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# Breyten Breytenbach's Revolutionary Aesthetics

Sandra Saayman

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- <sup>1</sup> The South African poet, painter, playwright, essayist and novelist, Breyten Breytenbach, was incarcerated in apartheid's prisons from 1975 to 1982 for his participation in the struggle against the National Party regime. On 27 April 1994 South Africa's first democratic elections led to the election of former political prisoner Nelson Mandela as President of the "New" South Africa: thus the South African miracle or negotiated revolution was accomplished. Amongst the freedom fighters who made this revolution possible were many writers and poets who were imprisoned for their "revolutionary" or "subversive" work: the list is long and would include writers like Jeremy Cronin, Ruth First, Fatima Meer, James Matthews, and Steve Biko, the Black Consciousness leader and author of *I Write What I Like*.
- <sup>2</sup> Ironically, during his imprisonment, Breytenbach's poetry remained prescribed academic reading at school and university level and it featured in the anthology of Afrikaans poetry, *Groot Verseboek* (then published by Tafelberg publishers). Thus pupils, students and members of the Afrikaner establishment, deaf to any African National Congress, Pan Africanist Congress or Black Consciousness "propaganda," were reading, and memorizing, Breytenbach's poetry. Popular South African musicians like the late Johannes Kerkorrel, Valiant Swart or Koos Kombuis (who is also a novelist) have acknowledged the manner in which their creativity was triggered by their early exposure to Breytenbach's poetry. *Lady One* and *Mondmusiek* (Afrikaans for "mouth music") are two CDs that offer interesting musical collaborations between Breytenbach and South African musicians and challenge the frontier between poetry and music.<sup>1</sup>
- <sup>3</sup> Although Breytenbach's work has been labelled revolutionary or even subversive, his oeuvre is not necessarily revolutionary to the modern reader in terms of its content. However, the aesthetics of his work *can* be seen as revolutionary. Breytenbach's labyrinthine *Mouir. mirrornotes of a novel*, written in prison, is a striking example. From his 1964 debut collection of poetry until this day Breytenbach's oeuvre – through its unique and unusual embodiment of beauty – has transgressed boundaries, surprised

and challenged rigid thought. After a brief note on Breytenbach as a public figure, this paper will examine a few features that characterize his literary oeuvre.

## Breytenbach as Public Figure

- 4 Breytenbach as public figure and Breytenbach the poet often overlap. Louise Viljoen, South Africa's most respected specialist of Breytenbach's poetry, points out that when one looks at Breytenbach's poetic oeuvre overall, one is struck by his unusual productivity. She argues that his life force and commitment to life are particularly poignant in his poetry and even more so in his love poetry. Characteristic of his oeuvre are his urgent need to communicate with the reader, his constant interrogations about the nature of poetry and the creative process, and his continued questioning of the self through the creation of new shapes for the "I." Breytenbach's oeuvre further reveals his intense involvement in the socio-political context of his own country, South Africa, but also the larger world, and the desire to be a witness of his time, through his poetry, but also the strong urge to make an impact on world happenings (Viljoen 2014, 273). These points made by Viljoen, in Afrikaans, in her recent work on Breytenbach entitled *Die mond vol vuur*, underline the manner in which Breytenbach's creative writing is intertwined with his social and political convictions and commitments. This has always been the case.
- 5 Breytenbach has been known to personally embody his own revolutionary aesthetics. An example is his appearance at the 1973 University of Cape Town Summer School. In his speech, he stated in Afrikaans, that Afrikaans is a "bastard language," a hybrid language born out of *métissage*. In 1976, a French translation of the speech was published in *Feu froid* and the line in which Breytenbach refers to Afrikaans as a "bastard language" is translated as follows: "*Nous sommes un peuple bâtard avec une langue bâtarde. Notre nature est bâtarde. Voilà qui est beau et bon*" ("We are a bastard people with a bastard language. Our nature is a bastard nature. That is a good and beautiful fact." [Breytenbach 1976, 115, my translation]). This speech heavily criticized the apartheid government, but that was not the main reason for the government's outrage. The fact is that Breytenbach, a "white" Afrikaner, had done something that was inconceivable from the Afrikaner government's point of view. It was indeed revolutionary to publicly criticize the Afrikaner government in beautiful Afrikaans and to furthermore call the Afrikaans language a "bastard language." From the Afrikaner government's point of view, Breytenbach had betrayed his own people.
- 6 Breytenbach's speech received a standing ovation, and from this moment onwards the South African security police started following him. Two years later he was sentenced to nine years in prison, for terrorism. With the long title of his prison memoir, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Breytenbach points both to the label "terrorist" his "betrayal" had afforded him, but also to the unstable nature of "truth" with a capital T. By referring to himself as "albino," he refuses the arbitrary "racial" qualifications of apartheid. Thus this title is itself revolutionary, in that it overthrows the "racial" categories of apartheid: Breytenbach refuses the label "white Afrikaner" and creates a unique category: "albino terrorist." In this work he not only shares his intimate experience of incarceration, but describes the South African prison system with as much veracity as possible, with the aim of denouncing it. In the end notes to *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Breytenbach states that "prisons are pretty much the

