

*The Martian Descends:
The Poetry of Breyten Breytenbach*

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Tell me of my people
Speak, break open your bitter breath
Let your talk fill my night with
Southern Crosses.¹

IT WAS NOT UNTIL THE LATE SEVENTIES that readers of English were at last able to form their own impressions of the work of the Afrikaans poet Breyten Breytenbach. By that time, he was already two years into a long prison sentence, following a decade in which he had published ten volumes of poetry and three of prose. Those volumes had already made him the most celebrated and discussed Afrikaans writer of his remarkable generation; a generation which includes the novelists André Brink and J. M. Coetzee and the poet Uys Krige.

Breytenbach was born into a rural community in the Western Cape in 1939 and left South Africa twenty years later for two years of wandering, which ended when he settled in Paris and began painting. Soon afterwards he fell in love with and married the Vietnamese girl Lien Yolande, the subject of so much of his poetry. Under South Africa's wierd racial laws, the mere fact of this marriage seemed to cut off the possibility of his return. After repeated refusals, he was, however, permitted to make a three-month visit with her late in 1973. Two years later he returned in disguise under a false identity. He was picked up at the airport on the point of departure and his trial, characterized by fantastic charges and the heavy sentence of nine years imposed on him, made it clear that the security police had been shadowing him

throughout his stay. He was tried again on fresh charges in 1977 and was finally released in 1983.

The poems which appeared in a flood during the years 1964-1976 are immediately remarkable for the fire and tenderness of their imagery. Breytenbach is a poet who creates entirely in the language of imagery and whose poems have no argument which can be detached from that language. He is not a narrative, confessional, or didactic poet, but a celebrator of intense moments of vision or experience. His moods range from typical evocations of love or landscape to wry self-mockery and deadly anger. He is also constantly aware of the immanence of death pervading every living moment:

just when you're tired
and stretch out on your back
under the tall tree
with your weapons in the dust . . .

that's how your death stretches out:
waiting within you:
a chiming stillness:
a miracle²

His is a temperament which seeks and is capable of finding great fulfilment in sexual love and yet is forced into confrontation with the world by the very nature of that love. This is not to suggest that Breytenbach would or could have remained aloof from the conflicts sweeping South Africa, even without the fact of his marriage. But it is true that this fact presented him daily with the absurdity of the regime imposed upon his homeland by his fellow Afrikaners; a regime which would brand such a marriage as immoral and treat it as a criminal offence. It also helped to make the Breytenbachs's home a focus for discussion among exiles of all races who would there "break open their bitter breath" and make continually impossible the sort of detachment sought by some exiles who have no hope or prospect of return. Absence and return were always dominant in Breytenbach's perspective.

In such a situation, even the most intimate caress is spiced with defiance:

That we may ascend together the mountain of Venus
 could pluck your forbidden fruit together
 until apples hang like stars in the sky
 figs are sweet, but love was sweeter . . .

and the little moles on your sun-baked body
 are a dark and rare empire of stars
 in a brown firmament³

The words “forbidden fruit” here carry an extra charge because the fruit of his wife’s body is quite literally forbidden by that rural Africaner culture in which the poet grew up. Their effect is reinforced by the colour inversion, reminiscent of *négritude* poetry, whereby her moles become “rare stars in a brown firmament.”

The excitement with which Breytenbach handles all imagery of colour in his writing reminds us that he is also a painter who continues to exhibit, one who regards painting and poetry as cognate and in no sense rival activities. Hence his poems often end with the strong affirmation of a dominant, key colour. In “Testament of a Rebel” we find:

Let summer come then
 without blindfolds or ravens
 let the pillory of the peach-tree be content
 to yield its red fruit . . .

for as I’m dying into open eyes
 my deep red song will never die⁴

And in “Travelling Blind,” from the 1970 collection, there is a counterpoint of red and white images; of blood and snow:

to taste your name once more
 to catch the light drops of your
 bitter name
 like rain on my tongue, to plant
 your name like an idol in the
 bitter earth of my dream
 a god to bless my further journey
 because with the calling of your name
 with the blood of your name in my mouth
 I crawl up the sparser, whiter slopes⁵

