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Reading and (not) seeing?

Breyten Breytenbach's 'Paris' and S.A. Angel

Sandra Saayman

- 1 *A Veil of Footsteps. Memoir of a Nomadic Fictional Character*, by South African-born writer and painter Breyten Breytenbach, is composed of short texts ranging in length from one to around ten pages. The work, published in 2008, may be read as the travel notes of a nomadic writer and painter.¹ Cyclical journeys to Paris, Spain, Gorée Island off the coast of Senegal, South Africa and New York are described. The texts correspond to an outer reality, or truth, as ever since Breyten Breytenbach was released from apartheid's prisons in 1982, he has indeed led a nomadic life, living and working in one place for no longer than a few months, before moving on. Yet the reader becomes aware very early on that the places described in what he calls his "black book of impressions" (AVF 31) correspond to an outer *and* an inner reality. In places the biographical is fictionalized, and the name the I-narrator gives himself, Breyten Wordfool, is emblematic of this in-between state.
- 2 A militant opponent to the apartheid regime, Breyten Breytenbach based himself in Paris in 1963. His exile was initially self-imposed. A disguised Breyten Breytenbach travelled clandestinely (under the name of Christian Jean-Marc Galaska) to South Africa in 1975, was arrested, and subsequently imprisoned for seven and a half years – for "terrorism."² Upon his release he returned to Paris and to his apartment in the Latin Quarter.
- 3 The note under discussion, "Paris," is the eighth in the volume. It is framed by two other texts also dealing with Paris, entitled "The return to Paris" and "Paris 2." These two texts are long and contrast with the text under study due to the manner in which they provide detail about the area close to the apartment that has served as Breytenbach's base since 1963. "Paris 2" maps the area; street names are carefully enumerated and historical buildings of interest like the Pantheon or the church of Sainte Geneviève, are described. The reader is taken on a walk, is indeed given a guided tour, from the 5th to the 13th arrondissement, where Breytenbach's studio is situated. The reason I evoke these two texts is that they make a point of clearly asserting Breyten Breytenbach's identity as writer *and* painter – a double identity one is also

made aware of when looking at the many covers of his novels and collections of poetry or essays that show paintings or drawings by Breyten Breytenbach himself. However, with the exception of the furtive evocation of an etching in the text under study, the works of art he produces in the studio he so carefully guides the reader to, are not described. This seems in keeping with Breytenbach's literary oeuvre in general: he very rarely refers to (and almost never describes) his own paintings or drawings, even when depicting an autobiographical subject who both writes and paints.

- 4 In the short text this analysis focuses on, "Paris," the nomad's narrative is suspended, and troubled, by the ambiguous evocation of a work of art. The work of art in question is a hand-coloured etching the I-narrator takes to be framed. This paper considers the contradictory manner in which a visually powerful text *avoids* describing a work of art that is nevertheless placed at its centre. I shall examine the manner in which the narrative runs circles around the etching, which remains a veritable blind spot in the text. This frustrating game of hide and seek will lead the ideal reader to turn to the extra-text, the existing etching, in order to try to determine "what this picture wants," to borrow W.J.T. Mitchell's expression (Mitchell). I shall consider the possible significance of the etching technique, which relies on the use of an etching needle (a reminder of the writer's pen) and then attempt to read the image, before re-considering the meaning of the text alongside the unveiled image.

Lying To The Framer

- 5 The text opens in a Parisian framer's shop, thus placing the narrative in a space associated with the visual arts. The I-narrator takes a "hand-coloured etching to be framed" (AVF 39). The reader is given a precise description, not of the etching, but of the framer and his reactions to the work of art:

The young framer [...] has a tuft of yellowish hair on his head and thick eyeglasses on his nose. When I enter the cluttered shop the framer sniffs and sneezes as he tries to keep down a big, snarling dog. He seems quite confident and direct in his opinions. He holds the sheet up to the light, looks at the work, comments on the 'frank' colours. We agree on the type and shade of wood to be used in the frame. (AVF 39)