same the world over” and then expresses the following conviction: “Never before has it become so all-important for all of us – especially the most ‘ordinary’ citizen – to struggle with all the inventiveness at our disposal against the dehumanization of man” (1984b, 339).

- 7 There are many examples of actions that mark Breytenbach's public and political commitment to transformation in South Africa – I shall briefly introduce three. In all three cases Breytenbach underlined the role culture must play in political transformation. In 1987, while still in exile, Breytenbach was involved in organizing the meeting between members of IDASA (Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa; established by Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert and Alex Boraine) and the ANC, then still banned, in Dakar, Senegal.<sup>2</sup> The ANC delegates were led by Thabo Mbeki, the future president of South Africa. This meeting between Afrikaner and ANC intelligentsia sped up the negotiation process in South Africa.
- 8 The second example is Breytenbach's open letter, dated 16 April 1991, addressed to future president Nelson Mandela a year after his release from prison in February 1990. In this letter, published in a prominent Sunday newspaper (and later re-published in *The Memory of Birds in Times of Revolution*), Breytenbach expressed his concern about the level of “state and communal violence” (1996, 74) in South Africa and underlined Mandela's role in leading the country out of the cycle of violence. Breytenbach also reiterated his allegiance to the ANC<sup>3</sup> and expressed his firm belief that F.W. De Klerk and the NP were then practicing “a scorched earth policy in moral, political and human terms” (77); that the NP government was actually maintaining the violence between Inkatha Freedom Party and ANC supporters in the Natal region. This fact was later confirmed.
- 9 Thirdly: when Nelson Mandela came into power, and “while the champagne [was] still bubbling” as he puts it (82) Breytenbach was the first left-wing figure to address a critical open letter, dated 17 May 1994, to the Rainbow Nation's icon. In it, Breytenbach adopts a stance of “critical loyalty” towards Mandela (79), embodying what Gayatri Spivak, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, calls “a persistent critique of what we cannot not want” (2003, 110, my emphasis). Interestingly, Breytenbach urged Mandela to set up a “national convention of reconciliation [...] articulated region by region and district by district” (86). The Commission for Truth and Reconciliation was indeed to be one of the major achievements of Mandela's presidency.

## The Aesthetics of Breytenbach's Writing

- 10 Breytenbach was incarcerated for “terrorism” from 1975 to 1982, the first two years of which were spent in solitary confinement in Pretoria's Maximum Security Prison. Immediately after sentence was passed, an international petition was launched to obtain permission for him to write and to paint. Breytenbach never obtained permission to paint in prison, but permission to write was granted on condition that he handed in the day's writing to the prison authorities at the end of every day: this fragmentary writing led to *Mouiroir. mirrornotes of a novel*, a work that can be seen (and has in fact been read by critics) as the shadow or double of his later *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*. The shadow-status of *Mouiroir* seems to be suggested by the refusal to use capitals in the subtitle, “*mirrornotes of a novel*” as opposed to “*Mirrornotes of a*

*Novel*,” where the capital “N” would have implied something more accomplished than “notes.” *Mouiroir* is a complex work that some critics call unreadable but that can be read, as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere, when read as a labyrinth. Though the writing in places takes on qualities of automatic writing as practised by the surrealists, *Mouiroir* is in fact a remarkably structured work if one takes into account the fact that Breytenbach could never refer back to previous pages. Rosemary Jolly underlines the significance of the writing act for Breytenbach as prisoner: “By writing *Mouiroir*, Breytenbach literally gives himself an alternative history to that of his victimization. This history does not erase or replace that of his victimization, but it allows him to be something in addition to, something other than, victim” (1996, 74).

