Aspects of Contemporary Literary Theory, Zen-Buddhism and the Breytenbach-Oeuvre: An Intertextual Reading

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Summary

It is generally accepted that Zen-Buddhism forms a primary intertext of the Breytenbach-oeuvre, and that some knowledge of Zen is essential to an *understanding* of his work. It is not, however, obvious how notions such as Satori, Sunyata and Zazen pertain to the study of literature. Taking an article by Brink (1985: 10–26) on the parallels between quantum physics and literary deconstruction as point of departure, this article examines the analogy between certain aspects of Zen and contemporary literary theory. Suggestions are made as to the possible implications of such "transgressions" between seemingly disparate fields for a reading of Breytenbach's more recent art and writing in particular and the creative process in general.

Opsomming

Dit word lank reeds aanvaar dat Zen Boeddhisme 'n primêre interteks van die Breytenbach-oeuvre is. Die manier waarop die filosofiese strekking van beginsels soos Satori, Sunyata en Zazen van toepassing gemaak kan word op 'n literêr-teoretiese benadering is egter nie voor-die-hand-liggend nie. Met 'n artikel deur Brink (1985: 10–26) oor die onverwagte raakpunte tussen kwantum fisika en literêre dekonstruksie as vertrekpunt, ondersoek hierdie artikel die verwantskap tussen sekere aspekte van Zen en kontemporêre literatuurteorie. Deur te fokus op sodanige oorskryding van grense tussen oënskynlik uiteenlopende terreine, word kommentaar gelewer oor die meer resente Breytenbach woord- en skilderkuns in die besonder sowel as die skeppingproses oor die algemeen.

It is well known that Zen-Buddhism forms a primary intertext of the Breytenbach-oeuvre, (confer for example Brink (1973), Van der Merwe (1975), Roux (1983), Steenberg (1985), Ferreira (1988a), Sienaert (1993)), and that his work often remains largely inaccessible or misunderstood without at least some knowledge of Buddhism in general. Notions such as Satori, Sunyata, Zazen, selflessness and the dialectics of relativity do not, however, always seem pertinent to the study of literature. The aim of this article is thus twofold: to give an indication of how knowledge of the parallels between Zen and aspects of contemporary literary theory can enrich a reading of Breytenbach's work, and to make suggestions as to the possible implications of such parallels for an understanding of the creative process in general, as experienced by writer *and* reader alike.

The notion of an analogy between Zen-Buddhism and literary theory was first suggested to me by a comment in Lacan (1977: 100–101) and later re-enforced by Zukav's (1983) book on quantum physics in which Buddhist terminology is used to describe the latest scientific discoveries. It was finally Capra's (1992) explorations of the parallels between modern physics and Eastern mysticism, which I read in conjunction with the article by Brink (1985: 10–26) revealingly entitled "Transgressions: A quantum approach to literary deconstruction", in which the remarkable parallels between quantum

physics and literary deconstruction are exposed, which persuaded me to "transgress" similarly and further by focusing on the relationship between the two apparently unrelated fields of Buddhism and literary theory. It goes without saying that, in the scope of this article, I simply highlight some of these parallels in an attempt to elucidate aspects of Breytenbach's more recent art and writing. As an example of detailed analysis of such "transgression", the seminal work of Magliola (1984) should be consulted, where the focus falls on Derridean deconstruction and the Buddhism of Nagarjuna (a Buddhist rationalist of the first century A.D.).

Transgressions of the kind mentioned here do not always make for easy reading. In his introduction Brink (1985: 10) is at pains to stress the need to transgress our conventional, conditioned boundaries of comprehension if we are to appreciate the similarity between literary deconstruction and the startling discoveries made in quantum physics. He (1985: 12) very rightly points to the "limitless freedom of reading, the endless process of supplementarity, the inexhaustible *différance*, boundless iterability and unchecked proliferation of traces" – in fact all Buddhistic notions – as some of the most notorious thorns in the flesh of critics of the Derridean approach. And a similar ability to transgress our conditional approach to reality, poetically described as "dreaming in a different key" (Santayana as quoted by Brink (1985: 25)) is equally required to appreciate the analogy between Zen Buddhism and contemporary literary theory. What follows is an attempt to highlight, mirrored in Breytenbach's art and writing and in contemporary literary theory, the extension of the approximately two-thousand-five-hundred-year-old Buddhist philosophical tradition into the West, as well as the remarkable convergence of Eastern and Western thinking this suggests. Naturally then, a working knowledge of contemporary literary theory and its affinity to quantum physics as elucidated in the Brink article, is here assumed. Relevant Buddhist notions however, with which the South African scholar of literature is not necessarily familiar, are elucidated throughout.

