

CREOLIZATION AND THE PRODUCTION AND NEGOTIATION OF BOUNDARIES IN BREYTEN BREYTENBACH'S RECENT WORK

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Abstract

Much of the South African poet Breyten Breytenbach's work has been concerned with borders. In this article I examine borders and creolization in three important poems from *Nine landscapes of our time bequeathed to a beloved* (*Nege landskappe bemaak aan 'n beminde*, 1993), *Paper flower* (*Papierblom*, 2002) and *The wind-catcher* (*Die windvanger*, 2007). The link between creolization and boundaries is the poet's conception of identity and freedom. As is often the case the boundaries of the self are questioned as the poet permutes the central concepts. Crossing boundaries entails entering into dialogue not only with the self but also with the mother tongue itself and with a variety of other artists and writers. In other words, in Breytenbach's work an abrogation and appropriation of the own tradition ("erfgoed") as well as of material from others, other places and other traditions occur. In these three case studies in particular it is clear how the poet stretches and deforms boundaries as part of his poetic project to concretize a dynamic freedom.

Creolization and the poetics of relation

In 1973 the South African Breyten Breytenbach stunned the Afrikaner establishment by calling the Afrikaner a bastard nation with a bastard language" ("‘n bastervolk met ‘n bastertaal", (Breytenbach 1976, 123). The English translation is a bit weak as *bastard* does not have the strong connotations of hybridity and racial mixing *baster* has in Afrikaans, but its connotations of inferiority and contempt are quite accurate. This was the first time he spoke in public in South Africa after a long period of voluntary exile.

Much of Breytenbach's work is concerned with borders, especially the border between homeland and exile. His work seems to need a yearning for somewhere else, and this reached a poignant

climax in his prison poetry, in which there is a constant yearning for freedom, to be elsewhere, and a constant imagining of states beyond the prison, which, sadly, were all doomed to fail before the reality of imprisonment.

In this paper I want to examine a few important poems from Nine landscapes of our time bequeathed to a beloved (*Nege landskappe bemaak aan 'n beminde*) (1993), Paper flower (*Papierblom*) (2002) and The wind-catcher (*Die windvanger*) (2007).

The focus will fall on the crossing of boundaries, the creolization of the self and of the mother tongue (“moertaal”) and the creolization of the boundary between word and image.

For this purpose I find Svend Erik Larsen’s (2007) methodology for the analysis of borders quite useful – but it would need some extension to fit Breytenbach’s work. The category of theme should be expanded into different frames of reference, I think. Moving across a boundary creates meaning, and I am particularly interested in crossings of boundaries that could be called creolization, that is the mixing of different fields and the new relations that come into being by such mixing.

Creolization I regard as a principle of rhizomatic understanding – trying to understand literary phenomena in networks of dissemination, multiplicity and diversity. I take this idea from Edouard Glissant’s *Poetics of relation* (2006) and the situation of archipelagic thought, that is, thought continually exposed to cultural and linguistic winds and seas, as it were. I also regard it as a principle of deconstruction – of taking leave of foundations and entering into new relations and *communitas* (Turner 1975) with others.

Creolization to my mind entails three important processes. The first is the *mixing* of cultures and traditions leading to new forms of thinking and expression. The second process is *localization* or adapting to the local. Creolization comes from the word *criollo* in South American Spanish that is today still used in the sense of “local”, “of this place”, “born and raised here”, without a specific racial or ethnic meaning. The primitive literal meaning goes back etymologically to Latin *creare*, “to create”, via Portuguese, and boils down to “something or somebody born or raised” plus a deictic element like *here* (Schwegler 2003, 53-54).

Nearer to the linguistic meaning of creolization, the third process entails *extending and adapting* an instrumental or communicative tradition (like a Pidgin language) for mother tongue (or mother-tradition) use – in other words, testing and extending the boundaries of the vocabulary, language structure and expressive power of a language.

Creolization in all three of these senses figures in Breytenbach's work.

Crossing real borders and experiencing life in nomadic interludes Creolizing the racial divide

One cannot fully understand the import of Breytenbach's emphasis on creolization and bastardization without an understanding of the colonial and racial history of South Africa. Breytenbach (1999) himself rewrote this history by again emphasizing that the Afrikaner is an African and by pointing out that he is a cultural mulatto and that Afrikaans is a "lovely fluent creole tongue born from the clash and copulation of cultures" ("lieflike gladde bastertong gebore uit die botsing en die paring van kulture", (Breytenbach 1999, 27).

