

**Sandra Saayman**

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Discussion

“Writing is travelling unfolding it’s own landscape.” A discussion with Breyten Breytenbach on *A Veil of Footsteps*

This discussion of *A Veil of Footsteps* (*Memoir of a nomadic fictional character*) resulted from my reading of the manuscript – initially entitled *Word Bird* (*On the peripatetic art of writing an I*) – in August and September 2007. Breyten Breytenbach’s comments on my initial responses to the manuscript led to the idea of giving the conversation a more formal structure. I invited Breytenbach (based in New York at the time) to a discussion via e-mail. The agreement was that he would have the chance to read the final text and to remove anything prior to publication. He answered all my questions and added slight modifications to one or two answers once the conversation had been completed, but removed nothing. The discussion lasted a month (October 2007), was interrupted and then concluded in February 2008. Other than the addition of a bibliography and endnotes, it has not been modified. I was concerned, at the time, about the reception in South Africa of a work that breaks so many rules. *A Veil of Footsteps*, simultaneously playful and serious in a characteristically Breytenbach manner, is riddled with pitfalls and my aim was to point one or two of them out with the hope that critics would then move on to the more challenging aspects of the work. The discussion took on its own momentum however and due to its length and nature I decided to withhold it at the time of the publication of *A Veil of Footsteps*.

**Sandra Saayman, 1–5 October 2007:**

When we discussed my initial reactions to of *A Veil of Footsteps*, you evoked the “laying down of patterns and the creation of echoes.” These patterns seem to recur in a circular manner. The reader becomes aware, fairly early on, that the work has a circular as opposed to a linear structure. Perhaps a spiral structure, for the reader moves through layers or depths of meaning, through easily comprehensible texts to mysterious texts and back. I would like to start by moving into one of the deeper layers of *A Veil of Footsteps*, to those texts that, in their dream – or nightmare – quality, remind one of the texts encountered in *Mouir. Mirrornotes of a Novel*, written during your incarceration. In *A Veil of Footsteps*, “In the middle of the night” would be one example of such an echo. It describes “a grave in the sky,” with “inner walls [...] of fold upon fold of blue silk” (*Veil*, 69), echoing the impossible projects for the Grave of the Unknown

Poet described in *Mouiroir* ("Re: Certain Papers left in my Possession"). The construction of a high structure, a "momentous project," in "In the Middle of the Night" (*Veil*, 69) evokes the prisoners working against a "perpendicular rockface" in "No, Baba," (*Mouiroir*, 95). In both texts, "the "workers" seem to be prisoners and the structures being built, labyrinths of some kind. The scaffolding in "In the Middle of the Night" further evokes the surrealist cages recurrent in *Mouiroir*. A "big building perched on a hill overlooking the distant city" (*Veil*, 70–1) carries echoes of descriptions of Pollsmoor Prison in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, your autobiographical prison novel.

I realize that I am being very demonstrative, but the point I would like to make is that, due to the recurring prison spaces, one might be tempted to read these texts in *A Veil of Footsteps* as nightmares, or haunting memories of your incarceration. A discussion we had about *Mouiroir* in 2001 comes back to me: I had tried, with difficulty, to interview you on *Mouiroir* and you had made it clear that you did not enjoy discussing the book. I was reading *Mouiroir* as prison literature and you had said, to end the discussion, that the landscapes or spaces evoked in *Mouiroir* were spaces beyond death, spaces that have always existed and that will always exist.

If *A Veil of Footsteps*, which takes stock of your whole oeuvre,<sup>1</sup> is also a continuation of the kinds of *spaces* you explore in your work, it could be relevant to take note of the echoes with *Mouiroir* or other prison texts. But I sense it might be a mistake to see the mysterious shadow texts as haunting prison memories, even when prisons or interrogators are mentioned. Are you prepared to comment on the above?

### **Breyten Breytenbach, 1–8 October 2007:**

Although I appreciate the reader (Reader) picking up on the process of establishing patterns – and I hope these will resonate through the text, I don't imagine the need for familiarity with anterior texts in order to access or situate what's offered here. Having said that, this manuscript, *A Veil of Footsteps*, is conceived to be part of what will ultimately be *The Middle World Quartet*,<sup>2</sup> and as such there are references back and forth, a recurrence of motifs and a migration (or transformation) of characters.