- 6 The portrait of the framer is brief, but visually dense. Breyten Breytenbach excels at description, "pictur[ing] in words" to use the terms Oliver Sacks employs in his work *The Mind's Eye* (Sacks 239). "Picture[d] in words" here, however, is not the etching, but the framer looking at the etching. The meticulous descriptions both of the framer's appearance and of his professional gesture of "hold[ing] the image up to the light" lead the reader to anticipate a description of what the etching depicts. Frustratingly, the focalization does not shift to the framer's point of view; the reader does not get a chance to "see" the work of art the yellow-haired framer scrutinizes. All the reader knows is that the work of art is an etching, that it is "hand-coloured" and that the colours are "frank."
- 7 At this point the question regarding the identity of the artist is introduced:
- The framer asks for my name and phone number. Suddenly I'm intimidated. Shall I admit to authorship? Or would I rather want to hear his true opinion of the work? Instinctively I say 'Breyten' - when foreign any name will do - and then give my real number. The framer looks more closely at the etching, remarks upon the

violence of the imagery. He reads the signature underneath. Could be 'Bernard', could be 'Breyten'. (AVF 39)

- 8 The etching has been held up to the light, looked at more closely, close enough for the signature to be read. I, reader, still haven't "seen" the image. And, offhandedly, another piece of information regarding the etching is added: the reader now knows not only that the etching is "hand-coloured," makes use of "frank" colours, but also that the "imagery" is violent. In addition, we learn that the work is signed. The description, a kind of anti-description really, refuses to come together and evolve into a coherent image in the mind's eye. Can we even speak of a "pictorial text"? The exercise of introducing the pictorial certainly does not develop into anything as stylistically elaborate as an *ekphrasis*, or even hypotyposis. And yet the etching remains central to the text, and linked to it, the question of the identity of its maker. Paradoxically, the "signature underneath" as opposed to clarifying this identity, obscures it: "Could be 'Bernard,' could be 'Breyten.'" In the ensuing discussion about the identity of the artist, the reader is however given the title of the etching, placed – framed as it were – in brackets:

"I happen to know him. He travels a lot in Africa, to Mali and to...South Africa. In fact that's where the etching was made. (The title is *S.A. Angel!*) That's why it is so violent. The trouble he's seen...He spends part of every year in Mali. Poor, poor continent. Malnutrition and terrible plagues. Paints there. In fact, that's where he is right now. Asked me to have this framed as a present that he intends to give to somebody". (AVF 39)

- 9 This is a rather confused list of stereotypes, deliberately ironic of course, concerning South Africa and the African continent in general, relayed in direct speech. The parenthesis containing the title of the work, followed by an exclamation mark, may be read as an aside to the reader. In his hasty concern with inventing a story, or creating an identity for the maker of the etching, one has the impression that the narrator allows the title of the work to slip accidentally into the discussion. But we do learn, even if incidentally, that the etching was made in South Africa and that its title is *S.A. Angel*: this information is set apart, by the parenthesis, from the web of lies created by the rest of the discourse. The identity of the artist, however, remains vague.
- 10 In an interview following the publication of *A Veil of Footsteps*, I asked Breyten Breytenbach the question, "Who is 'Breyten Wordfool?'" He answered:
- Genetically, in terms of the writing history of the book, "Wordfool" is a descendant of "Woordfoël" – an Afrikaans neologism that could be said to straddle 'Word fool,' 'Word bird' and 'Word prick.' (The title chosen for the Dutch edition is "Woordvogel" – 'Wordbird.') I wanted him to be a clown, a fool for words, a nomad, maybe as free as a nomad and as stupid as a bird and as self-sufficient as a prick. I toyed with the possibility of giving him more of an independent existence, autonomous substance. But why? Somehow it would have been too pat. Let's imagine he's the shadow that inevitably spills out the moment you start writing. The mirror image. Which is a reminder that there's no "I." Because what you see in the mirror is the mirror image. But he's not an alter ego. (Breytenbach quoted in Saayman "Writing is travelling" 206)
- 11 The playful denial of the existence of an "I" (which echoes the game of hide and seek the protagonist plays with the framer in the passages quoted above) and the reference to a mirror, by implication a written mirror, are of relevance to the current analysis.