- 11 *Mouiroir* draws the reader into the prisoner’s inner world. It evokes grey deserts, mirrors, labyrinths and minotaurs (as opposed to the Minotaur) and contains surprising reflections like: “But everywhere behind us the mirrors are growing deaf. Or pulling their own faces. When the image is gone, the mirror reigns” (1984a, 91). The mirror, a leitmotif in *Mouiroir*, is also embedded in the title of the work, as Breytenbach confirms in an interview with Claude Wauthier, quoted in Hans-Georg Golz’s *Staring at Variations*: “For me, the word ‘mouiroir’ not only evokes ‘la mort,’ death, but also ‘le miroir,’ the mirror, in which one sees oneself dying, alone, like the prisoner in his cell” (1995, 37).
- 12 The fragmentary texts that compose *Mouiroir* offer the reader no respite and meaning remains elusive. The descriptive passage below is an extract from the text entitled “Wiederholen”<sup>4</sup> and is composed of one long, masterfully composed sentence. It is both a sample of the aesthetics of Breytenbach’s prison writing and an example of the prisoner-narrator deprived of his paintbrush who paints with words in order to evoke a “land,” or possibly a mindscape, that is qualified as “terrible, sublime, massive, majestic in its absolute barrenness” (Breytenbach 1984a, 24):

Purple it was then, brownish at times, depending on the cracking of day or the twilight of evening – but the dominant colour scheme of this naked world was grey, a hundred different shades of grey, starting with *the wet ashen colour deep under the wings of a broody speckled hen*, passing through *the nearly transparent silver of falling rain to the hard glitter of a blue-grey rock ledge in the sun*, and stone reefs and harshness were the most common characteristics of this area, but despite the nudity it wasn’t cruel or sore: all these hues of greys surged and heaved, a gigantic play of aloof light and shade washing over the expanses to give contour and nearness and mobility to a circumscribed plot of earth here, and there again to sombreness, a depth, a mystery, a surfaceless mirror (25, my emphasis).

- 13 The imagination is challenged by a passage like the above: the emphasised lines require the reader to imagine precise shades of grey. The sentence runs along, one image calling up yet another, to end with a final, stark metaphor for the land: “a surfaceless mirror.” As is the case throughout *Mouiroir*, the reader has the sense that the “naked world” described metaphysically reflects the bland prison environment and, possibly, the effect the grey absence of texture potentially has on the prisoner’s mind. *Mouiroir*, by offering troubling, yet detailed imagery like the above, breaks through the blandness of prison non-existence and resists the dulling of the mind. The reader is both taken into the prison world and, like the prisoner, invited to resist it. If what is described is indeed a mindscape, this passage also bears witness to the prisoner’s sanity: the narrator maintains control of a long, winding, descriptive sentence, creating beauty out of nothing, whilst demonstrating that he has not lost control of the verb.

- 14 In an article entitled "A Poet in Prison" J.M. Coetzee describes the characteristics of Breytenbach's prison writing as follows:

A feature of Breytenbach's poetry is that it stops at nothing: there is no limit that cannot be exceeded, no obstacle that cannot be leaped, no commandment that cannot be questioned. His writing characteristically goes beyond, in more senses than one, what one had thought could be said in Afrikaans. The pages of *True Confessions* that stand out, that could have been written by no one else, are those in which he tries to feel his way into the experience of the condemned man, into the experience of death itself, and then into the moral world of the men who order deaths, build prisons, carry out tortures, and then into the very interior of the mad thinking of "security" itself. (1985, 74)

- 15 The following extract from *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* illustrates Coetzee's point:

We have built the mazes, the high walls from behind which we stare at the blocked-off sky. We take with us the images. We have to go down corridors, we have to have keys, we must shout and plead at the gates for guardians to let us through... to lead us ever deeper into the inner sanctum. To where the noose of the penitent waits. To where the altar of the State is erected. In the final heart of loneliness. We are the wind and we are the birds, and the singing, singing of the rope.