A purpose of patternmaking is to promote the autonomy of the text. I am concerned with the 'thing-ness' of writing: the patterns, textures, colours, structure and spaces. I believe there are at least two 'meanings' in a text – that culled and ascribed to it by the reader, in terms of her experience and expectations and understanding; and the organic life of the text, going beyond, but including, the meaning conveyed by the words and the thoughts. If a text has a 'parallel world' or a 'subconscious' it would be that: the autonomy of language (more precisely *writing*) procreating and talking to itself under the veil of surface communication or narration, which could be equated with the mating and the mirroring of consciousness.

I do not see a dichotomy between the 'real' and the 'dream.' In fact, it is important for me to bring them to the same level through *writing*. By that I mean that they are equally shaped and experienced through the techniques of interaction between the writing hand-mind and the words. (By 'real' I here suggest the depiction of sequential and logical experiences and observations according to the general conventions; by 'dream', for these purposes, I'd say I'm talking of going into other surroundings where logic and spaces of semantics would seem to be represented differently.) It is important to point out that this "going into other surroundings" does not only happen while asleep. Under certain circumstances, *writing* can open the way. This is what happened with several texts in *Mouroir*. It was also a procedure that occurred repeatedly in the making of *Katastrofes*, although more crudely so, and in many poems.

On the one hand, I could claim that these *spaces* do not exist until and unless written into existence; on the other, it is probably so that they are there in any event.

The pervasiveness and the unchanging characteristics of these spaces – give or take a few shifts in scenery (or rather the point of observation illuminating more or less of the terrain), and the occasional eruption of what may be called 'news' – make me believe they have always existed and always will exist. I would now say they are the landscapes and the movements of death, by which I certainly do not intend to convey anything morbid!

I am talking of songs of consciousness. Consciousness as procedure and as process, not as realization or as product – moving from depth to surface, from light to darkness. This 'knowledge' is reflected in many cultures, as you know. A disciple of Carlos Castaneda was talking, in a recent article, of the cardinal concept in shamanism of the 'dream-self,' and only yesterday I picked up a fascinating book (in a Tibetan monastery in Woodstock of all places), *Living Dreaming Dying*, written by Rob Nairn, with as subtitle "Practical Wisdom from the Tibetan Book of the Dead." I'm not sure that I'm interested in these results of stratifying and systemization, perhaps made necessary by pedagogical needs. The salient point here is the *travelling*.

So, *writing is travelling unfolding its own landscape* – with the understanding that the landscapes and the rooms may always have been there. This is why I am loath to link the exploration of these spaces/places to any particular era of experiences. Of course, as with any place, 'real' or 'dream', each setting has its own memories. And it is probably true that in the transcription of the travelling, giving language to it and making it subject to language, a certain 'shorthand' happens so that the rendering comes across as though coloured by stock emotions of anguish, melancholy etc. We know that language is both limiting and defining in an arbitrary way, and potentially limitless. Again, it may be that, for me, references to prisons and interrogators are metaphors, gateways and gatekeepers into and out of the respective stages of the one world of layered consciousness. Maybe they represent nothing more than the need for patternmaking!

The short answer is: no, that 'middle world' is not one of nightmares. And then: the prison experience may have facilitated the back-and-forth between these apparently discrete worlds – promoting visiting facilities, as it were – but nothing more. And then (as I mentioned to you before): I most certainly do not ascribe to psychological notions of a 'subconscious' functioning as some censor or receptacle of complexes. The proposition of a 'shared subconscious' as a collective existential or genetic memory seems more attractive. Freud? No. Jung? Well now, apart from the tedious business of categorizing myths and symbols, maybe...

But this is not what you suggested.

"...even fiction isn't real..."