Zen-Buddhism is not a monolithic philosophy. Its Soto-school – to which Breytenbach by his own testimony adheres (*Boek* 1987: 74) – considers *Zazen* or meditation as central to its practice, while the Rinzai-school concentrates on the use of *koan* or irrational riddles as a means of attaining Enlightenment. It is the latter which is generally known in the West, mostly through the establishment of Zen Masters in America, the United Kingdom and Europe as well as through writings aimed at the layman, those of Watts and Suzuki being the best known. As such Zen became very popular during the sixties, and as a result is often considered simplistically as an archaic remainder of an obsolete hippy cult. This misconception is one of the reasons why Zen's relevance to the study of literature is not obvious and why it is often dismissed as "fashionable theory...full of unsituated and timeless truth, signifying nothing (in particular)" (Weltz 1992: 10). But the presence of Buddhist terminology in Breytenbach's text should not be seen as a mere tool for the unfolding of plot or the development of character, nor is a reading of the Zen-Buddhist intertext in his oeuvre an attempt to define his work as mystical or moralistic: this would be entirely missing the implications of the Zen

philosophy for the *nature* of the text and of the creative experience itself, be it that of the writer or the reader. An analogy with well-known aspects of contemporary literary theory should help to dispel such misconceptions.

Three further points need to be made at the outset of this study. Firstly, the field of investigation is vast and in the present article only tentative and provisional results can be reached and suggestions made. Secondly, Zen-Buddhist concepts of Satori, Sunyata, Zazen, selflessness and relativity – which all abound in the Breytenbach oeuvre – greatly overlap: for the sake of clarity of exposé each concept is individually elucidated, followed by an analogy in contemporary literary theory, and concluded by an illustration of its manifestation in Breytenbach's work. Finally, and no doubt most importantly, the analogy here established is based on a layman's view of Zen-Buddhism.

Transgression of Conventional Modes of Thought

Japanese Zen (C'han in China) is a combination of the ancient Chinese Taoist philosophy and Indian Mayahana Buddhism and retains as essential principles the Tao's Yin-Yang relativity as well as the Mayahana ideal of selflessness. Embodiment of the cosmic process, the Tao designates that which constitutes the entire universe. It is in perpetual flux and represents a constant process of transformation. As illustrated in the Sanskrit word *Tantra* ("to weave") the universe is experienced as a network, as "a harmony or symbiosis of patterns which cannot exist without each other" (Watts 1975: 51). This concept abounds in the Breytenbach imagery:

> and our grasp of the city
> no one else could know
> that it was in reality
> a rhythmic intertwining flow
>
> (Breytenbach 1988: 87)

This brings us directly to the Derridean view of the text as a network of traces, to which I will return when discussing the "Void".

To experience fully the Tao (*Satori* or *Enlightenment* in Zen) requires a transcendence of conceptual, "logic" thought processes, identical to the transgression of conventional boundaries of perception demanded from the student of quantum physics and literary deconstruction alike (Zukav 1979: 207). According to Buddhism our grasping intellect which subdivides the universe into individual, definable concepts presents a major obstacle for the attainment of Enlightenment. Differentiation of objects, which includes the constitution of a separate individual ego, is considered to be an illusion, the result of our analytical perception of the world and our intrinsic inability to fully experience reality.

The concept of a separate and individual ego resulting from the differentiation of objects is "the enemy to be overcome" (Versfeld 1991: 16) for both Buddhist and Hindu spirituality. The distinction in Hindu thought between the mind and *Purusa* (spirit), can serve to clarify this. The mind consists of

three components: "manas", "buddhi" and "ahamkara". "Manas" is the mind's ability to sensory perception, and "buddhi" is the classification of these perceptions as well as the ability to respond to it (the way in which you would pull your hand away from a burning object). "Ahamkara" is the ability to form a concept of self which "owns" the above-mentioned sensory perceptions: "I" feel the burning pain of the flame, it is "my" hand, this is "my" experience of fire, and so forth. For the Buddhist all this is illusion: the mind has only secondary or "borrowed" intelligence or consciousness. Purusa is the true subject of consciousness, and is ineffable. In the same way as the hand cannot grasp itself, and as the eye cannot perceive itself, so the mind cannot conceive itself. The ego constituted by the mind is therefore only a parody of Purusa, and is the reason why "the putting down of the I" (Breytenbach 1984: 308) becomes an essential prerequisite to the experience of Enlightenment.