It must be like a wall. Very often – no, all the time really – I relive those years of horror and corruption, and I try to imagine, as I did then with the heart an impediment to breathing, what it must be like to be executed. What it must be like to be. Executed." (1984a, 215)

- 16 Until it was abolished in 1995, capital punishment in South Africa took the form of hanging.<sup>5</sup> In Pretoria's Central Prison condemned prisoners, the majority of whom were black, were hanged: "Hanged by the passage of breath and of words" (215) as Breytenbach puts it in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*. Clearly the passage quoted speaks from the inside of the prison (from 1975 to 1977 Breytenbach was held in the same corridor as the prisoners awaiting execution), but also functions at an allegorical level: scathing criticism underlies the comparison between the gallows and an altar. The walls evoke prison walls but also the invisible walls of segregation and the noun "guardians" refers to prison warders but also to the various guardians of the racist regime, be they the security police or the censorship board. We note here the manner in which the metaphor of the labyrinth affects the structure of the sentences. By the use of "we" ("We have to go down corridors"), the reader is invited into the labyrinth represented by both the prison and the winding sentences that describe it. The aesthetics particular to Breytenbach's writing can furthermore be detected in the fragmentation of the sentence: "What it must be like to be. Executed." Here visual form is given to the cut between life and death.
- 17 Often in Breytenbach's work death by hanging is associated with decapitation, a characteristic I explored in *Breyten Breytenbach. A Monologue in Two Voices* with the help of Julia Kristeva's *Visions capitales*. Breytenbach is also a painter and in many self-portraits he depicts himself as decapitated; sometimes one has to look carefully at his self-portraits to notice the thin line that separates the head from the rest of the body. The prison (and particularly execution by the apartheid state) haunts Breytenbach's oeuvre to this day and manifests itself in recurrent prison imagery in both his literary and painterly production. In dark and frightening passages like the following, an autobiographical character named Breyten Wordfool finds himself unexpectedly face to face with "colonel Huntingdon" the man who interrogated Breytenbach during his

period in solitary confinement (his interrogation is related in *The True Confessions*): “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” (Breytenbach 2008, 131).<sup>6</sup>

- 18 The way Breytenbach's writing “*stop*” at nothing,” to use J.M. Coetzee's words, can again be observed in the opening of an address Breytenbach gave in 1990 in Stellenbosch, weeks after it became possible for exiles to return to South Africa. Stellenbosch University, where many South African ministers and presidents received their secondary education, at the time still had a rector who was a member of the *broederbond*, a secret organization composed of powerful white Afrikaner “brothers.” Breytenbach was well aware of the fact that the security police was following his movements during his stay in the country. Dressed in the black, green and gold colours of the ANC flag, thus literally embodying his own political allegiance, he opened his speech as follows:

Ladies and gentlemen, members of the police, the security police, National Intelligence, Military Intelligence, Civil Cooperation Bureau, Special Operations, Municipal security, spies, agents, infiltrators, grasses, grey shirts and gray shirts, moles, operators, hitmen, handlers, car bomb artists, paymasters, Broederbonders and other intriguers and plotters and schemers and wangers limited, inner-sanctum strategists, public saints and private sinners, deeply troubled intellectuals, Total Responders, ex-torturers, inquisitors, confidential advisors, stable-lads, courtiers and courtesans, frustrated functionaries and jacks-in-office, future élite of the people, fellow-travellers, deserters, runaways, movements groupies, hangers-on, henchmen, musket-bearers, quitters, hands-uppers, scabs and scallywags, blue-eyed boys, moral rearers of the National Party, federated Afrikaner culture carriers and cultured crust and cultural workers and vultures *stop*...*stop* – in short (because I don't wish to be ill-behaved toward anybody), my dearly beloved fellow South Africans (1996, 24).

The list of “fellow South Africans” that precedes the speech is longer than a page and one has the impression that when Breytenbach reaches the end of the list it is not because he has run out of ideas, but out of time. The reaction to these opening lines was nervous shifting, laughter, and clearing of throats.<sup>7</sup>

- 19 Mongrelisation, hybridity, bastardisation, mixing – these are terms that carry positive connotations and are celebrated in Breytenbach's work. His own use of the Afrikaans language most strikingly conveys this. It is of course Breytenbach's Afrikaans poetry that is revolutionary in the sense that it led to profound changes in Afrikaans poetry as a whole: not only in terms of what Afrikaans could say, but also in how it could be said. One of Breytenbach's first public lectures after he was free to return to the country in 1990 was a lecture at the University of the Western Cape, a “coloured” university during apartheid. He was asked about the colourful Afrikaans he speaks and answered jokingly that it was a good thing he had been to prison, otherwise he might have spoken Afrikaans like an Afrikaans professor. “Afrikaans” contains “Afrikaan” – Breytenbach claims an African identity and his implication in African affairs is concrete: for ten years he directed the Gorée Institute on the Island of Gorée, off the coast of Senegal, for example.
- 20 In *White Writing* J.M. Coetzee refers to white South Africans as “people no longer European, not yet African” (1988, 11). The general opinion that writers like Coetzee, Gordimer and Brink were writing for a sophisticated, liberal, *European* audience does

not, I believe, apply to Breytenbach. In South Africa Breytenbach's readers include people who were formerly labelled "black" or "coloured."