**Sandra Saayman, 2–9 October 2007:**

*"writing is travelling unfolding its own landscape"*: Writing as meditation, a (silent) "song of consciousness"? Indeed, any barrier or dichotomy between "reality" and "dream," the likely and the unlikely, even the possible and the impossible, falls apart in "Burning, burning – September eleven," where a normal day in New York becomes an instant nightmare. (Once again, *Mouir's* labyrinths, its grey spaces inhabited by grey people come to mind; its "landscapes and movements of death" seem, disturbingly, to overlap with the "reality" of September eleven.) In "Burning, burning – September eleven" one has a strong impression of implosion, of things not so much falling apart, as giving in. How do you give form to such inconceivable and sudden emptiness?

**Breyten Breytenbach, 2–11 October 2007:**

There would be a temptation to see the events of 11 September 2001 as a "coming together" of outside and inside, a conflation, where the horrors of the inner world – at least in its dimension of apocalyptic conflagration – erupt through the thin skin that separates the 'rational' world we construct to live in from the limitless chaos of the inchoate. But that would be sheer hubris. The attack on the World Towers should be seen in historical context – however extreme, spectacular and inconceivable the actual event. There was nothing 'supernatural' or even 'existential' about it. We did not dream the planes.

For the writer, the implosion happens in the attempt to use writing to encompass such a momentous occurrence and its aftermath. Can writing, the individual human consciousness, "get its arms around it"? Of course writing cannot comprehensively do so. So what do you do when it is too dark to sing? You sing about the darkness. Better: you *sing* the darkness. Implosion reverberates.

In many passages through that section of the book I refer to how we try to impose the form of 'understanding' upon that which is too big and too unprecedented to

bring to shape. In many ways one can argue that man's dialectic interaction with the unknowable (nature, the origin and the sense of being), through expressing the *making* of self and the *feel* of being alive, is an ongoing attempt to shape the process in controllable form. Hubris? Whistling in the dark? Think of Adorno's remarks about the impossibility to write after Auschwitz... But then, Primo Levi, Roger Antelme and others *did* write!

Can emptiness exist in a void? Consciousness is the line or edge (*nirodha*) indicating the border between emptiness and emptiness. Perhaps we can say it is because of consciousness that (we know) emptiness exists.

Writing/breathing is about giving form to flow, *and/or* allowing 'emptiness' (which, the Heart Sutra points out, is 'form') to manifest itself.

In the pages you refer to I think the implosion came about in the contrast between trying as closely as possible to write things and perceptions the way they were (obviously not comprehensively), and the hugeness of what cannot be penned down. Under such circumstances, one also instinctively falls back on a heightened sense of the texture of words and the rhythm of sentences, superstitiously believing these may capture and reflect that which cannot be expressed in thoughts.

In other words, one attempts to shape a dark, hollow mirror—with the hope that the flames reflected there can be accommodated through description.

**Sandra Saayman, 3–12 October 2007:**

Before taking a closer look at your "Middle World pictures" (*Veil*, 301), allow me to now move back to the surface of the work and to ask a few short questions, to which you may give short answers. This extract comes from "Declaration," towards the end of the manuscript:

"This is to solemnly affirm that I, the undersigned, am Breyten Wordfool."

I, Breyten Breytenbach write these words. [...] (And as for the other: let him go hang himself. He's been threatening to do so all along.)

Writing continues. I'm not so young anymore. [...] The nose is the most prominent feature on my face, quite centrally placed; I'm often led by it. I am of average height, have a biggish mother-spot right on the sternum, my beard is mostly white by now and my eyes are blue. I also have one leg shorter than the other (*Veil*, 288).

Q: Who is "Breyten Wordfool"?

Q: Who is "I"?

Q: Who is "Breyten Breytenbach"?

Q: Who is "the other"?

Q: Who has blue eyes: "Breyten Wordfool," "I," "Breyten Breytenbach," or "the other"?

Q: Who is "Reader"?

