

END PAPERS

Essays, Letters, Articles of Faith, Workbook Notes

BREYTEN BREYTENBACH

author of THE TRUE CONFESSIONS OF AN ALBINO TERRORIST



"Both dynamic and thoughtful."—*The Bloomsbury Review*

Excerpts from *End Papers*:

"And to the extent that culture is also the expression of social ideas and values, the writer, the artist and the musician must use it as such, and use it to fight for political freedom, for dignity and for justice. Man lives only in other men; he expresses his dreams only in *human* terms, his only real fear is of other men . . .

"As long as we have Apartheid—and the mutual fear, distrust and hate this inspires—it will be impossible for South Africa, or any of its ethnic groups, to develop a living culture."

"Our land, my land, is filled with bitterness and wretchedness and hate and anguish. But at last the discovery is dawning that it has become urgent to dream a new future—a dream as old as the exile of the people . . . the ultimate outcome of the conflict is clear for all to see. In my country it is often said: 'Freedom in our lifetime.' . . .

"We cannot write ourselves out of exile, we can only hope to comprehend its roots and its working through our writing. Only the redistribution of political and economic power—whether it comes about abruptly (and bloodily) or slowly—will bring an end to exile. . . . We are at the present moment living through the prerevolutionary period. The converging and sharpening conflict is smoking all of us out from behind the protective hedges of our words and our illusions

"The apparatus
the cause of
will snap t

source of joy for some and
the redistribution of power
shall be free . . .

by the same author

A Season in Paradise

Mouroir: Mirrornotes of a novel

**The True Confessions
of an Albino Terrorist**

End Papers

Essays, Letters, Articles of Faith, Workbook Notes

Breyten Breytenbach

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All things are absolutely true at all times.
Some things, however, are more true than others from time to time.

Don Espejuelo

And it must be remembered that at birth the chameleon is
transparent.

Ka'afir

In heaven and earth, no ground to plant my single staff,
I delight that man is nothing, all things nothing,
Wonderful, this three-foot sword of the Great Yüan,
Like lightning it flashes through the shadows, severing the spring
wind.

Wu-hsüeh Tsu-yüan

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In heaven and earth, no ground to plant my single staff,
but I can hide this body where no traces will be found.
At midnight the wooden man mounts his horse of stone,
crashing through a hundred, a thousand folds of encircling iron.

Sesson Yubai

[i]

The stage is bare. The eye opens. The inner space, a hall, is vast and desolate. A film of grey dust covers and permeates everything. You can actually write on the floor, or on the walls if you feel like having the mantle of prophecy descend upon you. EUTHANASIA FOR OLD ROCKERS. When wind enters the dust rises in whiffs here and there. Here and now are indicated by whaffs.

When you look (again) there are figures on the raised section, motionless, locked into their expressions, hearkening to their longings as if to pain. First there is Angel, bent double, meaty wrists suspended above the keyboard, his eyebrows all tied up, paunch sitting tight. Praying he must be. Or kipping. He has the head of the turbit. Facing Una who stands with breath stilled at lips, fingers fixed in a fondle of flute-holes, long grey hair curl-darkening his face down to the collar. His reflection is shadowing him in the black-polished wood of the open-tail piano, lending ears. Behind Angel Narciso sits, he of the darker countenance, the frowned forehead tilted to attention, one hand shading the strings and the other petrified on the precipice of plucking. And next to him again José Watsenaam, limp the neck and the shoulder, holding his guitar like the light-dripping shield of some deceased warrior. Breathing

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as if sucking a seegar. The air is known as *'Una flauta en la noche'*.

Further back in the wings, the wings are scorched, and barely discernible because of a parenthesis of blackness paragraphed there, the Old One has his presence. He has his legs crossed and his lips hovering between smile and sneer, and protruding from the boniness of his fingers a cigarette like some stylus with its vocabulary of ash. Also, above the head, a whooff of cold smoke. Nothing is quite as nightly as ink.

Nearer to you, hard in the foreground, an act has been frozen. Someone has conceivably been shot or knifed or cracked open, it doesn't matter, and some other one is hunkered down, cradling in the lap the head of the recently expired dead. The mourner has shoulders twisted in the mould of lamentation. There is the question of the game. Watch out for the soft signals. You surmise that you recognize the persons to the extent that they make you think of mice or of melons, or that you have witnessed that scene before, or some such parody, or that you identify with the agony, but you cannot be dead certain since it is all too close to you for your perception to focus properly.

