

The Verbal and Visual Mirrors of Postcolonial Identity in Breyten Breytenbach's *All One Horse**

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Summary

This paper explores Breyten Breytenbach's repeated reference to mirrors and mirror images in both his verbal and visual texts and asks how they are engaged by the author to tease out the complexities informing the formation and representation of personal identity. It argues that Breytenbach postulates the mirror as a model space where personal identity is at once instated and contested through the inevitable interplay between the real subject and its reflected other. An analysis of some of the portraits reproduced in *All One Horse: Fictions and Images* (1990) serves to illustrate concretely how the mirror is incorporated into Breytenbach's texts to evoke in his readers a sense of the paradoxes informing personal identity.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek Breyten Breytenbach se herhaalde verwysings na spieëls en spieëlbeelde in beide sy verbale en sy visuele tekste en vra hoe hulle deur die outeur aangewend word om die kompleksiteite wat die formasie en voorstelling van persoonlike identiteit informeer te ontlok. Daar word aangevoer dat Breytenbach die spieël postuleer as 'n model-spasie waar persoonlike identiteit terselfdertyd gevestig en betwis word deur die onvermydelike wisselwerking tussen die werklike subjek en sy gereflekteerde ander. 'n Analise van sommige van die portrette wat in *All One Horse: Fictions and Images* (1990) gereproduseer is, het ten doel om by die leser te illustreer hoe die spieël in Breytenbach se tekste inkorporeer word om by die leser 'n sin vir die paradokse wat persoonlike identiteit informeer te evokeer.

Two is the mystical figure.
Man and woman, you and I, the I and its double.

(Breytenbach 1989: 305)

Mirroring and Identity

Since its invention, the mirror has been praised for its capacity to offer the viewer a precise, albeit reversed, representation of what is placed before it. Described by some as “the symbol of an unaltered vision of things” (Trinh thi Minh-hà 1989: 22), the mirror is commonly understood as an instrument of mimesis that reproduces in perfect form the real or concrete thing which is reflected in it. Presumably, the mirror is ideally self-effacing in the representation of things insofar as the image it casts forth corresponds completely to the empirical reality that occupies the space directly in front of it. In fact, the mirror’s perfect transparency or invisibility, which makes of it a passive recorder of the real, has seduced many students of optics. Leonardo da Vinci, for example, called the mirror “the painter’s master” and compared the successful painting to a mirror image (Da Vinci quoted by Gombrich 1965: 258).¹

However, the impression that the mirror image conveys a direct, unmediated copy of what is before it can be delusive. The mirror does not merely duplicate the way the world around it is, for if it did, it would be, as Richard Rorty argues, “indistinguishable from what was mirrored, and thus would not be a mirror at all” (Rorty 1980: 376). Drawing a subtle distinction between presentation and representation, Rorty implicitly assumes a doctrine of essential distortion: Every mirror and every mirror image is inevitably flawed. Counterintuitively, the mirror does not present an unaltered or perfect projection of an empirical object; rather, it represents – stands for, denotes, depicts – a realistic likeness of that object (cf Gombrich 1982: 176). It actually fails to function as a pure, immediate, and uncompromised reflecting surface because, as one critic notes, it is “‘semitransparent’ and thus, indeed, ‘semi-opaque’” (Laycock 1994: 8). What the mirror makes visible is subject to the slight discolourations and imperfections of the glass, the conditions of light, and the angle of reflection, among many other factors of disfigurement. Furthermore, since all mirrors are enclosed as if in a frame, and are thus clearly delimited reflecting surfaces, the mirror image is inevitably a fractured or divided representation of what is placed before the mirror. It is, in other words, a fragmented virtual projection, exterior to reality but contiguous on and contemporary to it (Dubois 1990: 184). Not only is empirical reality never mirrored in its entirety (Cousineau 1997: 81-83), but it is also structured or organised by the mirror’s bounded area. Like all frames, the mirror “is a structural constraint which acts within the image as a transcendent law of form” (Marin 1979: 778).² Isolating empirical objects and space from a larger whole, the mirror focuses and thus arranges what it represents.

The framed area of the mirror also makes obvious the dividing boundary between what is real (i.e., that which is placed before the mirror) and what is

a constructed representation (i.e., the image in the mirror). As the space of difference between the image and its empirical counterpart, the mirror shows at once their relationship of likeness and the means of reproduction, along with the necessary impurities, by way of which such a relationship is produced. As a result, the mirror functions as a space for viewers to contemplate and, more importantly, create the illusion in the mirror's mimesis.

