclically returns to his water holes, the artist returns to a life’s production of texts and images. Early in the work, the line “In Paris there are any number of deranged humans on the street gesticulating to the people in their rooms as if to angels in an oven” (VF 40) creates a clear and deliberate echo with the lines “the hospitals of Paris are crammed with pasty people / standing at the windows making threatening gestures / like angels in the furnace,” from the first stanza of the opening poem of Breytenbach’s first collection of poetry, *Die Ysterkoei moet Sweet*, published in 1964.⁴ Echoes with the prison oeuvre have been pointed out.

4. “Bedreiging van die Siekes” is here quoted in its English translation by Denis Hirson, “Threat of the Sick,” from Breyten Breytenbach, *In Africa even the Flies Are Happy*.

In some instances these echoes evoke detail, creating a zooming-in effect as is the case with the description of Giacometti drawing on a tablecloth in a restaurant (VF 36)—an image that also recurs in *Mouiroir*. In a subtle way, Breytenbach's life as a painter is also taken stock of. There are passing references to fellow artists, and to galleries in South Africa and Europe where Wordfool has exhibited. Particularly striking is a recognizable description of an existing etching by Breytenbach, *SA angel* (VF 39), this kind of description of his own pictorial oeuvre being rare in his works of fiction.

Friends are referred to, sometimes just mentioned or more precisely, remembered. Authors are mentioned, some cyclically quoted, like Federico García Lorca. But a quotation from Lorca is given no more importance than a line of graffiti quoted from a New York pavement. When I pointed this out to Breytenbach, he referred to the process of “levelling,” *gelykmaak* in Afrikaans. Similarly, the places that are described as favourite places and that are periodically returned to, range from churches to bistros, to a spot on a Paris pavement, to a baobab tree. In this way, a seemingly arbitrary jogging itinerary on Gorée island becomes a personal songline.

The constant movement from the personal to the general leads to the impression that the artist is trying to represent the world as it is *today* to his dead friend Petit-Loup. Some of the personal images are dark; the text literally becomes drained of colour and the grey world of the prison comes to mind. But any separation between personal and collective pain—and with it the notion of the resurgence of forgotten or suppressed memories—falls apart in the texts that deal with, or attempt to deal with September 11, New York. Their titles “Burning, Burning—September Eleven,” “Measures,” “Mirror note 2,” “16 September,” “Mandela's Visit,” “21 September. Random Thoughts. Images,” “One of these Days,” and “27 September,” give the impression that Wordfool counted the days after the terrorist attacks, while attempting to account for them with words. The list of dates also underlines the arbitrary nature of dates and their incapacity to anchor an event like the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (though it is true that the unnameable event is today referred to by its date, “September 11”). Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse these texts here, their striking similarity with *Mouiroir* must be pointed out. Here, as in *Mouiroir*, vertical cage-like structures evoking labyrinths are created only to be destroyed or never completed, the colours of the world are inexplicably erased to be replaced by an omnipresent grey, people are buried alive and the pervading smell is that of death. About writing in New York during the days that followed the September 11 terrorist attacks, Breytenbach says: “What do you do when it is too dark to sing? You sing about the darkness. Better: you *sing* the darkness.”⁵

“Breyten Wordfool's Black Book of Impressions” (VF 31), though intensely personal, is also universal. It defies linearity by moving forwards and backwards—

5. Email correspondance with the author, between 5 and 21 October 2007 (his emphasis).

and inwards into dreamscapes, beyond time. The places that the reader is led to explore cannot be fixed in time; therefore any reading of the “prison” as a recognizable place belonging to one individual’s past is called into question. The relevance of the term “resurgence,” too, may be questioned, for, as Breytenbach states below, “the rooms” that bring to mind the prison “may always have been there.”

On the one hand, I could claim that these spaces do not exist until and unless written into existence; on the other, it is probably so that they are there in any event. [...] I am talking of songs of consciousness. Consciousness as procedure and as process, not as realization or as product—moving from depth to surface, from light to darkness. [...] So, *writing is travelling unfolding its own landscape*—with the understanding that the landscapes and the rooms may always have been there.⁶

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6. Email correspondance with the author, between 5 and 21 October 2007 (his emphasis).