When wind enters the windows move.

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(There is the question of the game. When broaching the subject, that is the Other (the Odder), the means of doing so is the game. Communication is a play – instinctively in that one is sublimating mating, the need to chase to catch to dominate and to devour the Other (the Odder); in an acquired fashion because the game is a social defence, of weaving (ducking and diving) and of remaining out of reach and therefore untamed. The game – the linking of movements, the pirouettes and the arabesques, the looking and the writing – is verbal and gestural. It is the exploration of the contours of the Odder. Through the game you create the chance of risk, of becoming the unknown in new knowledge, of falling headlong through astonishing landscapes, and you establish the possibility of maintaining control. Or at the least of keeping a check. For what it's worth. Of bringing the Odder to heel . . . It is erotic, as testing power always is; it can be an end in itself. The anticipation of eating is more nourishing than food.

What then if the Odder is the I? Does the game become sterile?

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No, the feeling of the movements will be more complex and the silences more ambiguous. Not to say pregnant. *Jeux est un autre.*

Never rape a lady against her wishes.)

[iii]

Death is a trip. Traveller afflicted by *Cacoethes scribendi*.

[iv]

Last night you and people close to you went to eat in a rooftop apartment. Through one slanted window a pale and cold moon could be observed drifting through the skies. Later you wended your way home up the dark hill emerging from the many subdued rumours of the city. ('Squelched' would be closer to the truth. Watch your step! Paris must be the number one European city risking total immersion in dogshit.) And just before retiring to bed your ear picked up the hoo-hoot of the owl. A plaintive sound. It could have been the moon. Your sister remarked upon the strangeness of hearing an owl here in this concrete labyrinth. But there must be trees not far off, she said. In a courtyard or a park. And: the owl is a wonderful bird, it is only a pity one never can see it. And: but it mustn't come and cry here. Not now. Death comes so easy. During the night you dreamed, the dream is the muted remains of the scream, or rather you admonished yourself in nightmurmurs: that you ought to rinse some mice and leave them out on the balcony for the owl. So clean that the ultimate mating would make a squeaky sound. The shivering of tiny but rapid movements bathed in moonlight. The darting across the balcony in the cold. Mice, big as pumping hearts, disputing the protection of pot plants. A shadow will come gliding. The predator will stoop, swoop, thrash, and return to a slightly swaying treetop, or a blocked-off loft somewhere. Blood and fur at the beak. The tree will in due time wither from the fumes and the acid rain. Death comes easy, easy. (As to Ethiopia.)

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Your sister had brought riches with her: a land. A land in the sense of roots and rocks and odours and locusts and space and the infinite variations of blue. A slowness in the uptake, a turning over of words in the mouth to reveal other reaches. But a land too in the opening up of nostalgia and myth: that stretch of the tongue which the White writers are now so tempted to traverse. No Man's Land. A country where reality (or history, personal and communal, as perceived or imagined through White eyes) is such a fertile soil for Literature. We bury our history as fast as we can kill it off. Sometimes we dig up the corpse to burn it for good measure. South Africans are learning about rituals, about cartoons, about 'magic realism'.

This land of youth. She brought back to mind the wind-blown family graves crawling with ants. There is famine in Africa. Do you remember the farms in the dunes bordering on the mutter of the sea, the farmsteads with wide verandas cooling the interior, and in the gloom of an empty room, Bahbah, the strange girl, sitting there, plump and white and pasty as a queen bee, dressed in the immaculate manifold folds of a bride? The bridegroom will never put in an appearance. No lover on horseback Saturday night. And the years slipped by. There was Rachel – a living miracle, the people said – born without arms or legs. A cascade of blonde curls. Listen to her thump-thumping on her rump down the corridor. Shiny floor. No flute-playing for her. She married a farmer called Swart. She was bedded and gave birth to twins, who turned out to be angels, and then she died. The coffin no bigger than a travelling trunk. There was the man with the leaking heart who slept in a bed that smelled of ginger. When you put an ear to his chest you could actually hear the gurgling sound of faulty pipes. There were people who went off to war to become POWs so that they could escape like rabbits across frosty potato fields and become heroes and thenceforth drunkards swapping tales for drinks. There were suicides. A bullet through the head without even taking off the hat. Floorboards stained with blood. In the dark you could listen to the shuffling in the loft. There were beautiful widows who left for far-off regions and returned with small children at hand. Three-year-old pregnancies. There was the cousin who walked into the jeweller's down that busy street of that coastal town, you know which one, who sighed and promptly fell down dead. Tch tch. So young still. There was Uncle David who had this wonderful knack of talking to birds, and taming them with a cooing of lips and a cooling of hands. They tailed him everywhere,

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the cranes and the pigeons and the turkeys and the peacocks screeching like demented Greek goddesses. And Uncle David's wife, harsher even than the climate, used to catch them and twist their necks. She had a thing about birds. Or maybe about Uncle David . . . The ancient country.