More Lies In A Parisian Café

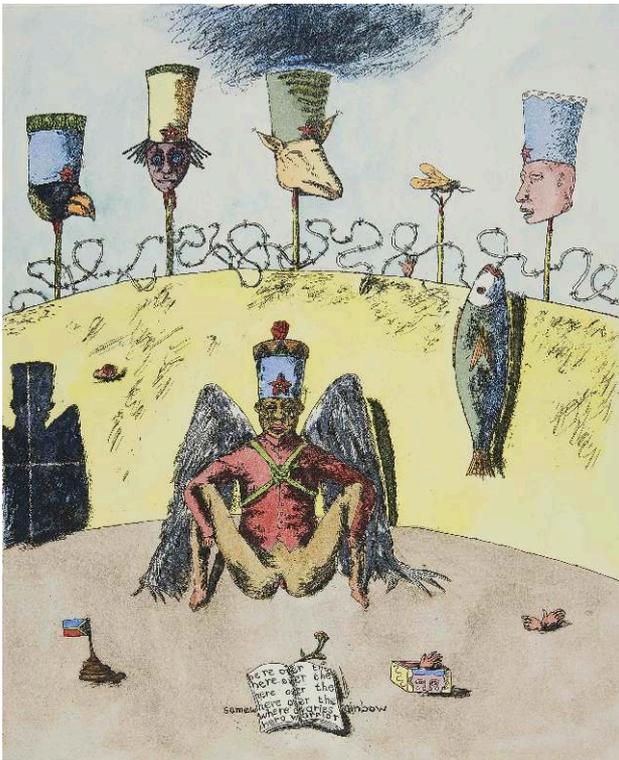
- 12 The second part of the narrative shifts to a café where the narrator goes to “make a note of the ethical implications of the betrayal that transpired at the framer,” in fact, to consider the blatant lie he has just told. In the café the I-narrator is accosted by a marginal character, who is possibly a tramp:
- “Are you family of Breyten?” she inquires. (She uses the formal *vous* as a 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. [...] “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 [...] Some thirty seconds pass. There will be more than thirty thousand words in the book. Right now I’m about to describe an etching showing an auto-portrait of an angel as a small red blob. How to get into the depiction? One is polishing the paper to make a mirror of it and then it is not much thicker than a skin. Don’t write too deep or else you’ll pierce the appearance. (AVF 40)
- 13 Again, it is in a passage where the protagonist is denying his identity that he lets slip more information concerning the etching that I, reader, am trying to form an image of. However, the protagonist does not get very far in his description, does not get “into the depiction” as it were. The description fails to describe and disappoints: “an etching showing an auto-portrait of an angel as a small red blob.” The elusive image calls up another image, in the form of the metaphor of the page as mirror (“one is polishing the paper to make a mirror of it”) and this metaphor leads to yet another, that of the mirror-page as skin (“not much thicker than a skin”). Another image chases this image: the wordplay “thicker than skin [...] don’t write too deep” calls to mind the expression “skin deep.” And, “pierce the appearance,” which has a clumsy feel to it, evokes the idea of piercing the skin. The paper mirror – the description of the etching, were he to make such a description – would be a mirror of Wordfool’s own creation. It would be a mirror in which he would see himself, as depicted by himself, for the etching is a self-portrait. But the reader is faced with a dizzying series of *mise en abyme* instead of an image.
- 14 All the information about the etching given thus far, placed side by side, amounts to the following: The signed etching, entitled *S.A. Angel*, is “hand-coloured,” makes use of “frank” colours and violent imagery and depicts an “auto-portrait of an angel as a small red blob.” Frustratingly, the parts still fail to add up to a whole.
- 15 One could argue that here the pictorial weakens the text, as, by taking up so much space, it creates expectations it does not fulfil. As we have seen, there is something deliberate and almost perverse in the manner in which the text constantly frustrates the reader. According to Oliver Sacks, language “can enable what, in principle, should not be possible,” that is, it can enable us “to see with another person’s eyes” (Sacks 240). The “other person” in the case under study is an I-narrator, himself an artist, who carries a work of art into a framer’s shop, in Paris, the art capital of the world. The reader “sees,” in chromatic detail, the framer looking at the work of art, but never gets to “see” the work. We are given precise visual detail concerning the “weak-minded,” “thickset” tramp with her “cheap and dirty” sneakers, “sad-looking green plastic bag” and “dark” teeth. And we can visualize the waiter with his “sardonic eye and pungent armpits” (AVF 40). But when it comes to seeing the work of art, it is as if the I-narrator, the “eye” we are relying on, suffers from a blind spot. The text closes with the main

character moving away, “limping imperceptibly,” and leaving the reader unsatisfied and perplexed.

