

The trickster and the prison house: The Bakhtinian dimension of 'the carnivalesque' in Breyten Breytenbach's *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*

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Abstract

This paper undertakes an analysis of Breytenbach's prison book in terms of the autobiographer's psychological response to his experience of incarceration. Breytenbach's 'gallows humour' is shown to parallel the Bakhtinian 'carnavalesque' with its symbolic destruction of official authority on the one hand, and the assertion of spiritual renewal on the other. While looking into the carnivalesque dimension of gallows humour as mediated through the literary device of the trickster figure, I shall show that 'the laughter of irreverence' goes beyond mere verbal playfulness in that it is part of a spiritually-based programme of opposition.

1. Introduction

Breytenbach the poet, prose writer, painter, public figure and exile is also an ex-convict and, as he calls himself mockingly in his prison book, an "albino terrorist". Having received a nine-year sentence for political offences, he served seven and a half, with the first two spent in solitary confinement: "a spell from which" – as J.M. Coetzee believes – "he emerged with his sanity miraculously unimpaired" (Coetzee, 1992:376). What may have led Coetzee to this conclusion was that, although Breytenbach wrote the memoir after his release from prison, the general tenor of the book suggests to readers that they are in the company of a mind actually experiencing the immediacy of the daily prison condition while in full control of all its faculties. Intrigued by Breytenbach's ability to cope with the evil effects of imprisonment, especially with prison space, Coetzee goes on to ponder that what will survive of *True Confessions* is not the narrative of capture, interrogation and imprisonment, absorbing though that is. Rather, it will be Brey-

tenbach's transformation of the physical constraints of the prison cell into the metaphysical state of the internal exile. It is the "metaphysical cell" (Davies, 1990) that leaves its mark. Coetzee (1992:379) tries to give an explanation by viewing Breytenbach the memoirist primarily as a poet, whose poetry "stops at nothing: there is no limit that cannot be questioned. His writing goes beyond in more senses than one".

As regards the memoir, *True Confessions* 'goes beyond' the documentary value of the standard prison memoir and also avoids the embittered attitude so characteristic of many prison memoirists. One need only consider the prison memoirs of political prisoners such as Ruth First (1988), Molefe Pheto (1985) and Caesarina Kona Makhoere (1988) in order to understand how a rigid opposition to the 'hostile space' makes it extremely difficult for the imprisoned person to come to terms with incarceration, and to survive with psychic equilibrium unimpaired. Aware of the danger of psychic dissociation in prison, Breytenbach, as he recounts in *True Confessions*, self-consciously embarked upon a sustained practice of disciplining his mind, a process that closely resembles Albie Sachs's earlier efforts of mentally suppressing aggressive attitudes towards his captors as described in *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (1966). Breytenbach's desire to survive the hostile space is very clearly stated in the introduction to Part Four (Breytenbach, 1984b), in which he invokes Sarasvati, the Hindu goddess of wisdom, to help him cope with the conditions of incarceration:

I invoke thee, I concentrate on thee, I salute thee,
Come onto my tongue and never leave me again
May my intellectual faculties never go astray
May my errors not weigh unduly on my becoming
Give that I be freed from the vicissitudes of life
In times of peril, may my spirit not go mad
May my intelligence function without obstacles.

2. Gallows humour as coping mechanism

What is evident in the above quotation is Breytenbach's determination to survive the damaging effects of imprisonment through an intellectual understanding and mastery of his situation. This is apparent at several layers throughout the memoir, and initially it may be surprising to the reader that the apparently light-hearted vein in which the memoir is written is also part of a spiritually-based programme of opposition. As we shall see, spiritual mastery and irreverent laughter are not, in Breytenbach's case, necessarily contradictory conditions.

At the outset, Breytenbach recognises that already “the game was up” (16)¹; and, towards the end, he refers to the entire prison experience as “this macabre dance, this fatal game – because”, he says, “there are certainly elements of a game present” (341). As he puts it in the introduction to Part One, the autobiography is the story of “how a foolish fellow got caught in the antechambers of No-Man’s-Land; describing the interesting events, including a first trial where various actors and clowns perform” (11).

To present prison as a “No-Man’s-Land” or as “a private zoo”, as he calls it elsewhere (44), a place where various “caricatures of mankind” (44) are housed, certainly contains some “elements of a game”, which makes it possible for the prisoner to “talk and to laugh, to situate [him]self” (280). On inspecting the laughter and irreverence which allow Breytenbach to “situate himself”, however, the reader is struck by the resemblance his ‘gallows humour’ has to what Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World* (1965)² calls ‘the carnivalesque’ with its inherent ‘grotesque realism’.