The undermining of conceptual thinking, however, often leads to the misconception, particularly in the West, of Zen being irrational or anti-intellectual. Buddhism does not deny the value of the intellect, but only stresses that it has to be transcended. Analytical thought should be taken to its full potential before it is transcended, as this is the only way intuitive knowledge, as ultimate value, can be attained. To quote from the Lankavatara Sutra:

> Transcendental intelligence rises when the intellectual mind reaches its limit and, if things are to be realised in their true and essence nature, its processes of mentation...must be transcended by an appeal to some higher faculty of cognition. There is such a faculty in the intuitive mind, which...is the link between the intellectual mind and the Universal Mind.
>
> (Translated by Hoover 1988: 45)

The attainment of intuitive knowledge is the purpose of the *koan* or riddle of the Rinzai school, where the irrational question to be meditated on cannot possibly be answered. For example, by realising that no definite answer can be found to the *Koan* of "what did you look like before you or your father or your mother were born" (Breytenbach 1984: 13), the candidate is shocked into realising that the intellect is limited in understanding, and has to be transcended, or rather, decentred as source of all meaning. Magliola (1984: 98–101) points to the difference between "centric Zen" and "differential Zen": Centric Zen is logocentric or absolutist Zen, and aims to "transcend *logos* understood as the language of *is* and *is not*, and to achieve the 'undifferentiated center' " (1984: 97). In differential Zen however, there can be no centre, the Buddha-nature "is differential and not centric, not a focus or stasis" (1984: 99). Differential Zen disclaims "centered" experience of any kind. (Confer three examples taken from old Buddhist narratives which illustrate the point in Magliola (1984: 98–104)). Metaphorically described as a fluid, it is Zen no longer when solidified by the intellect in an attempt to grasp it. Therefore, no assertion by a Zen master should be taken as an assertion of truth, relative or absolute. It is something moving, something "evermore about to be" (Nansen in Magliola 1984: 104), a description which

could as well apply to Derridean *différance*! Countless extracts from Buddhist literature illustrate the lesson of differentialism: "alleged centers are not to be foisted onto the differential flow; rather, alleged centers are really a matter of shifting perspectives, and the adept is one who can control these shifts at will" (Magliola 1984: 102). This is mirrored in contemporary literary theory where the meaning of a text is never final or "fixed"; interpretation is always infinite. Or, in the words of Breytenbach as Zen-Buddhist (1983: 100): "There is in fact no Truth. We are too fragile and volatile for that; we work with too many uncertainties. There is rather the continual shaping of something resembling poorly, provisionally 'truth' ".

Within the Zen tradition, the intuitive knowledge thus acquired by the realisation of the inadequacy of conceptual thinking is often compared to the opening of a third eye, and is a prerequisite for creative experience: "Until you have a third eye opened to see into the inmost secret of things, you cannot be in the company of the ancient sages" (Suzuki 1957: 62). This immediately calls to mind the self-portrait of Breytenbach on the back book cover of (*"Yk"*), one of the volumes of poetry written while he was in prison, where the gaping wound on the forehead expresses the desire for intuitive knowledge which leads to true creativity.

The Principle of Relativity and "Dependent Arising"

This is perhaps best illustrated by way of contrast with Western conceptual thought, where things are perceived by differentiation and placed into separate categories. In the West, for example, death is seen to be the opposite of life, or good to be the opposite of evil. This conceptual attitude is conventionally inherent to language as such, where separate words are thought to designate separate, definite concepts. In the field of contemporary literary theory this notion of language has, however, been transgressed, inter alia, by Derrida in his reading of Saussure: as shown by the "gap" or *différance* between signifier and signified, no utterance or text can be definitely "fixed"; there will always be a gap between intention and reading. As in the case of quantum physics where light is paradoxically found to have the structure of BOTH wave and particle (Brink 1985: 14–15 and Capra 1992: 77), the Derridean concept of *différance* which considers language as "an infinity of spatiotemporal relationships" (Brink 1985: 19) demands an "overhaul" of our conventions of perception and thought. Deconstruction stresses the complementarity (not opposition) of different signs, where presence is deconstructed as the presence of absence. The sign becomes a metaphor for the temporary fusion of opposites/complements, as its two components (the form [*signifiant*] and the content [*signifié*]), can never be identical: "The structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent" (Derrida 1976: xvii), a notion which forms the basis of the Derridean notion of supplementarity.

It is through a similar break with the conventional Western concept of polarity that the Buddhist principle of relativity can be understood. Based on the Taoist polarity of Yin and Yang, all things in the universe are seen to be

interdependent, with seeming contradictory poles being simply the two essential components of one and the same process. What we perceive as duality is considered to be the inevitable consequence of conceptual thinking and of the structure of language, which does not necessarily give access to the full experience of reality (Watts 1957: 93). Within the Zen tradition seeming opposites are not in conflict with each other. It is a balanced polarity with each pole dependent on the other for its existence: without death there is no life; without good there can be no evil. Therefore, "all things are without 'self nature' (*svabhava*) or independent reality since they exist only in relation to other things" (Watts 1975: 83).