**Breyten Breytenbach, 3–14 October 2007:**

Before answering your formulated 'short' questions, a remark and a warning: these apparently straightforward questions are the most difficult to respond to – maybe because in some ways they go to the heart of the book, or perhaps because I have not worked them out for myself. Can they be worked out? Should they be? Do I *want* to? Here's the dilemma: it may be that the ambivalence is just wilful obscurantism, or a teasing of the reader, or a weakness in the writing; on the other hand, I believe very strongly that one should never be tempted to 'explain' everything in a text. A literary text without shadows and shifting perspectives and even mirages (in places as ambiguous as 'life' itself), is a medical prescription. As map it will have as little relation to terrain as mind has to memory. What would be the point? One could argue that it is in this that a text is 'realistic' – 'lifelike' – riddled with uncertainties and unexplained elements. A further qualm would be that my own 'reading' may well be poor (it will certainly be personal and one-eyed), but as it is *mine* the purported 'authority' may pre-empt the much more inventive reading of the reader.

The warning: my answers may seem flippant. (Maybe they are.) (They are.)

Q: Who is "Breyten Wordfool"?

A: Genetically, in terms of the writing history of the book, "Wordfool" is a descendant of "Woordfoël" – an Afrikaans neologism that could be said to straddle 'Word fool,' 'Word bird' and 'Word prick.' (The title chosen for the Dutch edition is "Woordvogel" —'Wordbird'.) I wanted him to be a clown, a fool for words, a nomad, maybe as free as a nomad and as stupid as a bird and as self-sufficient as a prick. I toyed with the possibility of giving him more of an independent existence, autonomous substance. But why? Somehow it would have been too pat. Let's imagine he's the shadow that inevitably spills out the moment you start writing. The mirror image. Which is a reminder that there's no "I." Because what you see in the mirror is the mirror image. But he's not an alter ego.

Q: Who is "I"?

A: A point of observation, a locus of experience, a passage of consciousness. And since there is movement there will be the illusion of continuity, in other words an 'I' that can be recognized and defined. He's the fleeting moment, the flickering light asking, "Who is 'I'?" In the landscape of this book he is alternatively or successively the I doing the writing, or "Wordfool," who may also be "Wordbird" or "Wordprick" or "Breyten Dog" – sometimes more than one of these in the same sentence. When I think, am I not already two?

"I" is also a writerly convention – the emptiest and most neutral of pronouns.

Q: Who is “Breyten Breytenbach”?

A: The entity, or ‘identity’ (id-entity), whose name will be on the cover of the book. The concept (or idea, or trajectory, or ‘history’) that goes under that name, or is evoked when that name comes up in official and other contexts. Even though that ‘historical identity’ is seen very differently, interpreted very differently, by different people. From “two” comes three. Breyten Breytenbach is a bastard. And a usurper.

Q: Who is “the other”?

A: If you’re referring to the text at the beginning of this series of questions, it is “Wordfool” who hangs himself, who has hanged himself, who ought to hang himself — to bring resolution and get out of the way so that the book may be concluded. One does not want to be distracted by a profusion of “I’s” at the moment of death – from fear that some of them may not be extinguished.

Q: Who has blue eyes: “Breyten Wordfool,” “I,” “Breyten Breytenbach,” or “the other”?

A: All of them.

I, Breyten Breytenbach write these words. Or they write me. Not you, Reader. Sometimes there may be confusion between you and me, but there are distances and spaces! (Veil, 288)

Q: Who is “Reader”?

A: “Reader” is the single and unique reader. The confidante. The one who needs to be seduced. Is she unknowable? (Why should it be a ‘she’?) I have the conceit that when you communicate with somebody, the words you throw at her or him, or *pour* over her or him, will bestow or evoke an outline, a presence (if only a pre-absence), even if that ‘presence’ never pulls aside the veil of words to step forward into broad text. Reader is unambiguous, the one person we can be sure about. As far as this book goes, without Reader no I.

By the way—Breyten Breytenbach agrees with me here!