In these terms, the logic of mirroring is intrinsically paradoxical. On the one hand, the reflected image in the mirror is indistinguishable in colour, form, and detail from what is actually before the mirror. The mirror thus repeats the identifying characteristics of a real object. On the other hand, the mirror shapes its own projection, and not only by presenting a partial rendition of the original object, but also by isolating the image from a complete whole. The real object is mirrored as something other than itself. What Michel Foucault says of the use of mirrors in Dutch painting can be approached as a summary of the mirror's inherent duplicity. "In Dutch painting", he argues,

it was traditional for mirrors to play a duplicating role: they repeated the original contents of the picture, only inside an unreal, modified, contracted, concave space. One saw in them the same things as one saw in the first instance in the painting, but decomposed and recomposed according to a different law.

(Foucault 1988: 96)

Foucault touches upon the essential contradiction that informs mirroring: it is an act that replicates accurately a real object, but that does so only by reorganising anew that object.

This contradictory quality makes of the mirror an attractive trope for those who deconstruct the apparent relation between the self and its various embodiments. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan ascribes to the mirror a central role in the formation and primary identification of self. In Lacan's mirror stage, a subject falsely (and jubilantly) identifies with the reflection of its own self and registers self-identity as being equal to the coherent, whole image it apprehends in the mirror. Lacan specifies that it is a false identification insofar as the mirror gives shape to an ideal self, a projection, an "other" that masks the profound incongruities that necessarily underscore the real self. The mirror, in other words, is unable to produce a transference that is in all ways true to the real. Notwithstanding, the idealised mirror image, or *imago*, informs what Lacan calls "moi", an external, recognisable, social, and alien identity that the subject tries to project across its interaction with others. Although the self and its mirror projection(s) differ fundamentally, the subject is intrinsically dependent on such projections for its own notion of self.

Indeed, whether the "moi" and the real self are parallel in content and process, and how they may interrelate, are central issues informing all forms

of self-representation. A clear example is the autobiographical narrative that, as a “*literary* capitalization of the ‘I’” (Couser 1989: 18), is at once a reflective and transformational space.³ As one critic notes, “the [autobiographical] narrator [and, I would add, the autobiographical author] is both the same and not the same as the subject of narration” (Smith 1998: 109). This double logic – where the real self is simultaneously similar to and different from its representation – also characterises portraiture, the visual equivalent of the autobiographical narrative.⁴ An imputed resemblance of the portrait and the individual portrayed is intrinsic to the art of portraiture, as is the fact that every portrait casts its sitter as a confected type (cf Brilliant 1991: 30-37). As a matter of point, reference to a real subject and the fashioning of that subject are inextricably bound together in these and in other arts of self-portrayal. Since the mirroring of self – that is, the act of duplicating and representing oneself through projection – is necessarily twofold and paradoxical, continual contradiction is inherent in any form of self-representation. Any presentation of self, whether verbal or visual, both reflects and creates the original subject.

Breytenbach, the Poet of the Mirror

Described as the “poet of the mirror” (Doherty 1995: 226), Breyten Breytenbach is a writer and painter who is most definitely infatuated with the mirror’s double logic. In many of his poems, prose, and paintings, the mirror figures as a medium through which the real is replicated and generated, reflected and created. Above all, it is posited as a means of both self-ascertainment, insofar as the subject easily identifies with its mirror image, and self-estrangement, insofar as the subject repudiates it. Indeed, Breytenbach never tires of exposing how the mirror is, on the one hand, a privileged site for the manifestation and exploration of personal identity and, on the other, how it in some crucial way severs and deforms that identity (as imagined by the self). The mirror’s twofold and contradictory bearing on personal identity is fabulously related in Breytenbach’s parable “The Day of the Falling of the Stars and Searching for the Original Face” (Breytenbach 1984a: 83-88). It is the story of how Boy, a “culturally unclassifiable creature” (p. 85) who lived peacefully among gazelles, as a gazelle, was wrenched from his personal conviction of self by a group of Academicians who decided to capture Boy and fulfil their need for knowledge. Unable to catch him, the representatives of the Academy decided that Boy must “*see himself* and in this way to see the relatedness between himself and those wishing to capture him. And in this way to become alienated from his mates. The whole must be shattered” (p. 87). Armed with large mirrors or “instruments of demise” (p. 88), they set out to expose Boy to his own reflection and, more precisely, to disrupt “the paradise of neither knowing

nor questioning” (p. 83). Studying his reflection in the mirrors, Boy experiences an initial dismantling and a subsequent restructuring of his self very similar to the process of identification described in Lacan’s mirror stage. He looks in the mirrors, recognises his similarity to the Academicians, and is disorientated by the mapping of his self, an act which brutally destroys the “fixed edges of nothingness” (p. 86) that render him whole. The discovery of his mirror image is, at once, a moment of creation and authority, as well as a process of displacement that, paradoxically, destroys, breaks, or shatters his sense of self.