The common practice of Breytenbach to fuse two words with seemingly contradictory meanings into one word should be seen in this light. "Lewendood" is, therefore, more than an allusion to the deadliness of life in prison: it incarnates the interdependence of apparent polarities, here contracted into a single word. This is:

> dancing the undanced dance
> the fitful freezing together of life and death
> in a single dignified quadrille of the heart
>
> (Breytenbach 1988: 111)

As subtitle of all five volumes of prison poems, the "undanced dance" is a primary motif in Breytenbach's work, incarnating the constant dialectic of immobility and movement. It is an image used by the Zen Master to describe the "artless art" of archery; the moment "considered as the unmoved movement, the undanced dance, (when archery) passes over into Zen" (Herrigel 1953: 89). As such, it is reminiscent of the "motionless" arrow in flight Culler (1979: 163 & 1983: 94) uses to describe the Derridean concepts of "trace" and *différance*: the arrow in flight is normally associated with motion, but it becomes "frozen" in space when its position is ascertained from one split second to the next, each instance nevertheless carrying traces of its past and future states, which can be compared to the continuous process of "difference" and "deferment" in language.

Central to the Zen principle of relativity is the notion that "opposite" does not imply "antagonistic"; the one pole is always already present in the other, thence the principle of "dependent arising" formulated by the historic Buddha as the central concept in Buddhism. It explains phenomena as being in a state of constant arising and ceasing, and involves a denial of the concept of substantiality, i.e. the concept that anything has a true substantial nature through which it can exist independently (Abe 1985: 92–93). "The difficulty in perceiving and understanding dependence is . . . a major cause of anxiety and frustration. . ..The ability to perceive things 'as they have come to be' (*yathabhuta*) elevates one intellectually. . .." (Kalapahana 1992: 59). This seems to be a direct analogy to the transgression of conventional thoughts and perception required from the scholar of quantum physics and deconstruction alike (Brink 1985: 25). In this regard, compare with the Buddhist "beginner's mind" as the ability to look afresh at the world, breaking through all established patterns of conception: "The mind of the beginner is empty, free

of the habits of the expert, ready to accept, to doubt, and open to all the possibilities. . . ." (Zen Master Roshi as quoted in Zukav 1988: 141). Transferred to language, "dependent arising" would imply transgressing the concept of words (*signifiants*) functioning as independent units. Language would, therefore, rather be considered in the Derridean way as an endless stream of dissemination.

The implications of "dependent arising" are enormous. "You" and "I" are not only relative to each other as polarities of one and the same cosmic process: "you" are also inherently present in "I", just as "I" am always present in "you". This literally implies that "when Lee drinks the wine, Chang gets drunk" (Abe 1975: 35), and lies at the heart of the Buddhist principle of compassion and total respect for the other. Not only is every single thing itself, but also all other things. In considering selflessness I will return to this crucial concept, apparent in Breytenbach's mysterious statement that "every portrait – landscape or poem or other depiction – is a self-portrait. This is so because depiction is recognition and exposition" (1991: 76). Studying his paintings one is indeed struck by the frequency of the artist's own face in the picture. It would, however, be a misconception to construe this as narcissism, in the same way as it is off the mark to interpret the continuous references to the "I" in his poetry as egocentricism. (See in this regard Bekker 1969: 36–40 and Roodt 1980: 49–54). As implied by the relativity principle this "I" does not refer to Breytenbach as individual, separate being, but rather to the ideal of being in a permanent state of interrelatedness with all in the universe, a "vassal of humanity" (Breytenbach 1987: 185). He writes:

> what for? all over man
> is death and dust
> and only in others will he reverberate
>
> (Breytenbach 1988: 46)

The analogy here with topology as dominant mode in postmodernism is striking (for a detailed analysis of this concept, see Muller 1992: 38–51). Muller bases the transgression of ontological worlds, as well as of discourses in the postmodernist text, on the bioptemic system of Warren Brodey. According to this scientific model all things are interrelated, everything being contained in everything. Transferred to the study of literature, the structure of Breytenbach's *Mouroir* is a prime example as there is constant transgression between the different levels of the text. Author, character and dream personage fuse only to separate again, and the conventional boundaries between fiction, reality and dream are completely abolished (Botha 1988: 404–416 & Golz 1989: 70–129). This is perfectly embodied by the last line of the book, which translates as "Form is emptiness and emptiness is form". Taken from the Prajnaparamita-sutra, the whole of which is translated by Breytenbach at the beginning of the volume of prison poems *("Yk")*, it is of primary importance: equating two seemingly paradoxical concepts, it implies that nothing can be fixed, as every concept also implies its opposite.