In this regard he quotes Glissant's views on the monolinguality of the root and errancy as "the search for a freedom within particular surroundings" (Glissant 2006, 20). Broadly, Breytenbach is making an appeal for the recognition of differences and diversity as sources for transcending the limitations of such particular circumstances. By underlining the diverse, impure and mixed nature of Afrikaans as a Dutch creole with Malay-Portuguese and African elements, he is attacking the accepted view of the pure European descent of the language and the Afrikaners' concern with racial purity. He equates creolization with crossing accepted schemes and opening-up new spaces of consciousness in the name of freedom. By calling the Afrikaners – descendants of the Dutch colonists who define their identity in terms of the language of Afrikaans – Africans he is arguing for a rich diversity that also recognises the dark, socially suppressed and earthly aspects of language, setting these views against the idea that language is merely a politically correct medium of communication. Cultural and linguistic hybridity also means that there is no single uniform Afrikaner identity. He radicalizes this even further by stating that Afrikaner identity is only an identity of

becoming different (“Die Afrikaner is slegs ‘n identiteit in die andersword”, (Breytenbach 1999, 42). This means perpetual errancy, continual dynamic change, “a dialectic of contradictions” (43), of which the chameleon is also an emblem. He ends by defending, again in Glissant’s words, the right of “marginal and deviant persons” “to do [their] own surpassing”.

From this it is clear that crossing boundaries and changing ways of thinking in Breytenbach’s poetry resonate with radical political implications.

The Middle World, an in-between and liminal zone

Since his release from prison in 1982 (Galloway 1990, 219) Breytenbach has become even more of a traveller, even more nomadic, dividing his time between Paris, a cottage in a village near Barcelona, the island Gorée before Dakar, the town of Montagu in South Africa and New York, where he teaches part of the year as distinguished professor of writing. The hostile reception of his play *Die toneelstuk* (The play, Breytenbach 2001) caused him to dissociate himself very strongly from the Afrikaners and even to threaten to never write in Afrikaans again. He has, in his own words, become a un-citizen of the Middle World – one who is defined by who he is not. The Middle World is in-between, somewhere between east and west, north and south. It lies on the margins, the edges, the living borders; it is different and otherwise. He calls it a “figure-shaping archipelago of applied freedom and unintended alienation” (my translation) (Breytenbach 1998, 25).

Travelling, writing, making love

One can trace the importance of errancy in Breytenbach’s work for example in the collection *Papierblom* (Paper flower) from 1998. It bears the subtitle “72 poems from an journal of errancy” (72 gedigte uit ‘n swerfjoernaal). It recounts a kind of “going nowhere slowly”, being on the road, as a nomad, without a fixed address. It is written by Jan Afrika, an African, an ordinary man from Africa, bearing a surname common among the people of mixed race in South Africa (the so-called Coloureds who were excluded from the definition of racially pure Afrikaners).

The link between travelling and the title is not immediately clear, even though the collection contains many poems with some form of travel in the title. The idea of travel is central in the book: travelling is to experience new parts of the world, like Hong Kong, Saigon or Princeton. Travelling is to keep experiencing and describing what exists – knowing how problematic such description can be. For it is true that the word “scorches a void where the thing was” (“skroei ‘n leemte waar die ding was”, 31).

A paper flower is an artificial flower but in Afrikaans papierblom also is the popular name for the bougainvillea. And of course the poem itself also is a paper flower – not a *fleur du mal* but a *fleur du papier*.

The front cover associates the paper flower quite strongly with the female genitalia, the warm flower between your thighs” (“die warm blom tussen jou dye”) as it is called in the poem “ekstasis” (78). The title poem (115) underlines this association but also links the paper flower strongly with writing and with fucking.

The link between travelling and making love emerges very clearly in the poem “finger fucking” (“vingerfok”, 118). The golden day after making love is a day for travelling, and the journey is landscapes of water and cloud and shadows (“die reis is landskappe van water/en wolk en skaduwees”) – that is, without form, fluid.