In this short story, as in many other texts by Breytenbach, the mirror is postulated as both a measure of mimesis and a mode of private alienation. It is a descriptive and a destructive surface that underscores the dissolution of boundaries separating the reflection of self and the invention of self, objective identity and subjective identity, the real self and the imaged or fictional self. Consequently, implicit in the act of mirroring is an ambivalent split between the self’s appearance as original and its articulation as difference or other. Breytenbach clarifies:

Even though something can be inserted easily enough into the mirror, none of us knows precisely how and when it can be taken out again. Do mirrors have looking-glasses too, deeper layers, echoes perhaps incessantly sounding the fathomless? This is the result: the eye and the hand (the description) embroider the version of an event, the anti-reality without which reality never could exist – description is experiencing – I am part of the ritual.

(Breytenbach 1984a: 62)

Rather than a self-image pure and simple, mirroring gives rise to a self-image entangled within a complex field of relations in which a subject, a singular “I”, shapes and is shaped by its reflection or, more precisely, its reflected other. Accordingly, the mirror is an engaging surface across which new, partially knowable, semifictional versions of self are realised in and through a creative interaction between a subject and its mirror reflection. Caught in a mutual process of creation, the self is shaped by its mirrored other (Laing 1971: 82) just as the mirrored other is shaped by the subject that it reflects (Laycock 1994: 14). Ultimately, the mirror dismantles divisions between the real self and the reflected self. The one cannot exist without the other.

To dissolve distinctions between real self and reflected self, subject and object, the inside and the outside, and propose that they exist in a strict relation of interdependency, is to negotiate a strategy of personal identity that is grounded on the subject’s identification with and simultaneous differentiation from its own representations. Breytenbach, who is inspired greatly by Zen Buddhism and classical Chinese philosophy, ascribes to the relational unity of

opposites. On the one hand, Breytenbach's subject is fundamentally aware of coinciding in one sense, or on one level, with the various presentations of self it encounters (such as its own reflection in the mirror). "What I would like to get at", Breytenbach writes in *A Season in Paradise*, "is that all of us live behind projections of ourselves" (Breytenbach 1980: 106). As vehicles of apprehension, such projections impart reality to a subject, making it partake in and identify with shared perceptions of its own self. On the other hand, his subject emphatically denies a correspondence between the self and its projections, acknowledging that the real, protean self disappears behind all attempts at (self-)representation and (self-)understanding. Breytenbach's rhetorical question, "Is 'I' not the absent construction, the lost master-key?" (1984a: 148), clearly postulates the real, original self as that which is so drastically transfigured through projection that it is virtually unintelligible and ultimately insubstantial. Absent and lost, but nonetheless central to all definitions of self, the "I", the real self, is a mental construct formed by, in, and through an other. The other – that is, that which perceives and acts towards self, such as, in the instance of mirroring, the projection of self – is in relation with self, fulfilling and completing, fabricating and fragmenting it as it, in turn, does the same to the other.

At a fundamental level, identity entails a loss of agency, of the control of self-signification, to the grips of an other. Infected perforce with the subjectivity of an other – "each person is always *acting* upon others and *acted upon* by others" (Laing 1971: 82-83) – identity is, in Breytenbach's words, "continually coming into being and dissolution" (Breytenbach 1996: 159). The perception of and responsiveness to an other brings the self into being; however, since perceiving and responding are highly subjective acts, they undeniably fragment, deform, and dissolve personal identity, making slippery and obscure definitions of self by other and other by self. Ultimately, private identity is unattainable, impermanent, and unknowable. Breytenbach specifies, ("In relation to others I exist. But because I can never put myself entirely in their place, I am unable to identify that 'I' objectively ..." (1980: 148-149)). Given the particularity of subjective agency, identity is situated between identity-for-self and identity-for-an-other, in an in-between space marked by multiplicity and plurality, rather than binary opposition or exclusion.