- 21 From the start, Breytenbach's work is characterized by a reaching out to other cultures, other ways of seeing the world and other ways of being in the world. Though from a Calvinist background, he became a practising Zen Buddhist in the late 1950s and remains a Zen Buddhist to this day; this informs and forms his writing, notably his poetry. A short extract from the seventh poem from *Voice Over. A nomadic conversation with Mahmoud Darwish*, published in 2009, conveys a minimalism that may be related to a Zen aesthetic:

sleepless snipers never miss  
blood  
and blood  
and blood (26)

The blank spaces allow this poem to breathe and its form recalls other poems in which Breytenbach writes about breathing and Zen meditation. Here the poem is a minimalist and powerful meditation on the death of (Palestinian) children killed by snipers. The value and fragility of life are underlined in the closing lines, "this earth is smaller more silent more black / than the blood of its children" (26).

- 22 The influence of apartheid on literature was "imaginatively stultifying" and literature produced during this period in some ways partook of apartheid's "drabness" (Frenkel and MacKenzie 2010, 3). Albie Sachs, a Freedom fighter and Constitutional Court judge, refers to the "ghettoes of the apartheid imagination" (1990, 19). Breytenbach's work is never a macabre looking in: even in his darkest work, *Mouir*, death metamorphoses and decomposition feeds life.<sup>8</sup> In *Painting the Eye*, the book compiled to accompany his first one-man exhibition in South Africa, held in Cape Town in 1994, Breytenbach writes about the act of painting. The following passage brings the labyrinth and the Minotaur, themes found in his prison literature, into the creative space of the artist's studio:

The true dialogue in the labyrinth of the workshop is not between artist and idea (conception, intention, emotion) or between Minotaur and death, but with the materials. The hand in any event is discovering and tracing a known route. The give-and-take is among colours and brushes and canvas and pencils and paper. The relationships involve notions of favouritism, manipulation, cooptation, even of justice however rough. (Breytenbach 1993, 59)

- 23 The element of surprise is an ingredient of Breytenbach's particular aesthetics. We note here the personification of the working material ("colours and brushes and canvas and pencils and paper") said to be involved with each other in "relationships" that recall those taking place between prisoners ("favouritism, manipulation, cooptation"). In this way the theme central to Breytenbach's prison writing, namely that of the prisoner (or "Minotaur") in the heart of a grey labyrinth, a place of death, is metamorphosed and recycled in an unexpected way. The Breytenbach-scholar will however be sensitive to echoes with the death-world of the labyrinths described in the prison oeuvre and therefore remain on guard when reading a passage like the above.
- 24 Literature that opposed apartheid and also literature produced in the years immediately following apartheid is "a space of persistent trauma and anguish," according to Elleke Boehmer (2012, 30). The South African writer Ivan Vladislavić, quoted in *Marginal Spaces*, explains the attention he pays in his writing to the detail of the everyday: "But the world is already so overloaded with big stories and important

information that the small and peripheral has come to me to seem as positive value” (Gaylard 2011, 1). One is reminded of Njabulo Ndebele’s famous call for a return to the “ordinary” in his well-known collection of critical essays, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*. Breytenbach’s beautifully crafted poems convey his love for trees and birds, chameleons and butterflies, food, and colour. In *Dog Heart*, he describes an “enormous belhambra tree” by using intriguing imagery: “Call it the singing tree. All day long a whole vocabulary of bees will buzz among the branches, humming the entire tree with their hungry sound, so that one may hear it from a distance with one’s eyes closed” (1998, 75, my emphasis). His poetry celebrates the textures and small pleasures of “everyday lovemaking life” as he puts it in the sixth poem in the collection *Voice Over*, a work in which Breytenbach is in dialogue with his deceased friend Mahmoud Darwish. Below is an extract from that poem:

we shall be a people when we bleed and mock the sultan  
and the sultan’s courtesans and clowns in council of state  
without being dragged off to court  
we shall be a people when the poet erotically praises  
the dancer’s belly as bleached as a shell  
and as sweetly salt as an oyster (2009b, 22)