The second last stanza makes a strong association between writing, travelling and sex. The hand writes, the eye travels, the paper is a woman with curves and sighs. The whole process is that of loving that passes on or takes on death. Sex is writing is life. In other words, resistance against death equals the poem, the paper flower. The rationale behind this view is the universal analogy of Tantric Buddhism between writing, travelling and making love. Writing, moving the hand across the paper, is like caressing the beloved’s body and analogous to travelling across a landscape (cf. Paz 1975).

Another interesting travel poem in the collection is “twin journey” (“tweereis”, 48), in which the speaker goes travelling with myself, his alter ego, and “dreams open a secret country full of chameleons and other adventures” (“droom ons ‘n geheime land vol verkleurmanneljies en ander avonture oop”, 48). The chameleon (Kamiljoen) is one of Breytenbach’s personae and also an emblem of the un-citizen of the Middle World.

Travelling in this collection is also a matter of poems opening onto “travelogues of the self” (“reisbeskrywings van die self, 14), and this is where the poem “I’s place” (“ek se plek”, 72) will take us.

Travelling where the words lead; creolizing the boundaries of the self

This poem mentions the idea of creolization more than once, but it makes clear that creolization is a kind of play on words, ringing the changes on words, travelling where the words lead. In this case creolization is permutation:

ek se plek

(‘n selfportret)

ek met my mutasies en my
murasies,
die muil-rumoer en oproer van
mulatwoorde,
die stomme gemuit en gevoel
van resitasies,
ek met my metamorfose van
maandag óór

[moord

tot die koord wat sillabes moet
snoer –
kwylibek opgehang in die vers:
die pronomens is nie 'n self nie,
dis 'n hiér
dis 'n hoer se kooi,
dis 'n leë handvatseel in die
gapende poësie

I’s place

(a self-portrait)

i with my mutations and my
mural ruins
the mule-tumult and uproar of
mulatto words
the mute mutiny and fondling of
recitations
i with my metamorphosis from
monday across

[murder

to the cord that should lace
syllables –
slaver-mouthed hanged in the
line:
the pronoun isn’t a self
it’s a hère
it’s a whore’s doss

van omvorming en ontwurming
van keiser
en koei,
dis 'n askies my baas vir laasnag
se gestoei
met bottel en mes
die boer verdien om gehang te
word,
sy wortel so styf soos 'n
winterkeel
en met roet in die kieste
waar metafore gefraai het –
bránd die vers in haar moer!
want daar is baie plekke van
skrywe:
oëverblindery, asem, jeug, die
seepkis,
 [hartwroet,
seer lywe, gaskamers, memorie,
gekskiedenis,
 [die verlies
van fluïditeit – en lyne
deur die lostorring ingewande se
bodemlose
 [swaai
van verbastering tot ék

it's an empty handle in the gaping
poetry
of deforming and deworming
from caesar
and cow,
it's a sorry my boss for last night's
scuffling
with bottle and knife
the boer deserves to be hanged,
his carrot as stiff as a winter's
throat
and with soot in the cheeks
where the metaphors fried
burn the line to her hell!
for there are many places of
writing:
eyewash, breathing, youth, the
soap-box,
 [burrowing the heart,
sore bodies, gas chambers,
memory, mad
 [history, the loss
of fluidity – and lines
through the bottomless swing of
ripped-out
 [innards
from bastardization to i
(All three translations are my
own.)

Mutation and metamorphosis are central ideas in this poem – especially the amazing metamorphosis of the I – a series of deformations and creolizations of language that are quite difficult to follow.

In stanza 1 *mutations en mural ruins* indicate the deformation of the I, but always strongly connects it to places – ruined, empty, desolate places of habitation, places of remembering and of memory. Metaphorically these constitute places, forms, shells or figures in which the I previously lived. In Bachelard's (1969, 10) terms, shells for protecting the vulnerable mollusc of the self.

Important links in the chain of metamorphoses are the sounds – alliteration and assonance – and permutation: in this case of the very idea of mutation. See for example the series *mutasie – muil – mulat – gemuit – metamorfose* (mutation – mule – mulatto – mutiny) and also *rumoer – oproer – gefoefel – snoer* (tumult – revolt – fondling – cord). The words themselves are in revolt – the impure, creolized mulatto words. Literally it is also a stirring or mixing of words which creates new meanings. The poems themselves – disparaging called recitations here – are also revolting and making love.