Few modern poets display a texture of images as continuous and alive as Breytenbach's. Every line of his early poetry (1964-1977) is packed with the mingled pain and delight of his exiled existence in Paris, where the unfolding South African tragedy continued to lay its touch on him almost daily, denying his right to the private happiness which seemed within his grasp. The actual return to the Western Cape, recorded in *A Season in Paradise*, also oscillates between the same poles of feeling; the delight and the pain of rediscovery. The book's title is not merely ironical. Bonnievale, his birthplace, has all the paradisiacal potentialities, without the realization. And for Breytenbach the mere fact of return after years of waiting, carried its own charge of excitement. But the visit also brought great tension and anguish, culminating in his father's heart-attack, which followed closely upon one of Breyten's most dramatic public attacks on apartheid, and for which he consequently felt much responsibility.

Like many South Africans of all races, the poet is so deeply scored by the beauty of the landscape, the brightness of the southern sun, the vast expanse of mountain, veldt, and ocean, that a flavour of Paradise still hangs obstinately about them, though it is a Paradise very much like Milton's where Evil, Sin, and Death stalk with apparent impunity and fulfil much of their desire. This is how Breytenbach introduces the description of his native village in *A Season in Paradise*:

BONNIEVALE. That's where the big foul-up began. I was born and received in a thatched roof share-cropper's cottage, and was cut out for great things from the first wail. . . . The village itself lies in a beautiful valley in the heart of the Boland and the Karoo. A river runs along it with the cheese factory on one bank and Uncle Red Daan's vineyards on the other . . . at the other end is the graveyard and Grandpa didn't want to have to walk so far.⁶

The grim joke about Grandpa and the graveyard does not really alter the current of Breytenbach's joy in revisiting the scenes of his youth after an absence of fourteen years.

But in the poetry which is scattered through the volume, that joy is often squeezed aside by the brutal intrusion of another South Africa, still ignored by many of his relatives and neighbours:

blessed are the children of Dimbaza,
 of Welcome Valley, Limekiln and Stinkwater
 dead

of diseases, undernourishment, poverty
 because they clean up the master's field of vision,
 because they escape from hell,
 because they clear the realm of the boer

— the Boer and his God —
 — the hand of the God —

because they are saved from living,
 because to live black is a political crime
 because you who are black live
 in the land of the blood
 and the pass and the scorn and the dog
 you pollute the soil of the Boer⁷

Not so far from the settled matured beauty of the Boland lie some of the parched "Homelands," with their barbed-wire compounds, shanties, and trickling standpipes; with all their attendant horrors of forced resettlement, unemployment, and the slow death of thousands of children by malnutrition. To think of South Africa, for an honest imagination, cannot be to think only of vineyards and sunny orchards. The poems of 1972-77 run the gamut of all that is involved in such thinking:

when you think of your country
 you see
 we must be strong; guts full of craters and flies;
 the mountain is a butcher's shop without walls;
 over the thousand hills of Natal
 the fists of the warriors like standards;
 prisoners lie in the mud: you see
 mines bursting with slaves⁸

Throughout Breytenbach's brief visit of 1973 his consciousness seems to have run at two levels. At the level of diurnal activity he was apparently fully engaged in a programme of visits to friends and relatives, barbecues on the beach, trips to the mountains, and occasional public engagements. And it is not as though his mind was elsewhere throughout these activities — his enjoyment of them is conveyed forcefully enough. But beneath this distracting surface a deep current of anguish and concern was flowing ever

more strongly. This current erupts occasionally in the poems and finds its expression at the level of action in his Quixotic return of 1975; a return probably known to the security police in advance; which compromised others as well as himself; and which reminds us that poets, however *engagé* in their work, do not always make the best activists.