> The novel form itself is annihilated, i.e. non-linear, like a crystal conveying different reflections in the same 'form', according to the perspective the reader assumes when looking into the 'mirrornotes'.
>
> (Golz 1989: 58)

In Buddhism, the purpose of understanding emptiness is simply to cut out grasping (Williams 1989: 63), which transferred to a postmodernist reading of the text would refer to the grasping of fixed meaning. One is reminded of Derrida's view of the text as a hymen (Derrida 1981: 209), a permeable membrane through which an exchange of meaning constantly takes place, brought about by the transgression of limits between "word and thing, word and thought, thing and thought" (Brink 1985: 22).

The Void

Zen Buddhist Enlightenment or *Satori* implies experience of the Void (*Sunyata*) which is best described by the Sutra quoted earlier. The dialectical and dynamic structure of this experience depends on the transcendence of duality, as illustrated by the interchangeability of form and emptiness: "The Buddhist idea of emptiness can be properly realized not conceptually, but only holistically, subjectively or existentially through the realization and subsequent breakthrough of one's own existence as a self-contradictory oneness of being and non-being" (Abe 1985: 129).

The limit between duality and non-duality is not only transgressed, but also implies complete interpenetrability; "beyondness". The emptiness of Sunyata does not, therefore, imply emptiness as opposed to fullness, as it transgresses this duality: "(it) transcends every possible duality...and embraces both emptiness and fullness" (Abe 1985: 126). From this it should be clear that the Buddhist Void is not nihilistic. This common misconception results from the intellect always wanting to categorise. To classify the Void as nihilistic immediately calls into being an opposite such as "meaning". The Void, however, transcends both meaning and non-meaning, it defies definition and, being at the same time the container and the contained, remains ineffable (Abe 1985: 126–127).

This reminds one of the misconception that Derridean deconstruction implies the destruction of reality and the non-existence of meaning. Without a conscious effort to transgress our conventional conceptual way of thinking this does indeed seem to be the case, just as the Buddhist Void *seems* to point to a state of nothingness. But as implied by the Sanskrit word *"tantra"* meaning "network", the Void implies a constant weaving in and out of meaning and non-meaning, being and non-being, emptiness and non-emptiness. In a similar way Derrida views language as a network of presence and absence in which meaning is changing and referential but *not* non-existent. Derrida does not replace "presence" with "absence", but stresses the absences inherent in presence, as is clearly illustrated by the metaphor of the Mystic Writing Pad in *Writing and Différance* described as "a double system contained in a single differentiated apparatus: a perpetually available innocence and an infinite reserve of traces" (1978: 223). Recognising man's

limited capacity to perceive reality leads to experience of the Void, the Buddhist description of which echoes in Derrida's view of the "seething mass of indefinite signifying energy dancing below the seemingly solid surface of every word we utter" (Brink 1985: 24).

In this way art and poetry at its best realise the impossible dream of creating a tactile form for that which has no form – the French poet's striving "pour dire l'indicible":

> till an I corrupted to blindsight
> with language-fouled eyes
> again try by the magic maggots of phonemes
> to sing together
> the whole absence
>
> (Breytenbach 1988: 84)

In a Derridean sense the Void is "the essential nothing on whose basis everything can appear and be produced within language" (Derrida 1978: 8). It can be seen as the emptiness which is the precondition for the positing of meaning, reminiscent of Flaubert's ideal "book of nothing":

> The pure book naturally turns toward the eastern edge of this absence which, beyond or within the prodigiousness of all wealth, is its first and proper content. The pure book, the book itself, by virtue of what is most irreplaceable within it, must be the 'book of nothing' that Flaubert dreamed of. . .the origin of the total Book that haunted other imaginations.
>
> (Derrida 1978: 8)

Satori through Zazen

In Zen-Buddhist terms, experience of the Void (*Sunyata*) is called *Satori*, and is attained through meditation (*Zazen*). Zazen is central to the Soto school in particular, and Breytenbach (1987: 78–79) links its practice directly to the creative process. Both require selflessness and absolute awareness or "mindfulness" of things as they are; a condition which then serves as vessel or "correct posture" for the experience of Satori. The implication here is that ideally speaking the poem or painting becomes a moment of Satori, during which the conceptual limits of time, space and duality are transcended.

According to the Soto school, Satori is not a sudden experience (as in the Rinzai school where it is often compared to a flash of lightning), but is considered to be a *process*: "Enlightenment *is not a state; it is* an activity" (Blyth 1978: 104). As such it becomes "the joyful despair of metamorphosis" (Breytenbach 1991: 75) when applied to the context of text or painting; it means recognising the constant transformation implied by the "dependent arising" of both language and self. Thence the abundance of images and metaphors of movement and transformation in Breytenbach's work, such as the sea, the butterfly and the chameleon. Satori-as-activity can with ease be transposed to the field of Reception Aesthetics where the text is not passively seen as being "fixed", but is always actively created anew by each reading.