Stomme (“mute) is ambiguous in Afrikaans: it means both “not being able to speak” and “lamentable” – in contrast to the uproar of the words. *Recitations* is again an effect of the rhyme: it rhymes with *muradies* in Afrikaans. What is clear in this stanza are the multiple meanings that Breytenbach creates in his poems by permutation: the arbitrary manipulation of signifiers. Permutation is a principle of arbitrariness, of the entry of pure chance into the poem.

It is in that sense that we should understand the next lines. The link between Monday, murder and cord (“moord” and “koord” in Afrikaans) is again the rhyme and alliteration, but also the missing link *word* (Afrikaans “woord”) itself. The I becomes transformed into something that strings the syllables together; into a poetical principle of cohesion. And in the end it is turned into a rope for stringing up the self. In Afrikaans the line is determined by two sets of permutations: *kwylbek* (“slaver-mouth”) means both “mad” and “drooling with lust”, and this verse is the outcome of the rhyming series from *snoer* back to *rumoer* and *oproer* (lace – tumult – uproar). Both the drooling and the

mouth are the results of the series of permutations *muil* – *gemuit* – *gefoefel* (mule/maw – mutiny – fondling).

The word *here* in the last line is a specific but unnamed place, deictically empty, but it can also indicate the poem itself, meaning that the I is part of or result of the writing process. The I is posited at the beginning of the series of complex phrases, but disappears, becomes empty, a mere grammatical concept, a mere substitute. Of course we know fully well that the word *I* is not a substance but an empty pronoun that we mostly assume refers to a speaker or writer behind the text.

Stanza 2 lists a further series of ruins. The whore's doss ("hoer se kooi") suggests that both the I and writing are a kind of prostitution, a cheapening of what is holy. The second metaphor (it's an empty handle in the gaping poetry of deforming and deworming from caesar and cow ") ("n leë handvatsel in die gapende poësie /van omvorming en ontwurming van keiser/ en koei") is much more difficult. *Gapende* ("gaping") is often used with *muil* ("maw") – the dangerous open maw of an animal. The I (and poetry itself) thus becomes a gaping maw or gaping pussy – a devouring sexual organ. In this poetry of transformation, this process of dying, the I is but an empty name, a handle. Again the rhyme takes us further: from *koei* ("cow") to *gestoei* (wrestling) and the frame of a worker, maybe a coloured farm worker (a mulatto), enslaved by liquor and violence.

Stanza 3 is a further metamorphosis of the frames of hanging and of the farm. The I turns into a farmer (Boer, synonym for an Afrikaner, but also white master, landowner) guilty of his past, but one that has to be hanged as it were by the rope of his own words. The writer is guilty of sedition, prostitution, sexual excess. Part of his punishment is that his cheeks (derived from winter's throat), his mouth in other words, gets burnt by all the metaphors that he spewed out. *Gefraai* means "decorated, made pretty" but in English also to fry, to bake in oil.

The last line means that both the line and the poem itself get destroyed by fire, but the fire image is paradoxically also a celebration of the intensity of poetry itself.

The last stanza names a string of places, situations or reasons of writing. The last three lines, the very lines that mention creolization, are very obscure, however:

	...die	...the loss
verlies		of fluidity – and lines
van fluïditeit – en lyne		through the bottomless swing of
deur die lostorring ingewande se		ripped-out
bodemlose		[innards
	[swaai	from bastardization to i
van verbastering tot ék		

Lyne (lines”) can refer back to cord or rope, and the *bodemlose swaai* (“bottomless swinging”) to swinging on the gallows. *Bodemlose* is mostly used with *sea* or *abyss* – like in the bottomless pit of hell. What seems to be indicated here are the bottomless depths that open when the writer starts stringing out his intestine – figuratively, starts dwelling on the guilt of the past. *Derms uitryg* about the past like a baboon is said to do if he gets shot in the stomach has become a very resonant phrase among post-Apartheid Afrikaners. The writer starts stringing out his most intimate feelings, embarking on the unfathomable and endless processes of writing. This does seem to lead, through all the metamorphoses, deformations and creolizations, to a temporary point of rest in the word I – as though the process did result in a self, a person, an identity. But this is an illusion. We as readers realize that the point of equilibrium is the result of the process, that is, of the poem that we have in front of us. The circle from I to I is complete.