The Extra-Textual Image

- 16 For most readers the text ends thus. The ideal reader, or the Breytenbach-scholar, will find access to the extra-textual work of art: the etching entitled *S.A. Angel*. The narrator does take care to provide the reader with the title and medium of the elusive work of art. *S.A. Angel* is an existing etching and was indeed made in South Africa in 1997. The image that the text refuses to describe is neither a drawing, nor a painting, but an etching, that is to say the result of a technique that employs an etching needle, used to scratch off the waxy ground from a metal plate in the places where the artist wants a line to appear, before the metal plate is washed with acid, inked, and introduced, together with a sheet of paper, into a printing press. Several hundred copies can be printed and the etching can exist in more than one state if the process is repeated. The analogies between etching, writing and the publication of the written work are striking: the etching needle is used as one would hold a pen or pencil (and not a paintbrush), the printing process can be repeated to produce the work in a second state as a book is published in a second or third edition. Thus *S.A. Angel* is one of Breyten Breytenbach’s more accessible works of art: there are 50 copies of this etching which was exhibited in Cape Town in 2000, at an exhibition entitled *Dancing the Dog. Paintings and other Pornographics*. It was again shown in 2009 at a retrospective exhibition of Breyten Breytenbach’s painterly oeuvre in Hengelo, Holland, and is reproduced on page 60 of the exhibition’s catalogue, entitled *Raakruimtes*. It can also be seen on page 21 of *Breyten Breytenbach, A Monologue in Two Voices* (Saayman).

Fig. S.A. *Angel*, (1997 hand-coloured etching, 84,5 x 61,5 cm)



COURTESY OF BREYTEN BREYTENBACH

- 17 The etching depicts a half-naked angel, seated in the centre of the composition. This unusual angel wears a red military jacket and an elaborate hat and his wings seem to be strapped to his body. He sits back against a circular wall, which is topped with barbed wire. Planted on the wall are stakes, each with a decapitated head impaled on it: there are two human heads, one pig or perhaps sheep's head and one bird's head. Each head wears a high hat, similar to the angel's hat. Because of the pyramidal composition formed by the angel's position, the spectator's eye is drawn from the red dot at the top of the pyramid (and one has to look closely at that red dot on the angel's hat to see that it is not a pompom, but a fist) to the angel's red sex, which could be either a castrated male sex or a painted female sex. In front of the angel, between his legs, on the reddened sex, is an open book. Not only is the text on its pages readable, but the book is also turned away from the angel, to face the spectator. The first four lines "here over the" is completed in the fourth line with "Somew" and "rainbow" written on the earth on either side of the book, so as to form "somewhere over the rainbow." These lines, together with the title, *S.A. Angel*, give us a vital clue to a possible interpretation of the etching: "somew/here over the/ rainbow" evokes, not only the famous song from *The Wizard of Oz*, but the post-apartheid foundation myth of the Rainbow Nation. This term, used by President Nelson Mandela and later by his successor Thabo Mbeki, was initially coined by archbishop Desmond Tutu, 1994 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, who "re-evokes the metaphor in his Foreword to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final report, which concluded by appealing '[to South Africans] black and white together, to close the chapter on [their] past and strive together for [their] beautiful and blessed land as the rainbow people of God'" (Samuelson 12).