**Sandra Saayman, 4–16 October 2007:**

This reader did indeed experience Breyten Wordfool as a clown, a nomad, a fool for words (a jester!), but not as “stupid” (are birds stupid?). Rather than “stupid,” I found him childlike in some texts. Wordfool is a loner. What you refer to as self-sufficiency, I experienced as alone-ness (rather than loneliness). Perhaps his isolation is partly due to the concentration or state of mind required to seduce Reader. A certain way of being, a detachment, does seem to be a prerequisite for entering the Middle World. I suspect that Wordfool represents as much a consciousness, a way of being in the world, as a character. “About the island: independence,” a text that seems to celebrate

“Breyten’s” sense of belonging to the Gorée community, ends with this surprising confession to Reader: “Do you know there’s no one here Breyten Wordfool could ever imagine understanding totally or trusting absolutely? Poor fellow. And that it doesn’t matter?” (*Veil*, 217)

I found Wordfool difficult to visualise; when he is present he is also partly absent. I even wondered at the beginning whether he wasn’t dead (which is always a possibility in a Breytenbach text). His shadowy presence is disconcerting, yet powerful. And, though he is alone, he is always shadowed by “I” or by “Breyten Breytenbach,” as in the text entitled “Paris” (*Veil*, 39–41). In the extract below, the shift from “Breyten Wordfool tells her” to “she returns to shyly confront *me*” (as opposed to Breyten Wordfool, or *him*) occurs almost imperceptibly. In the final line, the reader does not know whether “myself” is “Breyten Wordfool” or “Breyten,” or “I,” Wordfool’s shadow. As you say, from one you get three!

“Are you family of Breyten?” she inquires. (She uses the formal *vous* as pronoun.) I shake my head and mumble. “A friend then? You look a lot like him.” Breyten Wordfool tells her she must be mistaken and makes a show of returning to his notes. Behind my back one hears her saying something to the bird sitting alone but apparently he’s not reacting either. So she returns to shyly confront me. “What are you doing?” I answer that I’m writing, frowning my serious absorption. “What? A book?” I admit that yes, it is a book. (A book of leaving to let go of illusions, I think, and how the hell did she pick on that random name? But this I keep to myself.) (*Veil*, 40).

To come back to Wordfool, I found him to be a likeable protagonist as I followed him on walkabout and into a late night bar in Bantry Bay or Gorée. No fool, he knows his way around Paris, Cape Town, New York, Barcelona, Dakar [...] and is sensitive to the workings of the world. This sensitivity manifests itself in surprising details. His belongings are graffiti on a wall or pavement, a painting in a church he ritualistically returns to.

Wordfool speaks many languages. The languages that come into play in the text, English, Afrikaans, French, Spanish, Xhosa, Wolof, but also “languages” in the more general sense of the language of a dictionary from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the internet and newspapers, Dante or Lorca, graffiti [...] create an effect of levelling. In the space Wordfool explores – the Middle World – a line of graffiti has the same “value” as a quotation from Lorca. Languages, codes, and texts overlap and interact. “News” read on the internet and a conversation with a tramp seem equally surrealist – and significant.

Would you care to comment on any of the above remarks and specifically on the languages that come into play in *A Veil of Footsteps*?

**Breyten Breytenbach, 4–21 October 2007:**

A quote I found the other day: “‘I shall retire to write a book,’ and at another point, ‘I shall retire to construct a labyrinth.’ Everyone pictured two projects; it occurred to no one that book and labyrinth were one and the same.” – Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>3</sup>

You are a perceptive observer. In fact, I’m not sure I need to comment on your remarks – they seem to me to be self-explanatory! Let me rather ‘continue’ some of your thoughts.

Are birds stupid? Obviously, that was meant rather tongue in cheek. A few days ago as I was walking in the early morning along the bank of the Hudson River, I heard the most beautiful chirruping and warbling, as sweet as the songs of the merle on the chimneypots in Paris and more intricately woven than the composition of a nightingale in the thickets of a gulch in Catalonia. I thought I heard it coming from a tree in a small park on one of the piers. A very old black man, clearly homeless, sat on a bench under the tree. His eyes were hooded like those of a chameleon. Was he a ventriloquist? Or selling some sort of tongue-sized flute that can imitate the chirping and trilling of birds? He didn’t even seem to notice when I walked up to the tree, hardly a yard away from him, to start searching in the branches for the source of this unexpected music. (Remember, it is well into autumn now, certainly not the season for mating.) From a nearby power pole a wire led into the tree. Would there be a loudspeaker up there? Could this be part of a surveillance system run by Homeland Security? Perhaps luring curious foreigners to within view of a camera? Maybe even indoctrinating us subliminally? Then there was a furtive fluttering and soon the song was coming from another tree. The chameleon man did not look up. I kept stalking the bird until I saw it fly, first to some low shrubs and then, after I’d become too inquisitive, to the top of a tall pole where it perched facing the breeze, with the slightly fetid odour of rivers, coming off the water. It was grey in colour with white areas on its chest and under each wing, which seemed nearly transparent when the bird stretched them. I could see the swollen throbbing of its throat as it continued singing. It had the long tail of a wagtail, but was bigger in size.