And now in turmoil. You are told of how police and military personnel patrol the Black townships, directing searchlights there at night, from a distance, and pulling off shots whenever they detect human movement. A *son-et-lumière* show. You listen to someone who has been to a hospital recently where, among other victims, he came across a young boy deliberately shot in the back while lying on the floor of a police cell, by a Black policeman ordered to do so by the White officer. *Pour l'exemple*. The legs paralysed . . . Cortèges come snaking out of the townships where palls of smoke linger, carrying their dead shoulder high. The lines of heavily armed police are sullen. The journalists, waiting with cocked cameras for scoops, will be stoned. You are told that in some significant ways the revolution has already taken place, from within, and that the Whites don't know about it. The rejection of the White state is total. People are indifferent to overtures for the reform of iniquitous structures emanating from the rulers. Collaborators are slain. The youngsters force their elders to stop drinking. 'You have drowned your humiliation in alcohol. We are through with the ways of the White man!' And then the army surrounds and enters a township, kicking down doors, hauling off school kids who are boycotting classes or staying home out of fear for the boycotters. One grandmother (you are told) stays home with a 9-year-old child, to keep him off the streets. The men in 'bush-war' outfits, with their machine-guns and their yelping curs, drag him away. The grandmother goes berserk with worry. She had been entrusted with the care of the boy. On foot she starts looking, from town to dusty town, from detention centre to police station. Three days later she finds him in a distant place, inchoate with terror, swollen from beatings, crying in pain and bewilderment . . . The White are blind. Like in 'Rhodesia' they will enter the areas they can no longer control, jumpy, at a loss to recognize foe from 'neutral', not being able to distinguish a 'terrorist', who has just buried his armoury of stones, from an innocent bystander or potential informer. Eyes slide off faces. The land has become foreign and hostile. In due time mines will be laid, the country divided in 'operational areas'. It is said that, along sections of the 'Rhodesian'–Mozambique border, the sky used to be black with vultures. Animals would trigger off the booby-trapped frontier fences. The stench of decomposing meat covered vast areas. The gorged birds would flutter, could scarcely hop away.

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South Africa is a symbol. South Africa is a reality. These two truths are intimately linked, as are the mirror and memory, and both can operate simultaneously. (There is the broken mirror, the wooden object with shards of sun-spewing and image-scattering glass, used to lure larks down to earth, to kill them.) But image changes depending on where you are situated, and so does reality. Listen, South Africa is a running sore on the world's conscience, depicting all the misery and the bitterness and the humiliation within the frontiers of one state where one man squeezes dry and pushes down the other in the name of 'racial superiority', of 'civilization', of 'survival', of 'anti-communism' . . . Listen again: Azania is that part of the world where the magnificent struggle for freedom, for mutual understanding, for justice and for self-respect expressed in the respect of the Odder, refuses to be effaced. Take reality if you wish: the minority hogging power (supported by those who white-wash them abroad, having themselves invested in the blood-sucking) will tell you that their regime is the last rampart against atheism, that they impose peace, that they create prosperity, that they honour the culture and the traditions of the Odder . . . They will dress in the same clothes you do; they will be decent and reasonable and hospitable and well spoken; they will speak to you of the horrors of the Far Right taking over unless you 'understand the situation'; they will tell you how they have reformed iniquitous structures; they will draw you unwittingly on to the ground of shared Whiteness . . . While the Western and Christian values in the name of which they rule are perverted and rotted beyond recognition or revalorization: where the only 'peace' and daily bread given to 73 per cent of the population will be famine and tear gas and buckshot and baton charges and bulldozed shanties and mass removals and hospital beds with chains for the wounded and snarling dogs and treason trials and death squads killing and mutilating the corpses; where culture and traditions are reduced to the harsh reality of living as foreigners, as migrant labourers, as squatters in lean-tos, scrabbling for food on rubbish dumps, going dressed in rags, separated from husband and wife and child – in the land of milk and honey, the land of their birth, potentially the richest land in Africa!