3. The healing potential of laughter

Despite differences in time and place between Bakhtin and Breytenbach, parallels in their response to, and conceptions of life are evident. The nature of this response creates an open textual space within which the writer inscribes himself and out of which he challenges the general closure of his times.

Although he was not physically imprisoned, Bakhtin developed an original critical theory around the relativising concept of the carnivalesque, the symbols of which are “filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of *gay relativity* [my emphasis – ID] of prevailing rules and authorities” (Bakhtin, 1984:11). This theory bears many resemblances to the imprisoned Breytenbach’s use of gallows humour as a coping mechanism. It is doubtful whether Breytenbach was familiar with Bakhtin’s writings; nonetheless, it is interesting to consider the circumstances that in the two writers provoked a carnivalesque interpretation of the

¹ Page numbers refer to Breytenbach, Breyten. 1984a. *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*. London : Faber & Faber.

² *Rabelais and His World* appeared in English translation in 1968 after having passed through a unique ‘adventure story’ of its own. Initially submitted as a Ph.D thesis in 1940, its author was not permitted to defend it until 1947 because of the frenzy of postwar xenophobia and anti-liberal campaigns that characterised Stalinist dictatorship at its height. Although Bakhtin defended the thesis with much rhetorical skill so as to avoid ideological accusations, the conservatives on the panel blocked the award of a doctorate to him on grounds of heresy from socialist realism. It was much later, in 1965, that the book was published in Russian, thanks to the manoeuvring of Bakhtin’s friends.

oppressive conditions of their existence. It is not only physical incarceration (as in Breytenbach's case), of course, that may induce states of extreme distress; an equally traumatic experience may be the psyche's incarceration in the oppressive ideology of a totalitarian system. Turning to Bakhtin, we need to recall that he witnessed the worst days of Stalinist dictatorship, that era of "total incarceration" (Davies, 1990:8), where political constraints forced him to address his theory of the carnivalesque not to Russian society itself, but (by analogy) to another time and place, i.e. to the sixteenth century world of Rabelais, so as to avoid a direct confrontation with the cultural censors of his own day. (Rabelais' courageous attacks on obscurantism, we may recall, brought on him the ire of the Sorbonne and the French parliament.) Breytenbach was physically imprisoned for opposing apartheid, another form of totalitarianism. The works of Bakhtin and Breytenbach, therefore, spring from an age of ideological totalism, with the South African's gallows humour and the Russian's carnivalesque both pointing to the healing potential of laughter in that the roar of laughter symbolically destroys the monolithic seriousness and authority of the 'official' culture. Just as Bakhtin's carnivalesque points to a whole world turned upside down, so Breytenbach's humour serves to subvert the external pressure to which he was constantly subjected in prison. His mockery turns the captor/victim relationship upside down and renders it harmless, the victim becoming both an actor in, and a spectator of, his own captivity.

This attitude is also in keeping with the paradoxical spirit of some Far Eastern spiritual disciplines, especially with Zen Buddhism³, which Breytenbach was practising at the time of his imprisonment. To put it briefly, the aim of Zen is to assist individuals attain a state of maximum spiritual awareness, *satori*, while liberating their natural energies and "giving free play to all creative and benevolent impulses inherently lying in [their] hearts" (Fromm, 1960:114). Breytenbach's invocation to Sarasvati, which I quoted earlier, will be seen as a suggestive aspect of this response.

4. The spirit of the 'carnavalesque'

As concerns the carnivalesque, the emphasis lies, for some, with the semiotics of the grotesque body, i.e. with an intensely physical rejection of the authority fi-

³ It is difficult to render acceptable, within the absolutist Calvinist way of life, the Zen Buddhist spirit of relativisation with its implicit exploding of external authority – filial, fraternal, statal, divine. The unconventional logic and the polyphony of points of view in Zen may be disconcerting as when articulated, for example, in the following statement: "One may regard the universe from a number of equally valid points of view – as many, as one, as both one and many, as neither one nor many. But the final position of Zen is that it does not take any special viewpoint, and yet is free to take every viewpoint according to circumstance." (Watts, 1971:188.)

gures. For Bakhtin and for Breitenbach, however, it is the mental attitudes exemplified by the carnival. To put it briefly, it is the spirit of laughter and mockery that constitutes the power of their rebellion rather than the minute descriptions of grotesque bodies and the space they inhabit.