In this poem we do not find a traditional self, a cogito, linked to a specific place or bounded by clear boundaries, but rather a nomadic self that is constructed from mutations and transformations and that discards the shells of previous habitations (ruins, demarcated spaces or frames or reference) as it changes from one situation to the other – a little like a chameleon. As the poem unfolds, the link between I and place becomes highly problematic, underlining that the I is but a temporary construction.

Permutation is not only a matter of manipulating the signifiers – it also forces the reader to transcend different conceptual boundaries

in a series of shifts in perspective. In poems like these we can see at work what the poet calls word work. This is the title of his writing journal *Woordwerk* (Breytenbach 1999). This word work, analogous to Freud's dream work, is an important process in Breytenbach's poetry. In this process of working the words the language itself, the mother tongue, more intimately here called the womb language ("moertaal"), inevitably also gets creolized.

Creolizing the mother tongue and the boundary between painting and reality

In true postcolonial tradition Breytenbach's work is both an abrogation and an appropriation of the own tradition ("erfgoed") as well as of material from other artists, other places and other traditions.

The collection *Nine landscapes...* opens with the well-known words of Horace on *Ut pictura poesis*. This motto suggests that the poet wants to investigate the boundary between poems and paintings as well as the boundaries between words, landscape paintings and the real world. What working the words (permutation) does to landscapes – and to the very idea of a landscape: these are the objectives of this investigation.

The poem *Leading* in ("Inleiding" (Breytenbach 1993, 3) introduces the idea of a landscape but phrases like "everything is development, completed in full-time" ("alles is ontplooiing, voltyds voltooi") seem to describe a quite frozen landscape – much like the suspended action in the poem "Icon" ("ikoon") from Breytenbach's first collection, *The iron cow must sweat* (*die ysterkoei moet sweet*, Breytenbach 1967). It seems to indicate a landscape in the artistic sense of the word, in other words, a landscape painting. The boundary between reality and painting appears to get erased in the process of exploration. The painting is a kind of mirror in which the speaker sees himself reflected, but that mirror is empty.

inleiding

leading-in

Die ware landskap is een van rus.
Jy kan van skeppers en taboes

The true landscape is one of rest.
You can forget about creators and

vergeet
want alles is ontplooiing, voltyds
voltooi,
en jy getooi in huid en vlees en
haar en muid
loop tot teen die algehele spieël
om opeens te sien daar is geen
glansbeeld meer.
Nie dat enigiets makeer. Net
oppervlakte.
'n Wit staar. En die oneindige
konvolusies
of asemspore.
Ou mense met hoed en plooië
klim

vir die soveelste
keer
dieselfde heuwel op, rus, vang die
son op die hand
so swaar soos 'n
bloukopklipsalmander,
gewaar die vinnige omlynings nie
meer,
vergeet dat hulle ooit hier was: die
oog
vervaag en word deel van die
land.
So baie mense het al hier gesit
elk op eie aanspreeklike manier 'n

taboos
for all is evolvement, completed
full-time
and you adorned in hide and
flesh and fell and bag
walks up to the total mirror
to see suddenly there is no
reflection any more.
Not that anything is amiss. Just
surface.
A white stare. And the infinite
convolutions
of breath trails.
Old people with hat and wrinkles
climb

for the
hundredth time
the same hill, rest, catch the sun
on the hand
as heavy as a blue-headed lizard,
no longer see the quick
outlinings,
forget that they ever were: the eye
grows dim and dissolves into the
land.
So many people have sat here
each in their responsible way a
madaam
or sir, en definitely tried to figure

madaam
of meneer, en sekerlik probeer
prakseer
hoe om die seerbly van
vergetelheid te slaak,
die ewige verbygaan. *Dit* was deel
van hulle gewees: die voelvlug,
die slak
se blink geprewel, die duin wat uit
die water blom,
die berg wat blou in hemelsome
vou: die idee
van besitting moes ophou bestaan,
ook die besitting en toe die
bestaan van ideë. Dit dan ons
gedeelde bemaking: ons private
gedeelte bemaak:
dat wanneer ons al te oud is om te
doen
ons nag in gleuf en glooiinge op
sal gaan:
op die hand is die son se taal
immers bekënd,
ook die wind op die wang al klank
die oog
nie meer so helder die hang van
die voël
teen die hemel se skuins asemstote
nie:
die ware landskap is rus.