This space is severely disrupted by oppressive sociopolitical conditions, such as those of South Africa that have always commanded an urgent address in Breytenbach's texts. Critics have shown that the totalising and homogenising system of South African apartheid drew a clear division between the ruling white culture, "the state as the true 'self' and all those whom it deem[ed] to be a threat to the state [and identified] as 'other'" (Jolly 1996: 66). The installation of strict identity categories (along racial criteria) by South African apartheid obliterated the effect of and opportunity for unconditional expres-

sions of subjectivity. Enforcing ideals of pure identity and closed societies (Van Wyk 1995: 89), apartheid subdued the legitimacy of personal identity through “the dehumanisation and psychic disintegration” of its people (Moretti 1997: 62). An erasure and negation of the self in the name of the other is inevitable when basic notions of identity are so deeply conditioned by and rooted in social practices that do not tolerate dissidence from the prescribed norm. As Breytenbach so clearly states, apartheid “ends up denying all humanity of any kind both to the other and to himself” (Breytenbach 1986: 53). It denies the humanity of not only the oppressed majority, but of the minority associated with oppression (cf Breytenbach 1984b: 73). Both oppressors and oppressed are unremittingly deprived of individuality under the identifying representations of apartheid.

Despite appearances, the effects of apartheid on identity are significantly more complex than the strict adherence to the labels and categories imposed by the governing white minority. The threat to self by an oppressive other is not confined to an external manifestation of power that is entirely on the outside. Rather, sociopolitical norms and conventions penetrate the very being of self and thus cloud personal attempts at identity formation. “Blinded and awed by the power of the colonizer” Breytenbach explains, “we [South Africans] situate ourselves in reference to him. We adopt his trappings, try to understand and imitate him” (Breytenbach 1986: 63).⁵ When the other, which the self may try so resolutely to disavow, not only leaves its markings on self, but also penetrates its very essence, clear distinctions between external and internal loci of oppression collapse.

Breytenbach began investigating the other as both an external force influencing identity and an internal one threatening the existence of self as a young poet writing in Afrikaans. The self-reflexive poems collected in *Die ysterkoei moet sweet* (1964a) (The Iron Cow Must Sweat) and *Katastrofes* (1964b) (Catastrophes) repeatedly draw attention to the erosion of self. In “Geb. 16 September 1939, Bonnievale” (b. 16 September 1939, Bonnievale), included in *Die ysterkoei*, fear of decay and desire to live are signalled out as being the two diseases or tumours that inflict he who is designated by the name Breyten Breytenbach. In this and similar poems, Breytenbach’s intense self-consciousness about the acts of naming and writing self, as well as the multiple references to his own person as being inflicted by internal decay, signal his early conviction that the self is essentially divided against itself. This conviction is heightened and fervently explored following 1975, the year Breytenbach was arrested during a clandestine visit to South Africa, convicted for acts of terrorism, and sentenced to nine years imprisonment (of which he served seven and a half).⁶ The extreme isolation, repression, and power madness of imprisonment certainly accentuated Breytenbach’s sense of a disintegrated self under the power of a tyrannical other (Golz 1995: 30-36).

But, more importantly, it also led him to the horrific acknowledgment that the conscious self, the self that reflects upon its own identity, participates in its own undoing (cf Breytenbach 1984b: 343). Because self-conscious acts of reflection, projection, or representation produce a self-image that is not perfectly equivalent to the real self, that image is fundamentally external, inaccessible, and other to the self. Yet, since the image is a self-likeness, self binds itself to it. Breytenbach summarises this doing and undoing of the self by the self as follows:

I write my own castle and it becomes a frightening discovery: it is unbalancing something very deeply embedded in yourself when you in reality construct, through your scribblings, your own mirror. Because in this mirror you write hair by hair and pore by pore your own face, and you don't like what you see. You don't even recognize it. It won't let you out again Who am I? Where and who was I before this time?

(Breytenbach 1984b: 155-156)

All One Horse: Visual Mirrors

A similar strategy of self-identification – a strategy that defines, transcribes, and creates the self through the construction and interaction with an internalised other that is an insurmountable threat to the self – is visually proposed in many of the portraits included in Breytenbach's *All One Horse: Fictions and Images*. This collection of twenty-seven short stories accompanied by twenty-seven watercolours examines primarily the interrelatedness of self and other, questioning, both verbally and visually, how creative imagination effectuates identity.⁷ *All One Horse* is marked by an intense preoccupation with the perception and manifestation of self. Explicit references to the self and to the viewing of self; frequent examination of the acts of writing, painting, and naming; and overt questioning of the relationship connecting what is real to what is known are some of the ways in which Breytenbach calls attention to the codes and patterns, the categories and concepts, upon which notions of personal identity are based. Although the author continually refers to how he conceives of self throughout his short stories, Breytenbach's boldest inquiries into and most provocative statements about personal identity are manifest in the imagery of his portraits. In a sense, every one of the paintings is an attempt to envision and openly represent the elemental components of identity, to break down and analyse identity. In keeping with his notion of the protean self, Breytenbach represents a subject from the perspective of its essential multiplicity, unintelligibility, and allusiveness. He captures, in visual terms, the unrepresentability of the self, as it were. This is not to suggest that the self is

absent from his portraits; rather, the self is evocatively hidden by – and thus seen through – the interpretative efforts of an other.