- 25 The metaphor is one of Breytenbach’s most powerful tools and his work often displays a playful awareness of this, as in this extract from the eighth poem of *Voice Over*:

to be is to keep moving  
through the declensions of dying  
looking for magical scripts in the ash  
for the line that may spit a perfect metaphor  
past the wrong taste of tongue  
rotting in its mouth (27)

- 26 When looking at a bookcase of Breytenbach’s works published by a variety of publishers over many years, one is struck by the original shape and texture of some of Breytenbach’s published works. It is true that, when possible, Breytenbach involves himself in the design of the covers of his books, often making use of his own paintings, drawings or etchings. Being a practising Zen Buddhist, he has a preference for publications with soft covers as opposed to glossy hard-covers.
- 27 In 1969, five years before the independent Cape Town-based publisher Buren went bankrupt after fighting the censorship board over André Brink’s *Kennis van die Aand* (*Looking on Darkness*), it published Breytenbach’s collection of Afrikaans poems, *Kouevuur*. Quite a few poems were censored and could not be published. Buren published the censored poems separately in a thin, soft-cover collection entitled *Oorblyfsels* (meaning “Leftovers”). It was distributed clandestinely. Archipelago Books’ 2009 edition of *Voice Over. A nomadic conversation with Mahmoud Darwish* is another example of an interesting aesthetic choice in terms of the physical appearance of a collection of poetry. The work, 12 x 14 cm, is tiny, almost square and printed on soft paper: it is a small, beautiful object, created in memory of Mahmoud Darwish and in celebration of a friendship. This choice too embodies Breytenbach’s revolutionary aesthetics: he pays homage to Darwish in work that does not shout but whispers – and fits into the palm of the reader’s hand.
- 28 It was not the aim of this short article to offer a complete overview of an artist who has been producing poetry, literature, essays, plays and paintings for 50 years. By briefly touching on examples of Breytenbach’s literary oeuvre, I have argued that to the

contemporary reader the *content* of Breytenbach's work is not revolutionary. His work embodies unwavering ethical values and his writing is the tool he uses and has used to attack dangerous ideologies – whether those be upheld by a past apartheid government or by a more recent Jacob Zuma. His work has been labelled revolutionary, and so subversive that he himself was not allowed to read his own poetry while in prison. But the revolutionary quality of his work clearly lies elsewhere: it can be found in the power of his metaphors, the surprising structures (and sometimes length) of his sentences, his awareness of the plasticity of poems, the texture of his grammar, and the manner in which his texts refuse the reader the respite of easy interpretation.

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## NOTES

1. Amazon offers MP3 downloads of *Lady One*.
2. Breytenbach was aided by Danielle Mitterrand and Abdou Diouf, the Senegalese President. 61 IDASA delegates and 17 ANC delegates attended.
3. "The ANC is a resistance movement fashioned from the suffering of generations, embodying the search for justice of a people, the only organization capable of preserving and perhaps realizing the dream of South Africanness" (Breytenbach 1996, 76).
4. Some of the texts that compose *Mouir* were initially written in Afrikaans and translated by Breytenbach himself prior to publication. "Wiederholen" was initially written in Afrikaans (conversation with the author, 2001).

5. Capital punishment (executed in Pretoria Central Prison) was abolished in South Africa in 1995 after a four-year moratorium that started in February 1990.
  6. I explored the manner in which the prison and related themes like interrogation and alienation resurge in Breytenbach's later work in an article entitled "The Resurgence of Prison Imagery in Breyten Breytenbach's *A Veil of Footsteps*" (Saayman 2008).
  7. I was present at this event and remember my own sense of amazement as well as my admiration for Breytenbach's audacity and creativity as he read his seemingly never-ending list without batting an eye, whereas the audience became increasingly nervous.
  8. Guillaume Cingal has written eloquently on the theme of metamorphosis central to Breytenbach's writing.
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## ABSTRACTS

This article takes a retrospective look at the literary production of the South African writer and painter, Breyten Breytenbach. It argues that the revolutionary quality of this controversial author's texts is to be found in the form his writing adopts, that is to say in the texture of his syntax and the power of his metaphors, rather than in the content of his novels, poems, short stories or essays.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Breytenbach (Breyten), apartheid, Afrikaans, prison literature, "New" South Africa, hybridity

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