how to slake the soreness of
oblivion
the eternal passing-on. *That* was
part
of them: die bird's flight, the
snail's
shiny muttering, the dune that
flowers from the water,
the mountain folding blue into
sky's borders: the idea
of possession had to cease
existing,
the possession too and then the
existence of ideas. This then our
shared bequest: our private
share endowed:
that when we are too old to act
our night will go up in flutes and
slopes:
on the hand the sun's language is
known, it's true
the wind on the cheek as well
although the eye
no longer sounds as vividly the
bird's hanging
on the sky's slanting gusts of
breath:
the real landscape is rest.
And I have a dream: to climb high
enough

En ek het 'n droom: om hoog
genoeg te loop
om jou teë te kom, dat jy uit my
struikeling
van woorde gespel sal word in 'n
land waar ek
met jou mag praat: ek nood
iemand
om hart, hand, droom, gebroke
geheue aan na te laat
en die kontoere van my
barensland.
(Sien, ek ken nog baie meer wysies
op moertong
as in ander tale, al begin die
snedes plek-plek
reeds yl, en is ek meer eiewys
met ander woorde, wat soms
verhoed dat lied
uit keelgat breek om woord-op-
loop
met vrye teuels te sit-sit
wik op die hand:
sien, lied is van tong wat streep
tussen hart en mik. Sienlied is
landskap.)
(Moet ek my dááma skik? Is dit
dan só
verderflik om haasbek te smaail?

to encounter you, that you may be
spelled
from my stumbling of words in a
land where I
may talk to you: I pang for
someone
to leave to heart, hand, dream,
broken memory
and the contours of my land of
labour.
(See, I know a lot more tunes on
mother tongue
than in other tongues, although
the phrases in places
are starting to straggle, and I am
more obstinate
with other words, sometimes
preventing song
from breaking lose from throat
with free reins
to go word-galloping
weighed on the hand:
see, song is tongue's that licks
from heart to crotch. Seeing-song
is landscape.)
(Must I resign myself to that then?
Is it then
so baneful to smile a gap-toothed
smile?

Moet mens tot die establishment	Must one belong to the
se vreetpartye	establishment's gorge parties
behoort om saam te mag praat?	before you can have a say?
Maak dit saak as niemand gehoor	Does it matter if nobody pays
gee	attention
en die taal verrot en die mooimaak	and language rots and from place
my van plek tot plek soos	to place
vingerklap	decoration slips like finger-clicks
deur die kneukels glip?)	through my knuckles?)
(Maak maar my oë toe en sing klip	(Then close my eyes and sing
maal beuels en moorde en maans,	stone
knyp die oë digdig en doen hoem	mull bugles and murder and
...)	moons
	screw up the eyes tight-tightly
	and do Om...)

The second stanza seems to be a description of the content of the painting – or it might be an imaginary landscape that is presented as if it is being described. The emphasis is quite strongly on rest, on suspended action, but from the word *This* (l. 21) onwards it seems to go over into an indirect description of the landscape. Landscape and the very idea of a landscape are in the final lines of this stanza virtually erased; the idea of possession, possession itself and even the existence of ideas get rubbed out.

Stanza 3 appears to be a kind of conclusion or interpretation of the thoughts that the painting evokes; more of a wish that the ghostly painting, the mirror image, would form a kind of memory; a re-experiencing, a re-description of the contemplation of the landscape. The poem ends in the vision of a dream that is “spelled from my stumbling of words” (wat “uit my struikeling van woorde gespel sal word”) – a landscape lofty enough to encounter the beloved; a transcendental landscape where both landscape and beloved are brought into being by the words, and especially by splitting and creolizing words or by a stumbling of words.

A key here is the word *barenslan*, literally “land of birth”, which is created by splitting and deconstructing the expression *barensnood*, “the pains of giving birth”. The pain (*nood*) turns into a need (the same word but in a different language) to bequeath to someone the contours of his dreamland, his country of memory. Someone has to share the immense effort to give birth to this new country of dreams. Language itself is an important theme in the last three stanzas. These stanzas are presented in brackets as if commenting on the exploration of reality and painting in the first part, relativizing and topologically deforming that part:

- Tunes on the mother tongue (literally womb tongue, “moertong”) are getting thread-bare.
- Words break from the throat and run wild like horses, creolizing a set idiom.
- Song is tongue that draws a line from heart to crotch
- Seeing-song is landscape, that is, the landscape is created by the words in a moment of epiphany
- Who might speak, even though language is imperfect and corrupt?
- The last stanza presents the final reaction of the speaker: again milling or permutating words, but also doing Om – that is, meditating, saying the Buddhist mantra Oum mane padme hum.