The portraits reproduced in *All One Horse* embody Breytenbach's sense of the paradoxes of personal identity, and, obliquely, his stoic acceptance of them. In this portrait, an indefinite number of canvases or individual paintings are pinned to a larger canvas with what appear to be thumbtacks or nails. The final four canvases, which only partially cover those fixed before them, are arranged to designate a half-length portrait of a man dressed in blue identified in the accompanying short story "And this Mirror" as the narrator's twin brother (Breytenbach 1990: 85). Although the divisiveness or disjunction of the canvases is clearly discernible, they are not free-floating signifiers combined at will; instead, they are brought together logically, made to blend into a coherent, albeit fragile portrait of a distinctly male figure. The clear divisions of the canvases, the mosaic accuracy with which they are assembled, and their precarious combination – it seems that they can easily be displaced or re-placed by removing the pegs holding them in place –



expose the portrait image as a sort of contrived patchwork. It is presented as the collation of an indefinite number of versions. The juxtaposition or montage of fragments makes visible the attempt to create a coherent image of self through the superimposition or correspondence of similar and substitutable canvases. What is strongly suggested is that the visible version, the one that reigns above an indeterminable débris of re-visions, is not a final, definite portrayal of the self: it is simply part of an indeterminate process. This version, with its removable layers, certainly suggests that behind the façade, behind the necessarily provisional representations of self, there is a core self – that is, an isolate self that cannot be forced into representation. But, it also visually communicates that the "self" can only be the thread stitching change to change" (Breytenbach 1996: 2).

In this way, the portrait introducing "And this Mirror" is an extreme presentation of the self as that which is redefined anew with every act of mediation. It is the visual assertion that "there is no *I*, just a series of temporary jottings, a brief bundling of being which will delineate as if along a dotted line the passage of an *I* (eye), an ancestor, a mask" (Breytenbach 1996: 69). The confounding of "I" and "eye", of one's self and how one sees one's self or is

seen by an other, is paralleled in the accompanying short story by the repeated assertion of a definite likeness between the imaged figure of a self-portrait and the viewer of that self-portrait. Wishing to introduce his twin brother, the narrator of “And this Mirror” specifies: “Physically he is my spitting image. To the extent that when he does a self portrait I often wonder whether he’s not trying to picture me” (1990: 85). This initial reference of exact likeness takes on an unwonted meaning when Brother attributes his liking of the “Mona Lisa” to the fact that it is “a self portrait” or “[m]ore precisely: because it is a painting of [his] self” (1990: 86). Both instances signal the ambiguity or radical interpretability of the self-portraitist’s identity as well as the viewer’s identity: just like the smile of the “Mona Lisa”, tellingly recollected by Brother to qualify his conclusion, self-portraits animate many interpretations. Indeed, the individuality and specificity of a self-portrait’s subject is not merely rendered unstable, but quite literally made invisible through the process of looking: “Of course one can no longer *see* the painting as it has become invisible. Too many people with framed expectations have looked at it. When a thing is looked at too often it loses its reality” (1990: 86). Because all looking “must always involve force and desire and intent” (Elkins 1997: 21), that which is seen fades behind the viewer’s thoughts, or as Breytenbach prefers, “elements of [the] mind” (Breytenbach 1990: 86). Looking at a portrait entails situating oneself in it so that the identity of the person portrayed becomes transmittable – that is to say, experienced jointly with others and by others. By looking, the viewer takes possession of the self-portrait, sees in it a version of his/her own self, and by attending to it adjusts his/her personal image of self. It is in response to what each “I”/eye sees that the identification of and with the self-portrait’s subject is established. For this reason, Brother asserts that Leonardo da Vinci’s famous (self-)portrait “has become a mirror. The original black mirror”, and entices, “Bring it to your face! Can’t you see the self portrait?” (Breytenbach 1990: 86). The actual reader fulfils Brother’s order to bring the portrait “to your face” and “see the self portrait” as she/he looks at the portrait that introduces “And this Mirror”. The full implication of this process is signalled out at the end of the short story when the narrator confirms that the portrait is, indeed, a mirror.