Moreover, Satori does not mean discovering the Buddha-nature (the perfection of all things as they are inherent to all creation), but the experience

of always and already *being* the Buddha nature. This implies that there is nothing to strive for; bliss is being what you are. Through the creative process of writing or painting you do not strive to fix any meaning or sense of identity or self, you only continuously uncover that which has always been: "Maybe you never create anything; maybe you can only help uncover the deadened feeling of being alive by peeling the eye. . . ." (Breytenbach 1991: 73).

According to the Zen Master the mind during Zazen is like a mirror (which has always been a primary motif in the work of Breytenbach, see, inter alia, Ferreira 1988b: 1–10). As such the existence of thoughts produced by the mind are not denied, but simply allowed to pass without being owned, similar to the way in which objects are reflected in a mirror without becoming integrated with it. "The perfect man employs his mind as a mirror. It grasps nothing; it refuses nothing. It receives, but does not keep" (Chuang-Tzu, quoted by Watts 1957: 39; see also Williams 1989: 195–196). In different fields of perception such as language this could refer to the Derridean idea of supplementarity where the flow of meaning in the text precisely implies that it cannot be fixed. As in the case of thoughts which arise in the mind during Zazen, "meaning" in the text is constantly under erasure (Derrida 1980: xix), like the sound of birds in a Breytenbach poem where

> the feathered ones' heart-chips
> changed to chain-eyes linking silence to silence
>
> (Breytenbach 1988: 110)

Selflessness

The selflessness required by Zazen and upheld as prerequisite to the experience of Satori seems to be in direct contradiction to the creative process which in the West is seen as an attempt to fix the "I": "puesto que miro, escribo y escucho no estoy muerto" (because I am looking, writing and listening, I am not dead), claims the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti (1988: 489). But in the work of Breytenbach the dissolution of the ego is essential, an understanding of which is of primary importance in the assessment of his oeuvre. In a recent radio interview he states:

> . . .an element of Zen that comes into poetry and painting. . .is the dissolution of the so-called 'self', the 'I'. The 'I' becomes an observation point, a point of passage, through which the images and the perceptions move. You become part of your work, the way the archer and target and the arrow eventually become one. Because underlying Zen-Buddhism, there is this notion of the non-being of the 'I', the non-exclusivity of the 'I'. The fact that one is a changing collection of elements, and that what you strive towards, is to move through the exploration, through the deepening of perception, to the dissolution of that. To stop being, and to be for always, as it were.
>
> (Breytenbach 1992)

Zen perception of the "I" as constant process of change and interaction implies that ". . .each person is a succession of fleeting selves, with the illusion of continuance and permanence" (Blyth 1978: 111). The analogy this quote

offers with the question of subjectivity as postulated by Lacan is obvious. For Lacan the "I" only comes into being through the symbolic order, for example by writing or painting as in the case of Breytenbach, where it is seen to exist only in the constant oscillation between the symbolic and the imaginary subject positions (Lacan 1966: 800–802). As such, the subject can only exist in a state of constant interaction, reminiscent of the condition of the elementary particle in the sub-atomic world of quantum physics where it is not "an independently existing, unanalyzable entity. It is, in essence, a set of relationships that reach outward to other things" (Zukav 1983: 94).

The analogy Zen selflessness offers to the *general* postmodernist view of subjectivity is striking. In his "Catena of postmodern features" Hassan (1986: 504) gives "selflessness, depth-lessness" as deconstructive characteristics of postmodernism. The Concept of Self is considered to be fictive: as "centre" of meaning it lies at the root of logocentrism and has to be dismantled. This results in a kind of Protean man, constantly exposed to the flood of change. As in Zen-Buddhism this is not to deny the "I" as such, but to insist on its existing only within the framework of relationship. As inherent to the topological quality of the postmodernist text (Muller 1991: 39–49) the "I" of the author is topologically pulled into the text where it fuses with both characters and reader. This is reminiscent of the ideal of selflessness attained through Zazen, when it is not the "I" who breathes, but (a collective) "it" (Breytenbach 1978: 80). Consider also the striking analogy in this regard with Bakhtin's view of death never belonging to the "I":

> Man, life, destiny, have a beginning and an end, a birth and a death; but not consciousness, which is infinite by its very nature (and which would be analogous to the Zen notion of 'Buddha-nature' experienced during Zazen – M.S.). It is not a case of not seeing death from the inside, by analogy with the fact that we cannot see the back of our neck without a mirror. The back of the neck exists objectively and others can see it. But there exists no death from the inside; it exists for no one, not for the dying, nor for others; it has absolutely no existence. The absence of a conscious death (death-for-oneself) is as objective a fact as the absence of conscious birth. Therein resides the specificity of consciousness.
>
> (Bakhtin in Todorov 1984: 98)

The subject in language which only comes into being through interaction finds a direct parallel in the Buddhist concept of *dependent arising* (see Kalupahana 1992: 53–59), and is crucial to an appreciation of the Breytenbach-oeuvre. According to this doctrine, "I" as interacting process, am indissolubly part of the universal process, and therefore inherently present in the "other". As such, it forms the basis of the Buddhist principle of absolute compassion and respect for the other: "The Awakened Mind, for whom the other's reality is fully as real as his own, is incapable of harming the other, for there is no 'other': I am neither I nor other" (Blyth 1978: xvii).