The poem thus describes an imaginary landscape painting, from which the poet develops a kind of truth (that the painting preserves experience and keeps it in memory), but this in turn leads to a transcendental jump into the land of birth – the land where language decays and escapes from beauty but also brings different landscape into being. The poem rejects representation in favour of presenting or creating a different reality through the seeing-song – in seeing and in

song. This different reality is relative and temporary and the only consolation is to keep on singing and breathing (or meditating).

The poem is a topological deformation of the (imaginary) painting and its values of memory and representation in favour of a radical poetical view: an imaginary world comes into being by means of words. The abstract seeing is given concrete form in the landscape.

Creolizing the medial boundary between word and image

An equally radical deformation – and also a meditation on boundaries – occurs in the poem *Maurits House* (“Mauritshuis”) from Breytenbach’s most recent collection *Die windvanger* (The wind-catcher, Breytenbach 1993, 143-4).

The *Mauritshuis* is the Royal Picture Gallery in The Hague renowned for its collection of 17th century Dutch paintings. What Breytenbach is creolizing here is not individual paintings but rather a whole era, the Golden Age of the Dutch 17th century. This is clear from the beginning:

Mauritshuis

in 'n museumhuis dwaal jy van
kamer na kamer
en staar van naderby na skilderye
vol dooie voëls
pap visse, honger honde, fraai
fisante,
veldhere met swierige krae en
polsversierings
en ander mense met uitsonderlike
hooftooisels
toe daar in Holland nog bosse en
heuwels was

Maurits House

in a museum house you stroll
from room to room
staring closely at paintings full of
dead birds
flaccid fish, hungry dogs,
beautiful pheasants,
generals with jaunty collars and
ornamental cuffs
and other people with exceptional
head-decorations
from a time when Holland still
had forests and hills

die lig wat deur die ruite kom
glim oor donker vloere
'n kunswerk is 'n flarde gesprek
uitgespoel in die oog –
vervagende oorblyfsel
van 'n eenparty-tweespraak:
na binne met al die saamstellende
uitbeeldings
van vorm en gedagte, na buite
met die verbeelde gedagtevorms
wat daar vroeër was
in die omgewing waarbinne
gevoelens beweeg het
hoekom probeer mense
die walvis wat op die kus strand
weer terugdu in die see?
wat is dit wat nie gehoor wil word
nie?
teen die mure sien jy
vergestaltings van spraakleer,
genotsug en leergierigheid en
liefdeslus,
vlyt en deug, en dat die
oorskryding
van grense ook die beliggaming
van verval mag wees
die gesprek gaan voort
selfs wanneer die betekenis van
die woorde

the light falling through the panes
shines across dark floors
a work of art is a shred of
conversation
washed up in the eye – a fading
remnant
of a one party dialogue:
inwards with all the combined
imaginings
of form and thought, outwards
with the imaginary forms of
thought
that existed in the past
in the surroundings where
feelings moved
why do people try
to push back into the sea
the whale that stranded on the
shore?
what is it that doesn't want to be
heard?
on the walls you see
representations of grammar,
pleasure and curiosity and lust,
diligence and virtue, and that the
transgression
of boundaries may also be the
embodiment of decay
the conversation goes on

of dalk tot die woordeskat
vervloei het onder vernis
en daar geen bosse of heuwels
meer is
beeldmakery is immers 'n
verdigting
as beskerming teen die tyd, en
skep ruimtes
waarbinne daar gesterf mag word
die lig wat deur die ruite kom
glim oor donker vloere
daar is so baie vlakke van die
waarheid
dat die waar wees rnetterhand
heeltemal vervlak
tot 'n kus waar die walvis
kom adem na dood
terwyl swane buite op die water
dryf,
'n bleshoender duik, meeue die
lug in repe snawel
en 'n vlag ryp gewind vlerk teen
'n hemel
so somber soos 'n hawe waar die
donker bote van
[wolke
van weleer teen mekaar stamp en
skuur