The mirror is black because it is empty until “I”/eye steps before it, at which time a copy of “I”/eye stares out from the mirror’s reflecting surface. (Its original emptiness is thus equivalent to the absence of sight or understanding). Mirrors testify to the self’s existence if and only if that self is able to see its self projected in the mirror’s surface. Thus, to look is to be looked at, to see is to be seen, or as Breytenbach puts it, “I am the surface of what I see” (1996: 166). In so far as “I”/eye puts itself into its viewing, “I”/eye engages in becoming, identifying, and individuating itself through this viewing (cf Laing 1971: 127). It follows that “I”/eye exists in relation to the other reflected in the

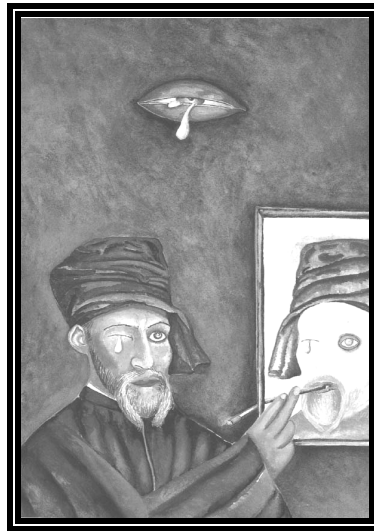
mirror: the private “I”/eye necessarily collides with the public images of its self. Faced with the mirror image of self, “I”/eye understands itself as being both the subject that stands before the mirror and the object reflected in its surface. But, according to Breytenbach, the self is never singular, never stable, never final: “there is no single immutable illusion of self to cling to” so that images of self are only “ghost images of the selves” (Breytenbach 1996: 8). Indeed, images of self, as one critic states, are “something we have, or wear, or perform, or disavow, rather than what we are” (Armstrong 1999: 23). Consequently, the mirror actually others the self while bringing it to awareness and therefore into being.

This imaged other, Breytenbach warns, may appear so real that it can “become a mask” of which the self is prisoner “and run[s] the risk of being smothered by it. A struggle may then ensue between the ‘I’ and the image” (Breytenbach 1980: 148).⁸ Such a struggle takes place if and only if the self perceives the substitution of its imaged self for its real self as a threat to its very being. However, because the self can only be known through its projections – that is, in a state of otherness – a conscious questioning and dismantling of the relation uniting the “I” and the image fosters a deep sense of alienation.⁹ “As the ground of received wisdom gives way under your feet”, Breytenbach writes, “you become more painfully aware of inconsistencies in that made-up individual discerned in the mirror, the presentable one that you tried to memorise and project as the historical first person singular” (1996: 1). Breytenbach’s “historical first person singular”, like Robert Fraser’s colonial first person singular, indicates a “protest against absorption in a political and social milieu from which [the self] asserts its freedom” (Fraser 2000: 69). To project this identity, then, is to present a self that is opposed to or different from the other; the other being that which threatens to swallow or assimilate the self, such as its mirror image. By underlining his failure to memorise and project his self as the historical first person singular and by defining the historical first person singular as a “made-up individual”, Breytenbach strongly suggests that the self cannot fully exist apart from its represented other.

To the critical observer, the mirror actually dismantles the illusory uniqueness and unity of “I”/eye and forces the realisation that singular identity is repeatedly traversed by the multiple and divisible imprints of its other. In brief, the mirror, with its dual capacity as passive reflector and active creator, provides a space where the I/other dichotomy breaks down. Paradoxically, the image in the mirror is, as Homi Bhabha underlines in another context, “neither ... ‘original’ by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it – nor ‘identical’ by virtue of the difference that defines it” (Bhabha 1995: 32). Identity, as witnessed in the mirror image, is split between the private and the public, the individual and the communal, the inside and the outside, the self and the other. Accordingly, the real self has no definite, perceivable, or representable shape.

Although it is provisionally tamed by the regulatory and displacing projections of self, it actually disappears behind them to become indistinguishable from them.