Contemporary literary theory would here offer several similarities, the most obvious perhaps being the role of the reader as "other" through whose active participation the text "as process" comes into being: "The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence" (Iser 1974: 275). Addressing the reader as beloved, Breytenbach writes:

your hands agile (rats)
your connoisseur's eye
so thorough behind half-closed lashes instincthiefly
you know how to fill (in) the gaps

(Breytenbach 1988: 88)

Applied to Lacan's psycho-analytical approach the essential interrelatedness of I and other would be evident in his view of the "discourse of the Other" as field of the unconscious without which no perception or meaning is possible (Lacan 1977: 305). This is based on a Freudian reading of the distinction Saussure makes between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of discourse (Easthope 1983: 31–40). On the syntagmatic chain appear all the signs which constitute discourse and which depend for meaning on the absence of the Other, i.e. the rest of language, positioned on the paradigmatic chain.

In Zen-Buddhism, the inherent relatedness of the "I" and "other" also implies recognising oneself in a stone, in a mountain or in the tiniest organism, as all not only *has* the Buddha-nature but *is* the Buddha-nature (Williams 1989: 115). Thence the title of *All One Horse* (Breytenbach 1990), taken from a saying by Chuang Teu: "Heaven and earth are one finger, all things are one horse".

However, to write a poem requires differentiation of words within language, just as to paint a picture requires the perception of differentiated objects. As exemplified in the West by the Cartesian "cogito ergo sum", the "I" seemingly needs to "be" in order to create. The notion of dependent arising and dissolution of the ego as such, therefore, appears to be in direct opposition to the necessary differentiation of words and/or objects and the uniqueness of being required for the creative act. The Buddhist answer to this lies in "oneness" *in* and *through* difference.

This statement can be elucidated by using the Western Christian tradition as metaphor (Versfeld 1991: 165–166). In Genesis a unique God creates beings in His image, each one of which is, as image, unique. However, for each being to be the image of the unique Creator, paradoxically implies that it *be* unique, but *also* one with the rest of creation. In this way the creature is both different from and one with its creator.

In the field of literary theory Bakhtin offers a related perspective on "one-ness" in and through difference. The analogy lies in the realisation of contemporary literary theory that true objectivity is an illusion, and that "I" can only form some idea of myself through interaction with the "other": "To be means to be for the other, and through him, for oneself. Man has no internal sovereign territory; he is all and always on the boundary; looking within himself, he looks into the eyes of the other or through the eyes of the other" (Bakhtin in Todorov 1984: 96). He describes the "exit from the self" (Todorov 1984: 99) during the creative act as taking place in two stages: the first being the stage of empathy or identification (e.g., the novelist puts himself in the place of his character), the second being a reverse movement whereby the novelist returns to his own position. Bakhtin does not, however, advocate the fusion or integration of "I" and "other", but rather a form of dialogue "with a "thou" equal to the "I" and yet different from it" (Todorov

1984: 108). Relatedness between the "I" and the "other" is seen as crucial in artistic creation:

> The most important acts, constitutive of self-consciousness, are determined by their relation to another consciousness (a thou). . . . The very being of man (both internal and external) is a *profound communication*. To *be* means to *"communicate"*.
>
> (Bakhtin in Todorov 1984: 96).

One is immediately reminded of the "other" in Breytenbach's *Confessions*, the "Mr Investigator" addressed throughout the book: "Listen to me. I shall confess" (Breytenbach 1984: 14). This is the "other" without whom the "I" cannot subsist. "Even his own external aspect is not really accessible to man, and he cannot interpret it as a whole; mirrors and photographs prove of no help; a man's real external aspect can be seen and understood only by other persons, thanks to their spatial exotopy, and thanks to the fact that they are *"other"* (Bakhtin in Todorov 1984: 109).

> you concentrated on what's on the table.
> in the dark (I) can't make it out.
> lean over your shoulder and see:
> you busy fitting out a jigsaw puzzle
> piece by piece:
> the pattern takes form (I) see:
> my portrait, my outline, me!
>
> (Breytenbach 1988: 88)

The interdependence of phenomena implied by the principle of *dependent arising* is often elaborated in the following Buddhist formula:

> When that is present, this comes to be; on the arising of that, this arises. When that is absent, this does not come to be; on the cessation of that, this ceases.
> (Kalupahana 1992: 56)

Within the context of Breytenbach's work the notion of dependent arising is apparent in the relationship to the "other", be it text and reader, or canvas and viewer, always constituting the necessary opposite of the poet/artist in the binary relationship through which the creative process can unfold. To stress the necessity of the "other" in attaining Satori, Zen sources quote the Master who insisted on the use of some form of communication "not (to) merely express what impresses us but (to) express this impression to somebody, somebody real or imagined" (Blyth 1978: 288–289). The beloved so often addressed or implicated in Breytenbach's writing is precisely this "somebody real or imagined", the "other" without whom the creative process (as moment of Satori) would not be possible.