Power always projects its own legitimacy. The questioning of central authority – and of the dogma shoring up that authority – must be seen as 'subversive'. 'Security' is identified with govern-

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ment. 'Peace' is the most terrible status quo that could ever be imposed on South African Blacks.

There is no democracy, ever. There is a power relationship between those who rule, and the others (the odders) – where either party may manipulate for partisan purposes the formal structures that incorporate, more or less, notions of democracy or representativity. (There is an ongoing struggle, always having to be renewed, in some parts of the world, to have the principles of democracy entrenched in such a way that they would supersede the power struggle, and serve as the immutable framework for public life.)

Powermongers recognize each other, even if only in the name of international law and order (except where national interests or ambitions preclude the recognition of the other's legitimacy). There is something universal in the relationship between rulers and subjects, in the acceptance of certain methods to maintain that rule, which is far stronger and more ancient than the differences that may emerge from opposed ideologies like socialism and liberalism, or democracy and totalitarianism. Botha, being a politician in power, ultimately belongs to the same species as Reagan, Thatcher, Lubbers, Mitterrand, Gorbachev, Nakasone, Alfonsín, Kohl, Mengistu, Bongo, Machel . . .¹ The killers of South Africa's DNS, the CIA, the KGB, Mossad and all the other spooks and moral cripples of the world are birds of a feather.

No ground is ever neutral. It is a field of tension, of power. The dissident may attempt to enter that area, to exploit it for his or her purposes, to air alternative positions, principles and options. In South Africa, with starkly opposed cultural centrifugal forces, the only role the dissident can hope to play is that of subversive, culturally and politically – as 'traitor' if judged by the dominant ideology of his group. (Naturally his motivation will not be treachery but exactly the opposite: South Africanness, justice, majority rule, anti-racism, tolerance, decency. He will subscribe to the minimal and non-negotiable demands so bitterly fought for by the majority: one unitary state; the same privileges and responsibilities for all; one citizenship; equality before the law; greater social and economic justice; democracy in the sense that the citizens can and must be involved at all levels of decision-making . . .)

You are a fool, of course. You and others like you (because in a

¹Note Of course I'm not suggesting that all those in power and oppressors. Botha is the pinnacle of a dictatorial regime whereas Mitterrand, Alfonsín and others represent, after democratic elections, the majority of their people.

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limited way it will be possible to form groups and organizations of dissidents) will be tolerated to the extent that you do not sensitize too much the severely depoliticized White milieu. You will then have to decide whether your opposition, which you have adapted in order to survive, now permitted to exist, is not just objectively making the totalitarian state stronger by giving it a lark mirror of internal flexibility. You may have to provoke breaks, or go into exile, which ultimately must be silence, at least as concerns the central problems of your country.

You may take some consolation from the fact that you are obliged to become more aware of the peripheral nature of understanding, of the unspoken areas, the un-linked perceptions that define group relations, of the ethics of resistance, of the liberating pain of awareness, of the collapsible contents of identity. You may be freed from your roots. In fact, if you were to move through the experienced understanding of compromises and the liberty and limitations of action, without self-indulgence or complacency whilst retaining the commitment to the cause of liberation – *but knowing that the struggle, like life, is a process never to be completed* – you have a fair chance of being favoured and obliged to become ‘cool’ like a Jew or a Black American or a Palestinian. A professional survivor.

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What exactly is it that happens to the prisoner during his stay behind the walls? The first fact to remember will be that he has entered *another world*. He may perhaps come to understand that the prison universe is but the reflection of ‘normal’ outside society, the earlier life . . . but more lifelike. Because his closed world can be found in the mirrors of that other one of which he is now deprived: like the other it has its conventions, language, history, myths, social organization, hierarchy, cults, rituals. The inmate will, were he to rot there for long enough, start to experience his physical and social environment as being the ‘essence’ of life, the nitty-gritty of conceivable relations between people, all the while knowing (or imagining) that the essential is elsewhere. For this essential absence one can substitute *woman, money, steak-chips-wine, walks in the mountain* – freedom, if you want to be grandiose. Along this line one can trace the mythification of the notion of ‘essential’.

Know that you will learn only one thing in prison; to be a