Maybe the whole world is a text. Fundamentally religious people instinctively recognize that hell is doubt, ambiguity, the secular, the man-made, the *either/or*, movements created by the appeal of the void. “In the beginning the Universe was created. This has made a lot of people very angry and been widely regarded as a bad move” – Douglas Adams. I always found it fascinating that all reality was deemed to fly up and return to the closed pages of the Book, like a bird for all seasons, which would neither lose its feathers nor ever change colour. The loss of faith in the certainty of Unum would be like being in free fall. Shades of Lucifer!

Then again, in our post-modernist fractured continuum, the primordially pre-eminent autonomy of the text became paramount. What this says to me is that, as in ‘creation’ (everything that exists), there can be no hierarchy of importance among the

variety of writings. Whatever is, *is*. Naturally, I also keep in thought that consciousness needs texture to come into operation, and that there is thus pacing and patterning (near and far, sharp and obtuse, 'important' and 'empty' – as filling – etc.) in order for the mind (with its garb of senses) to *move*. Among these textures are random, or seemingly random images and quotations as 'found objects.'

For me, the text is also always a surface. On this surface elements are put, often fragments and shards (images and sounds and rhythms), to interact both 'internally' and with the outside, the way a collage does. This interaction, ideally, brings about its own 'meaning.' And even laws! The words making up the surface will decide whether certain among them 'belong' or not. An interesting contradiction is that writing is always an opening up, going deeper, going unexpected and unexplored places – and the further you go the more the writing develops its own directions [...] to close you in! Dead birds on the ground become a burden. And they stink!

The *Veil* was originally conceived as a diary of some sort. Hence the suggestion of moving forward to wherever the days and the nights will take you, without much of a pre-determined purpose or destination and without according more or less importance to this rather than to that picked up or noticed along the road.

One can only walk when you are quiet enough.

Neurological experiments have apparently shown that when a certain part of the brain is stimulated, one has the practically tactile 'impression' of somebody being with you, at the corner of your eye, a shadow, as your guide. The moment you become aware of consciousness it becomes a presence, a being or a double outside you.

The fool or jester often goes clad in a cloak made of feathers. I followed the guide into the Middle World as he (she?) warbled and whistled and pointed out pebbles, sticks, chalk scrawls and voodoo signals to me, and I was aghast at the blood dripping down his legs.

### **Sandra Saayman, February 2008:**

Amongst the texts that come into play in *A Veil of Footsteps*, is an as yet non-existent book, that I shall call *Simon Snow*. The reader is introduced to this text, a future novel, a text-in-the-making, quite early in *A Veil of Footsteps*:

Though I have been working for a long time on a novel now it never seems any closer to getting done. What about? Oh well, it's the story of an old man, his name will be Simon Snow, who has spent his time preparing people for the final disposal and now he is trying to take his turn. It is not easy to die, to lie down and scoop the soil over oneself. To urn yourself in as it were (*Veil*, 17).

References to the story-to-be, "the *other* book" (*Veil*, 18, in italics in the original) crop up at regular intervals in *A Veil of Footsteps*, to form a pattern and rhythm. Now, even

if *Simon Snow* is indeed a manuscript that "I"/"Breyten Breytenbach" is busy working on, a "real" novel in the making (and this the reader cannot be sure of!), it is nevertheless a "future text," because it is a manuscript, per definition incomplete, in the process of coming into being. What would you say to the following reading? *Simon Snow*, "the other book," belongs to the "Middle World of Texts" (my extension of your expression) where the possibilities are endless; it is a World of manuscripts being written, of unwritten manuscripts, of censored texts and lost texts ...