Already in his very first published poem ("Bedreiging van die siekes" in *Die ysterkoei moet sweet*), Breytenbach invites the reader (as "other") to participate. While in solitary confinement his prison poems become an attempt to exorcise the physical absence of the "other"; essential counterpoint in the creative act:

look, I'll return
and till then all
over this horizonless page
I write sightless write tongueblind towards you

(Breytenbach 1988: 95)

His newly published tome of poems is similarly addressed to a beloved "other":

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.

(Breytenbach 1993: 4)

One is reminded of the "Other" as site of the unconscious in Lacan (1977: 305), without which no discourse is possible.

Dependent arising in Breytenbach's painting is probably less apparent. The canvas acts as mirror to the artist, and being ideally speaking "at one with the world", he would be able to recognise himself in whatever is depicted on the canvas ("Every painting is a self-portrait. . ." Breytenbach 1991: 76–77). In an interview with the art critic Jacques Leenhardt this phenomenon is explicitly brought to the fore as being a primary force in his work:

> . . .the image would show Breytenbach, always him, in the guise of a car or of any object that might take his fancy, a shoe perhaps, or the head of a horse, in short, a form that would crystallize his sensations, his feelings, this perception of self which sets writing or painting into motion the moment he takes hold of himself. This fantasy. . .told to me by Breytenbach himself, demonstrates well how in his eyes the artist's identity takes as many forms on canvas as his imagination can conjure up. The image shows that as often as I make the effort to fathom myself in my essentiality, as often am I different ("autre"). What the image shows indefinitely meets the words of the poet: "Je est un autre".
>
> (Leenhardt 1987: 5 (my translation))

This is why in Breytenbach's art the depiction of a shoe on a table with the head of a parrot next to it can be called "self-portrait", as can the painting of a horse or whatever. It is clear by now that the subject – object dichotomy of the artist is transcended during the creative process in the same way as in Satori, and that his "mirror image", identity or self-portrait can take any shape on the canvas. The "I" thus rendered, therefore, exemplifies the supposition that as soon as I should strive to fix myself in my totality, "I" immediately also become "other":

> Painting, writing poetry – these are acts of appropriation. . .You become who and what you paint.
>
> (Breytenbach 1991: 76)

In this way everything you see and experience becomes irrevocably part of yourself, and the realisation of the constant process of transformation this

implies, can only be expressed in terms of image or metaphor (Breytenbach 1991: 77). Thence the desire to paint or to write poetry, the two art forms traditionally associated with Zen, and also with Breytenbach, in which can be expressed the awareness of self as a labyrinth of constant transformation:

> this awareness-stalk reptile upright
> pendulum-pedunculate-flowering in mirror-knowing
> is what it's all about;
> these corms and internodes on paper (carefully scanned)
> there but to knot the mirror
> *drawing up being*
> in which you can just dip acquaintance
> (or the other way round) (watch worms stalking the
> whitesong)
> (language is after all the undoing of image)
>
> (Breytenbach 1988: 69)

As with the canvas, the poem becomes mirror of the self (Ferreira 1988b: 1–10), not only reflecting the poet's identity as "a changing collection of images", but also that of the viewer's own human condition. The reader thus is not only confronted by his own illusionary ego but is also invited to share in the experience of *dependent arising*: as "other", his participation in the creative process stands in direct relation to the poet, paradoxically his opposite as well as his mirror image. Similarly the artist as subject comes into being through relatedness with the subject of his painting, which paradoxically too mirrors, through differentiation, his uniqueness *and* oneness with the world.

As such, the creative act strives to embody an experience or condition – a state of being – and the "meaning" therefore of a poem or painting is irrelevant: "If you can look without projecting a meaning you will be confronted head-on by an embodiment of being" (Breytenbach 1991: 79). The poem or work of art is simply the instrument through which the transformative relationship between poet and reader, artist and viewer is activated, always "unique and different for each person coming into contact with it" (Breytenbach 1991: 76). The Buddhist relatedness between poet and reader transcends the apparent duality of "I" and "other": the poem or painting becomes a metaphor of the relatedness or connectedness *in* and *through* differentiation which can be compared to a moment of Satori, and which becomes the "raison d'être" of the whole oeuvre.

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