It was during the 1973 visit also that Breytenbach seems to have become fully aware of the calculated horrors of the Resettlement Policy, under which over three million blacks have been bundled out of the cities in which many of them were born, and carted off to already over-populated and over-cultivated reserves. He became aware that this policy was nothing less than a thinly-disguised campaign of genocide, practiced against people who already have one of the highest infant mortality rates in Africa. And this in a country with the continent's highest *per capita* income, enjoying a virtual monopoly of the West's gold and diamond deposits. His poem on the children of Dimbaza is just one expression of that awareness.

Against this, Breytenbach saw his own white community, though not lacking its prophets, as generally heedless and blind. Believing itself to belong to a liberal Western tradition, it tolerated and even condoned policies and beliefs which can only be compared with those of Nazism, to which many Afrikaner leaders once declared their allegiance. Only a year after his arrest, Soweto and other black townships exploded in a mass uprising of the young which resulted in the death of over six hundred people, most of them schoolchildren. Steve Biko, whose Black Consciousness movement had helped to inspire this new mood of refusal, was systematically beaten to death in the following year. Thus the years of Breytenbach's imprisonment coincided with a period in which, despite a few cosmetic changes which impress only those desperate to be impressed, the South African situation moved ineluctably towards revolution.

It was during those years also that his friends made a concerted effort to bring his work before a larger public. First came a selection of poems translated into English by André Brink and published in 1977 with the title *Sinking Ship Blues*. The next

year saw the appearance of two more volumes of selected poems. *And Death White as Words* is a selection translated by various hands from all Breytenbach's volumes up to 1976, edited by A. J. Coetzee. *In Africa Even the Flies are Happy* covers some of the same ground but includes some early prison poems, some uncollected ones, and several prose pieces. The whole volume is selected and translated by Denis Hirson. In 1980 came the English version of *A Season in Paradise*, also containing many poems. Thus in the short space of three years a large part of Breytenbach's output was made available to English readers. This rush of translating and publishing activity was perhaps the most effective way open to his friends of reminding the world that a major poet, the most prolific and talented that South Africa has yet produced, was languishing in jail under charges of the utmost absurdity (in a fresh trial of 1977 he was accused of plotting to bring a Soviet submarine to Capetown and of conspiring to cause a prison riot because he persuaded a warder to smuggle out some letters for him).

Perhaps it was only the poet's capacity for self-mockery which kept him sane and creative during these dark years. That capacity was displayed in one of his earliest poems, "Breyten Prays for Himself":

Have mercy on our mouths our bowels our brains
 Let us always taste the sweetness of the evening sky
 Swim in warm seas, sleep with the sun
 Ride peacefully on bicycles through bright Sundays
 And gradually we will decompose like old ships or trees
 But keep pain from me o Lord
 That others may bear it
 Be taken into custody, Shattered
 Stoned
 Suspended
 Lashed
 Used
 Tortured
 Crucified
 Cross-examined
 Placed under house arrest
 Given hard labour
 Banished to obscure islands to the end of their days . . . ⁹

This poem of 1964 is an early warning that Breytenbach could not forever be content to bear witness in exile, breathing an air of freedom denied to most of his countrymen. There is an inescapable falsity about the exile situation, a kind of exemption from the common lot with which the exile claims to identify. Even the most sincere and passionately committed exile cannot avoid this type of frustration; he must sustain himself with dreams of return, or else quite deliberately reject his birthplace and its people, as perhaps the earlier waves of European immigrants to the U.S.A., fleeing pogroms of extermination, were able to do. Clearly, this exemption was something which Breytenbach found intolerable. His return of 1975, so easy to condemn on rational grounds, must be understood in this context; it made him a participant in the common suffering he condemned, someone with a new kind of right to speak for all those who groan beneath the wheels of the apartheid juggernaut.

In one of his early prison poems, published by Calder in 1978, there is a new comprehensive irony at work. The poem is entitled "The Struggle for the Taal," and thus invokes all the nationalist rhetoric which has been expended on the Afrikaans language and culture over the centuries. Now one of its most distinguished wielders ironically commends it to the hands of the blacks, like the spent runner of a dying race who can carry it no farther:

We bring you the grammar of violence
and the syntax of destruction
from the tradition of our firearms
you will hear the verbs of retribution
stuttering.