If *A Veil of Footsteps* then brings into play a piece of graffiti, a Lorca poem, a Buddhist saying ... and a future text, it celebrates existing landscapes and places (cyclically, creatively), but also possible spaces.

### **Breyten Breytenbach, 23 February 2008:**

Yes. One is also always writing – treading water in your sleep – in order to escape or go beyond the sequential inevitability of communicating by stringing words together. Many experiments have been tried to bring about simultaneousness of distinct narrative lines or to break away from the tyranny of the straight-forward. I'm thinking of an early work of Julio Cortazar, or Raymond Queneau's infinite variables of the same text, or Brian Gyson and William Burroughs working with cut-ups and fold-ins, or for that matter J. M. Coetzee's most recent book.<sup>4</sup>

I like your notion of possible spaces, and that these could bring about movements in the mind that would set off echoes going beyond what is, for the time being, on the page – and in so doing would open up the simultaneousness of discrete 'realities.'

Art Spiegelman, the cartoon artist of *Mouse*, once said to me that, when concentrated on his painting, his mind seems to produce in parallel the most bizarre and even obscene fantasies, as a dancing and perhaps taunting shadow-image of what he is consciously engaged upon or as burn-off. In meditation this phenomenon is recognized as the rising of contorted and unexpected images and thoughts. It is as if one-pointedness, which seeks to close the gap with the void, provokes movement and aspires (as in 'breathing in') to unexpected images, situations, stories. Where do these come from? Were they always there, dormant or hiding in the shadows of 'conscious existence'?

'Western' notions of progress, of beginning and finality, are perhaps not apposite. Everything has existed since all time and are being born constantly. There is no end to reverberation. But what happens when the "I" moves away from the central point of observation, when it becomes movement? An unwritten text, as example, will be Simon Snow's *Of dogs and of angels*. Can something that has been conceived / that has emerged, even when not concretized, ever become non-existent again?

Now that Breyten Breytenbach ("I") is indeed working on *Simon Snow* it is interesting that the *Veil* is becoming the pre-existent 'other' landscape which emerges as

resonance to the text taking shape. “Future” and “past” conflate to the here-ness of writing, and the writing as movement secretes a Middle World of *possible spaces* expressed in an eternity of rooms and landscapes.

#### Notes

1. The reader of *A Veil of Footsteps* will pick up references to early Breytenbach texts, like the opening poem of his first collection of poetry, *die ysterkoei moet sweet*, “Bedreiging van die Siekes,” and the short surrealist text, *Om te vlieg*. Similarly, Breytenbach’s career as painter is taken stock of. Galleries and exhibitions are mentioned and works of art – like *S.A. Angel!* – described (*Veil*, 39). I examined the unexpected manner in which prison imagery resurges in this work in a paper delivered at the Société des anglistes de l’enseignement supérieur congress in Orléans, France in May 2007 (see Saayman 2008).
2. *The Middle World Quartet* will consist of (a) *The Intimate Stranger* (the French edition, *L’étranger intime. Livre d’écriture (A Mme Lectrice)*, was published by Actes Sud in 2007; the Dutch edition, *Intieme Vreemde. Een schrijfboek*, was published by Podium in 2006; the American edition will be published in 2009 by Archipelago Books); (b) *A Veil of Footsteps. Memoir of a nomadic fictional character* (there are three editions: the South African edition, a French edition, *L’Empreinte des pas sur la terre. Mémoires nomades d’un personnage de fiction*, published by Actes Sud in 2008, and a Dutch edition, *Woordvogel. Gedenkschriften van een nomadische romanfiguur*, published by Podium in 2008); (c) *Notes from the Middle World*. When this article went to press only the French edition was underway (to be published by Actes Sud in 2009); and (d) *Simon Snow* (the working title of the final work to form the “Middle World Quartet” is *Doggod: the Last Days of Simon Snow*).
3. The reference is to Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “The garden of forking paths” (“El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” 1941).
4. Breytenbach is referring to J. M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year* (Harvell Secker, 2007).

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