even when the meaning of words
or even until the vocabulary
has melted under varnish
and there are no forests or hills
left
indeed, image-making is
condensing
as protection against time, and
creates spaces
in which one may pass away
the light falling through the panes
shines across dark floors
there are so many levels of the
truth
that being true eventually
completely shallows
into a shore where the whale
comes panting for death
while swans are drifting on the
water outside,
a moor-hen dives, gulls beak the
sky into shreds
and a flag ripe full of wind wings
against a sky
as sombre as a port where the
dark boats of clouds

of long ago pound and scuff
against each other

The speaker in the poem is crossing the boundary between word and image and describing the still lifes from the 17th century, brimful with the abundance of the time, but that at the same time are also expressing the idea of *vanitas*: “everything dies, passes away; everything comes to nothing; all is useless” (in the words of Ecclesiastes) (Good News Bible). All the images carry the marks of death – the name of the cold wind that blows through the entire collection and that the poet tries to catch or to hold on to, as the title would suggest. This is a very generalised ekphrasis, losing the detail but pulling the paintings into the *vanitas* framework.

Death is not the only underlying framework that gets activated: there is another, exemplified by the jaunty collars and ornamental cuffs (“die swierige krae en polsversierings”), and exceptional head-decorations (“uitsonderlike hooftooisels”), namely ornate dress. These signs serve to place the paintings securely in a bygone era.

The second stanza, isolated semantically and typographically, constructs a clear boundary between the inside and the outside: the inside offers but a poor reflection of the light from the outside.

The poem is a meditation on the passing-away of a way of life and its forms and symbols – the imagined forms of thought (“verbeelde gedagtevorms”, l. 14), the environment in which feelings moved (“die omgewing waarbinne gevoelens beweeg het”, l. 16), but this occurs in a stanza, the third one, that breaks the frame of the poem to make a meta-artistic and self-reflective comment on the nature of art itself. Here the boundary of communication is evoked, especially the communication with the past. The poem implies that this communication is partial and breaks down; the representations and imagined forms of thought from the past are losing their meaning. Ekphrasis is impossible; crossing the line between words and paintings refuses to render meaning; the soliloquy makes no sense; dialogue with the past is a fond dream.

What becomes clear, is that the paintings of the past have become incomprehensible today, even though they are described, in v 31, in remarkable spatial metaphors, as “a condensation as protection against time” and as “creating spaces in which one may die”. The theme that is evoked here is the final boundary: death.

An important represented boundary that the mind of the speaker seems to alight on, is the shore on which a whale is represented as beached. But having established a frame in which the speaker reads the paintings with little comprehension (even if with wonder at their strange messages), the poem in the end as it were draws the whale into the meta-artistic speculation, breaking the boundary between represented reality and meditation on representation, turning truth into a deadly shallow shore. By transgressing the boundary between painting (as described) and speculation the speaker exposes the idea of searching for the truth to a very strong irony.

The ending of the poem is quite beautiful but enigmatic. Here the speaker is projecting the painterly landscapes onto the outside – and in that landscape he presents the teeming life of the present but as it were tainted with the memory of the forms of thought of the past – not the least of these forms are the representations of the Dutch skies in the 17th century landscapes like Vermeer’s “Landscape over Delft”. The boundary between viewer and object folds back onto itself, so that the viewer starts seeing the outside in the forms of the representation, transgressing the basic communicative framing of the poem.

The images of cloth and wind are instances of two central themes of the collection that are especially clear in the 3rd section – and of Breytenbach’s series of book rags (“Boekdoeke”) that inspired it. The title of the section – lappesait – is based on a South African slang word *lapa side*, meaning “there, over there” (Silva 1996.), but it also alludes to rags (“lappe”) in this case. Like the wind deforms rags so in this poem boundaries get pulled into different shapes and get stretched into amazing invaginations. Such topological deformations are typical of Breytenbach’s poems – particularly of his endings, that again deforms the temporary structures that came into being in the course of the poem.

Conclusion

Breytenbach’s poetry evokes and crosses real borders. The three cases that I examined show deformations of the bounded Western self, accepted ideas about mimesis and representation and also of bafflement at kinds of representation of the past. But it is by means of his word-working that the poet forces us to shift our frames of

reference, leading us to an inkling of the marvellous middle worlds of freedom that the poet creolizes into being.

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