- 18 The clues to “reading” the *image* meaningfully are provided by the *writing* present in the etching: the title, the line “somewhere over the rainbow” and the date, 1997. Combined, they allow us to link the image with the time when South Africa was grappling with tales of human rights abuses through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (or TRC’s) public hearings. Instigated by President Nelson Mandela and provided with a substantial budget, the TRC obliged South Africa to face its past through a series of more than fifty public hearings that lasted from 1995 to 1998. It was mandated to deal with gross human rights violations committed since March 1, 1960, the day of the Sharpeville massacre when police opened fire on unarmed demonstrators.³ More than seven thousand individuals applied for amnesty and acts of extreme violence under apartheid were brought to the light on an almost daily basis.⁴
- 19 To the left of the book is a small pile of excrement with the flag of the “New South Africa” planted firmly in its centre. Disillusion with the Rainbow Nation myth is spelt out clearly. The high wall and the barbed wire may reflect the enclosure and divisions of apartheid, the heads on stakes its brutal violence. However, the arena-like space depicted here also evokes the public arena of the TRC hearings, which were widely broadcast on television. Spectators would see the commissioners behind their table, often in a semi-circle, the perpetrators identified, the Truth of their crimes held up to the light. For, in order to apply for amnesty, perpetrators of violence had to give full disclosure. Thus, when Jeffrey Benzien was asked by his former victim, Tony Yengeni, to demonstrate the so-called wet bag method of torture, he got up and did it – providing one of the iconic images of the TRC. Another unforgettable, and much publicised, image is that of archbishop Desmond Tutu, head in his hands, at the one occasion when he cried. There are tears on the angel’s cheeks and they are even present in his shadow. In spite of the pain and horror portrayed by the etching, one is also aware of a sense of spectacle, or theatre. The terms “hero” and warrior” are inscribed in the book between the angel’s legs. Something that South Africa’s “Negotiated Revolution” underlined, is the instability of such labels. Previous heroes, or warriors of the apartheid cause, like Jeffrey Benzien, were shown to be villains, monsters even, and a struggle hero like Tony Yengeni lost his hero status when he was found guilty of fraud in 2003.
- 20 At this point it is necessary to return to the text under study where the names “Wordfool” and “Bernard” function as theatrical masks, blurring, even effacing, the elusive “I.” This is intriguing, as the text is contemporary; it post-dates the period of Breytenbach’s political exile and need to hide because of his militant involvement in the anti-apartheid cause. It is also interesting that the self should be portrayed in *A Veil of Footsteps* as a marginal character who is always on the move and carries his manuscripts around with him in shopping bags, thus in fact resembling the lady tramp whose conversation he tries to avoid. The etching, we are told, is an “an *auto*-portrait of an angel.” Self-portraits in which Breyten Breytenbach portrays himself as a winged creature (often as a bird, sometimes as an angel) are recurrent in his work. The reader has the impression that the over-representation of the self – through the different names or masks, the presence of a self-portrait, the choice of I-narration – complicates, rather than clarifies, the identity of the I at the centre of the text.
- 21 In *Poetics of the Iconotext*, Liliane Louvel refers to the four poles that are “at stake in artistic creation as well as in its critical system”: namely “the creator, the recipient, the object, and the referent” (Louvel 23). In the case of Breyten Wordfool who takes an

etching to be framed, we first of all notice a *mise en abyme*. Moreover, the creator (the artist who made the etching), the recipient (the I-narrator who sees the etching), the object (the work of art made by him), the referent (Wordfool again, as it is a self-portrait) coincide, and by coinciding thus, the four poles annul one another. The over-presence of the self seems to lead to a curious form of self-effacement, the “blind spot,” or, to use Liliane Louvel’s words, “vacant centre,”⁵ of the text.

- 22 The text under study opens with the line “Where does the lie start?” and then shows a protagonist and I-narrator who tells a series of innocent enough lies about his identity. It is by moving out of the text, by turning to the extra-textual *S.A. Angel*, that I introduced the notion of Truth with a capital T, the Truth the TRC wanted to bring to the light, which would lead to Reconciliation and the closing of a chapter, to use archbishop Tutu’s terms, the painful chapter of apartheid and the human rights abuses that accompanied it. But the book at the centre of the etching is open. Novels, referred to as TRC novels (examples are Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit*, Gillian Slovo’s *Red Dust*, or Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story*) show the complexity of reconciling the facts of human rights abuses, on the one hand, with personal trauma on the other hand. They explore complex, enduring, personal trauma – something that the public hearings of the TRC did not alleviate. For the main characters of these novels, truth does not automatically lead to reconciliation, and as for Breyten Wordfool, the chapter of apartheid is not that easily closed, nor is it that easy to contemplate.
- 23 “[O]ne is polishing the paper to make a mirror of it” Breyten Wordfool says, but the reader will never know what he sees in that mirror; the truth remains veiled. My decision to go beyond the text’s “vacant centre” by finding and examining the extra-textual *S.A. Angel* does not simplify the reading of the text, but does afford us a glimpse into the mirror that Breyten Wordfool so meticulously avoids, and does give us some understanding of the strange behaviour of this wounded, disillusioned I-narrator and his fear of looking into the mirror of his own creation.