This watercolour, which accompanies “Like a Whiplash,” a short story about a poet and his translator who “could be [his] brother in the word” (Breytenbach 1990: 33), visually illustrates Breytenbach’s definition of self as the construction of and across otherness. All sharp distinctions between the self and the imaged other – the one who views and the one who is viewed, the creator and the created – are significantly unsettled by the ambiguous nature of the framed field. (Is it a mirror that projects an image of self or is it a canvas where a self-portrait is fashioned?).¹⁰ That the imaged other is indistinguishable from the self is further emphasised by the double act of creation depicted in this painting: a painter is painting an image of self and the image in the mirror/canvas is painting the painter: The painter and the imaged figure share one brush. In other words, the painter most clearly partakes in the creation of his (imaged) self to which he is united and by which he is made. As Breytenbach so clearly explains in the introductory short story “Between the Legs”, “the mirror creates the image. The image creates the mirror. Imagine Imago! Imagine I!” (1990: 12). The framed field is blessed (or cursed) with a dual capacity: it gives an image of what is known or what is before it and, at the same time, refashions and makes unknown what is before it. Accordingly, there is a simultaneous melting and distancing of self and other through the act of creation, which, as Breytenbach specifies elsewhere, is “a reality transcription just as it is the furnishing of a reality. *That* you cannot do without” (1986: 108).



“I”/eye is inconceivable without the creative intervention of an other – regardless of whether or not that other inextricably coincides with self. “If I am”, Breytenbach writes, “it must be because you are, my brother” (Breytenbach 1990: 11). Brother, who appears in most of the short stories collected in *All One Horse*, is what “I”/eye identifies when seeing itself – in the full sense of not only looking, but also comprehending, imagining, and visualising itself. Brother is the self becoming its own object through seeing. In fact, Breytenbach stresses over and over again that the temporal and spatial distinctions between “I”/eye and Brother collapse with every self-reflexive act

that transforms, appropriates, and determines the self in relation to an other. Accordingly, the self is objectified within the very creation of self. In this and in similar self-portraits, Breytenbach shows that to question, to know, to articulate, or to identify the self is to come to the realisation that *imago* – that is, the image of self, the mask, the other – is not clearly discernible from the “I”/eye. The mirror/canvas, to expand Linda Hutcheon’s observation regarding the postcolonial project, “posits precisely the impossibility of ... identity ever being ‘uncontaminated’ by the other” (Hutcheon 1995: 135).

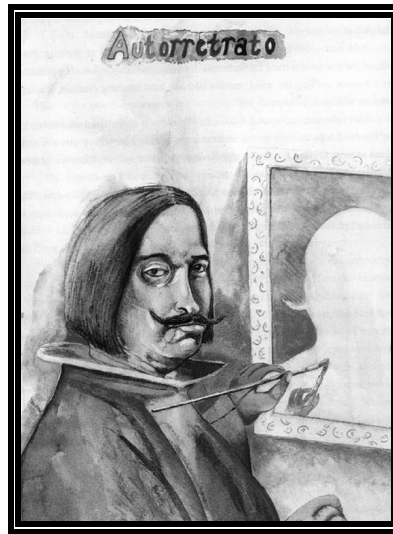
But, Breytenbach’s other is not a unique, steadfast, and unchanging reality; rather, it is, as he describes it, an expanding field of awareness (Breytenbach 1996: 19). His other is plural and amorphous, existing in a state of constant flux that makes it impossible for it to “be stilled for long enough to be defined ...” (Breytenbach 1988: 123). Consequently, the self exists across and by way of multiple and ill-defined points of awareness. To suggest this visually, Breytenbach introduces yet another creator of self, another other, as a third brush or locus of creation protruding from behind the mirror/canvas and painting the painter. Apparently, the painter is subject to the conceptions and designs of many others and thus melds into, to borrow from Breytenbach, “the Other or/and the other Other” (1988: 123).

The plurality of the reflector, the act of reflecting, and the thing reflected, whereas these three do not in truth differ from one another, is also reinforced by the “floating” eye located at the top of the painting. The large “floating” eye, which is partially endowed with sight (unlike its two teary, sightless equivalents), attracts the attention of viewers, collects their gaze, and sends it back at them (cf Breytenbach 1984a: 78). A device found in many of Breytenbach’s paintings, this semi-opened “floating” eye forces viewers to think about seeing, and also about being seen or, more precisely, about *not* being seen. By looking straight out from the painting, it plunges viewers into self-objectifying efforts of understanding and imagination, and forces each viewer “to build alone / to that point where I [or eye] remain part of you, reader” (1988: 88). This exchange of seeing, where the real metamorphoses into the imaginary, evokes new, unexplored images of self. Offered up to interpretation and existing in response to what “I”/eye imagines it to be, the viewing self experiences its self as adaptable and revisable, as a limitless space, or as an expanding field of awareness. The “floating” eye is unsettling because it reminds each viewer that the self is an apparition or, as Breytenbach specifies elsewhere, “a temporary awareness meeting and mating moment to moment” (1996: 159). Because the self inherently takes up, traverses, and abandons many shifting and fleeting others – that is, because its very being depends on subjugation – self can only be “a never-ending succession of moments, images of images of images” (1996: 138).