Look what we're giving you, free and for nothing
— new mouths
red ears with which to hear red eyes with which to see
pulsing, red mouths
so that you can spout the secrets of our fear:
where each lead-nosed word flies
a speech organ will be torn open . . .

And you will please learn to use the Taal,
with humility use it, abuse it . . .

because we are down already, the death-rattle's
throb and flow on our lips . . .

As for us, we are aged . . .¹⁰

A poem like this can be set beside J. M. Coetzee's powerful vision of the end in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, or André Brink's in the deluge which ends his novel *Rumours of Rain*. With this wry commendation of his language to re-emergent Africa, Breytenbach escapes his condition of:

. . . White African featherless fowl
I never exposed or bare
I black as an unuttered word
of coming and becoming¹¹

Breytenbach's poetry is situated where a consuming anger becomes inescapable and all-embracing, refusing all private content, all marginal accommodations in the name of sanity or survival. Yet few poets so impress us with their capacity for joy, with their yearning for a time and a condition in which that joy could flower. The passion which surges through his love poems is creative and self-renewing. Often he seems to soar far above the bonds of fate, as he does in the prose memoir "In order to fly," where he zooms effortlessly to Saigon, far ahead of his laboriously voyaging mother-in-law in her jumbo jet. The same soaring impulse makes him declare in a poem of 1976, "I will die and go to my father / in Wellington on long legs / dazzling in the light."¹² If Yeats was "hurt into poetry" by mad Ireland, then it is South Africa, exile, and alienation which have done the same for Breytenbach. The surrealistic imagination released in the short stories of *Catastrophes* (1964) has been chained since to the service of his master themes; love of his wife and an impassioned attachment to South Africa and its fate. Often the age he lives in has forced these themes into conflict. His love for Yolande postponed and complicated his return to the Cape; his subsequent imprisonment kept him away from her for almost a decade. That age will not and cannot leave them alone; it is forever asserting its claims to the services of all his faculties:

In the evening my house is an observatory
a coach stops before the lens

and a Martian descends
 come come
 I scratch my groin
 and let the air into my shoes
 no thanks, I'm happy here¹³

Alas, Martians have continued to descend before Breytenbach's house with their imperious summons. A talent for happiness seems to attract them like a bait. Now that he has paid such heavy dues to the demands of his time and place, is there any hope that the poet will be allowed a little time in which to cultivate his garden?

NOTES

- ¹ Fragment from "Ars Poetica," *In Africa Even the Flies are Happy* (London: John Calder, 1978), p. 23.
- ² "Just when you're tired," *A Season in Paradise*, 1976, quoted from *In Africa Even the Flies are Happy*, p. 89.
- ³ "The butterfly and the snail," from *Die Huis van die Clove* (The House of the Deaf), 1967, quoted from *And Death White as Words* (London: Rex Collings, 1978), p. 137.
- ⁴ From "Testament of a Rebel," *Die Huis van die Clove*, 1967, quoted from *And Death White as Words*, p. 27.
- ⁵ From "Travelling Blind," *Lotus*, 1970, quoted from *And Death White as Words*, p. 151.
- ⁶ *A Season in Paradise* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), p. 29.
- ⁷ "Life in the Ground," *Skryt*, 1972, quoted from *And Death White as Words*, p. 77.
- ⁸ "Firewing," *Skryt*, 1972, quoted from *And Death White as Words*, p. 91.
- ⁹ "Breyten prays for himself," *Die ysterkoei moet sweet* (The Iron Cow Must Sweat), 1964, quoted from *And Death White as Words*, p. 9.
- ¹⁰ "The Struggle for the Taal," Prison Poems, *In Africa Even the Flies are Happy*, p. 95.
- ¹¹ "Not will the pen but the machinegun," quoted from *And Death White as Words*, p. 69.
- ¹² "I will die and go to my father," *A Season in Paradise*, 1980, quoted from *In Africa Even the Flies are Happy*, p. 77.
- ¹³ "Hole in the Sky: to our House," *Die Huis van die Clove*, 1967, quoted from *And Death White as Words*, p. 15.