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NOTES

1. Breyten Breytenbach, *A Veil of Footsteps. Memoir of a Nomadic Fictional Character*, Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2008. All references in the article are to this edition which will be abbreviated as AVF.
2. His well-known autobiographical prison novel, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), tells the story of the seven and a half years Breytenbach spent in apartheid’s prisons.
3. For a succinct presentation of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, see Leonard Thompson’s *A History of South Africa*, p 274- 278 and for a more detailed analysis of the questions it raises, Kader Asmal’s *Reconciliation through Truth: a Reckoning of Apartheid’s Criminal Governance*.
4. The Afrikaans poet, Antjie Krog, translates the harrowing experience of reporting on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the South African Broadcasting Corporation in *Country of my Skull*, one of the most insightful books to be published on the TRC.
5. The term “vacant centre” was employed by Liliane Louvel in an e-mail sent on 13 March 2012. I am grateful to her for, yet again, helping me take my thinking one step further.

ABSTRACTS

Breyten Breytenbach, who is a poet, novelist, essay-writer and painter, very rarely evokes his own pictorial oeuvre in his texts. An exception is a short story entitled “Paris.” This article will study the manner in which the narrative is suspended due to the inclusion – or intrusion – of a furtive description of an existing etching. The I-narrator of “Paris” takes a hand-coloured etching, entitled *S.A. Angel*, to be framed; the implications of the discussion that takes place at the framer’s dominate the text from this point on. The presence of the artist in a frame shop, as well as the description of the framer closely examining the work of art, lead the reader to expect an ekphrasis, in other words, a detailed verbal description of the work of art *S.A. Angel*. The description of the etching, however, is fragmented, sketchy and elusive. If the pictorial text disappoints, the inclusion of a precise reference to the visual seems to corrupt the narrative. “Where does the lie start?” is the opening line of “Paris.” “Where does the lie end?” one is inclined to wonder, as the text, from the moment the pictorial is introduced, becomes embroiled in an existential and narcissistic questioning regarding the identity(ies) of the writer and painter Breyten Breytenbach. A reading of the extra-textual etching, *S.A. Angel*, which, interestingly, has an open book represented in its centre, will be used as another lens through which to look at the blurred picture the reader of “Paris” is left with.

Le poète, romancier, essayiste et peintre, Breyten Breytenbach, fait très rarement référence à sa propre œuvre plastique dans ses textes. La nouvelle, « Paris », est donc une exception. Cet article étudie la manière dont la narration est suspendue à cause d’une inclusion – ou plutôt de l’intrusion – d’une description furtive d’une eau-forte. La discussion qui a lieu chez l’encadreur domine le texte à partir de la description qu’en fait le je-narrateur apportant une eau-forte à encadrer. Cette œuvre, intitulée *S.A. Angel*, est colorée à la main et existe bel et bien dans la réalité extra textuelle. La présence d’un artiste chez un encadreur parisien, tout comme la description de l’encadreur qui examine l’eau-forte de près, amènent le lecteur à s’attendre à une ekphrasis, c’est-à-dire à une description détaillée de l’œuvre d’art, *S.A. Angel*. Or, la description de l’eau-forte est morcelée, lapidaire et fuyante. Le texte pictural déçoit et l’inclusion d’une référence précise à une œuvre d’art existante par Breyten Breytenbach semble pervertir la narration. D’ailleurs, la nouvelle s’ouvre sur la question, « Où commence le mensonge ? » Mais le lecteur peut légitimement se demander où le mensonge s’arrête, car dès l’introduction du pictural, le texte se perd dans des questionnements existentiels et narcissiques liés à l’identité (ou aux identités) de l’écrivain et peintre Breyten Breytenbach. Ainsi, le recours à l’extra texte, c’est-à-dire à l’eau-forte *S.A. Angel*, permettra de regarder autrement l’image floue au centre de cette nouvelle.

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Keywords: South Africa, blind spot, Breyten Breytenbach, ekphrasis, etching, Paris, pictorial text

Mots-clés: Afrique du Sud, angle mort, Breyten Breytenbach, ekphrasis, eau-forte, Paris, texte pictural

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