It follows that a representation, verbal or visual, that wishes to communicate

the self or, better, the continual flux which is self, must be, as Breytenbach argues, “about travelling and not about destinations. Identity is a passing creation, the sum of positions gained and evacuated during the trip” (Breytenbach 1996: 95). Such a self-composition is loosely or openly structured, lacks the fixity of a name, and gives shape to the as yet unimagined self. In brief, it embodies the self as both being and becoming.

Paradoxically, to communicate the fleeting images of self is to give form to nothingness. As Breytenbach asserts, it is “to move against the death-producing System which is a structure,” it is to know that the “search is a *process* (the way all living structures are)” and to become “that which you are: a metamorphosis” (Breytenbach 1984b: 240). Breytenbach embraces no deeper paradox than the recognition that the very visibility of the self is its invisibility, as is so provocatively suggested in this painting, which accompanies the final short story “Letter to a Mummy.” Here, the painter is not present(-ed) in his “autorretrato”; rather, the surface of creation (be it mirror or canvas) is virtually empty. However, the framed field is not completely empty: an outline, indicating where the reflection should be (or has once been) and an undersized, withered hand holding a paintbrush are reproduced on its surface. In this painting, emptiness and form are united in and through the framed field. Such a union signals Breytenbach’s conviction that “[t]he reality of what and who we are consists of ever-changing contradictions” (1986: 251). Ceaselessly refashioned and reformed with every act of understanding, performed by self or by other(s), the self is essentially impermanent and unknowable.



A likeness of self, therefore, must embody the self’s continual becoming, its constant conversion. Such a likeness necessarily breaks away from traditional strategies of portraiture, which are used to “fix the image of persons by visualizing their appearance and/or character” (Brilliant 1991: 14), in order to communicate the irreducible and unfixed nature of identity. Seen in this light, Breytenbach’s seemingly self-effacing (self-) portraits do, indeed, represent the core of personal identity. By ultimately representing nothing or emptiness, they touch upon the self’s real form, a form which allows self to hover indefinitely between self and other(s).

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Notes

1. The authority of mirror likeness to which Leonardo da Vinci alludes, where what is imaged is not distinct or distant from what is represented, is by no means a thing of the past. For a detailed analysis of its enduring relevance, see Bryson 1983: 1-18.
2. For a detailed analysis of how the framed area of a representation is a shaping device, see Schapiro 1969: 224-230.
3. These and all subsequent italic characters are in the original text unless stated otherwise.
4. For a detailed analysis of the ways in which visual portraiture resembles autobiography, cf Meskimmom 1996: 95-97.
5. Breytenbach describes the South African people in very much the same terms as Hutcheon defines the excentric: one who is “ineluctably identified with the center it desires but is denied” (Hutcheon 1988: 60).
6. For Breytenbach’s personal account of his 1975 arrest, see 1984b. Other accounts and opinions surrounding Breytenbach’s arrest can be found in Cope 1982: 179; Dreyer 1980: 47; Hope 1981; and Roberts 1986: 307.
7. In the introduction to *All One Horse*, Breytenbach explains that twenty-seven is “as good a number as any and better than most, it contains the eternal nine” (Breytenbach 1990: 9). Although this is a fair explanation for his choice, readers familiar with Breytenbach’s work (and with his tendency to play with double meanings) will likely find it difficult to forget that twenty-seven is the name of a prison gang who “are the men of *igazi* (meaning blood), and that means that they are the professional killers, the executioners and nothing else ...” (1984b: 272).
8. Breytenbach often describes the self-image in terms of a mask: “Perhaps *imago* comes closest to it. 1. Final & perfect stage of insect after all metamorphoses. 2. Mental picture, fantasy or idealized image of a loved person formed in childhood & persisting in adulthood” (1980: 147). Indeed, masks or masked figures abound in his watercolours, see 1990: 16, 36, 40, 48.

9. In *End Papers*, Breytenbach writes: “The perceptive intellectual feels that he is the product of a cultural bastardization. He is full of the pain of alienation, frustration, humiliation” (1986: 64).
10. The field’s doubtful make-up is emphasised by the fact that it is at the same time a faithful reflector and a deceptive reviser. That what is before the field is not completely and precisely reflected is easily asserted by the fact that only part of the mirror-image is reflected in reverse (as would normally occur in a mirror).

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