In important ways, Bakhtin regarded the carnival as a semiotics of the grotesque. In equally important (and related) ways, the carnival signified a mental attitude: the carnival of laughter and mockery as a power of rebellion. It is the latter sense that applies most pertinently to Breitenbach.

We also need to see the carnivalesque as part of Bakhtin's conception of 'dialogism', which, he says, "is the *sine qua non* for the novel structure", to the same degree that "carnivalisation is the condition for the 'ultimate structure' of life ... Dialogue so conceived [language as constitutively intersubjective] is opposed to the 'authoritarian word' in the same way as carnival is opposed to official culture" (Pomorska, 1984:x).

What literary critics have often forgotten about Bakhtin is that terms like *heteroglossia*, *multiplicity of styles*, *multi-accentuality*, *polyphony*, *dialogism*, etc, are for the Russian critic only part of a lifetime inquiry into profound questions about the entire enterprise of thinking about what human life means. As Wayne Booth recognises, Bakhtin's ultimate value – full acknowledgment of, and participation in a Great Dialogue – is thus not to be addressed as just one more piece of 'literary criticism' ... "It is a philosophical inquiry into our limited ways of mirroring – and improving – our lives" (Booth, 1989:xxiv-xxv). What is significant about "The Great Dialogue" – as Booth concludes – is that there is a religious dimension: the dialogue occurs between *homo religiosus* and God. But this dimension of Bakhtin's existence is usually ignored in the fashion for Bakhtinian revival in contemporary 'postmodernist' criticism. Living as he did during the heyday of Communist dictatorship, Bakhtin could not afford to be explicit about his religious convictions in his writings. Nonetheless, "he was unusual in retaining his Christian faith, in the Russian Orthodox tradition" (Lodge, 1990:2)⁴. At this point it must be emphasised that Christianity, for a citizen in an atheist state, constitutes an oppositional ethos comparable to Breitenbach's Zen Buddhism in

⁴ In his introduction to *After Bakhtin*, (1990), David Lodge discusses, among other things, Bakhtin's position within the debate of the 1920's between Marxism and Formalism, showing that Bakhtin had serious doubts about socialism's concern for the spiritual aspirations of the individual. Lodge (1990:2) uses a quotation from Tzvetan Todorov to point to Bakhtin's attitude towards socialism: "At some points [Bakhtin] did recognise, and even expressed appreciation of socialism, but he complained of, and worried about, the fact that socialism had no care for the dead". When Bakhtin died, at the age of 80, says Lodge, "he was buried according to the rites of the Russian Orthodox church" (Lodge, 1990:3).

the context of his own Calvinist Afrikaner inheritance, an inheritance which, as a Paris-based intellectual artist, he has tried to master even as he admits that he could not evade his 'South African' commitment.

This is the frame, then, within which Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque should be seen as applicable to Breytenbach. The carnivalesque acts as a device to challenge the totalist aspirations of the official culture, which are in conflict with the aspirations of the individual. The spirit of irreverence becomes a form of inner defiance in its open sense, which is implicitly a "subversive openness" that seeks to "destroy the forces of stasis and official ideology through ... parody[ing them]" (Holquist, 1984:xvi). Laughter explodes the forces of stasis and "builds its own world in opposition to the official world, its own church in opposition to the official church, its own state in opposition to the official state" (Bakhtin, 1984:88). This alternative polis of the dissident subculture is "finally a symbol of freedom, [of] the courage needed to establish it [and] the cunning required to maintain it" (Holquist, 1984:xxi). Throughout history, the aim of the carnival festivities has largely been one of parodying serious rituals and important events in order to gain some detachment from official authority and oppressive 'official truths'. As Bakhtin (1984:10) has it, "one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order ... it was hostile to everything immortalised and completed". While referring to Rabelais, Bakhtin (1984:3) says that there is in Rabelais' images

... no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness ... these images are opposed to all that is *finished* [my emphasis – ID] and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook.

Breytenbach has a similar 'subversely open' attitude against the 'forces of stasis' as regards the closed mind and space of the apartheid prison house:

There is no composition like decomposition: not just a rearranging or a falling apart, but verily rotting to the bone to bring to light the essential structure. The further you go, the more you realize that there are no *finites* [my emphasis – ID], just movements of the mind, only processes (Breytenbach, 1984a:151).

What this sort of rebellion suggests is a "ritual spectacle" attitude (towards oppression), one of Bakhtin's three categories of the carnivalesque. I shall look at this manifestation in detail before turning briefly to Bakhtin's second category, that of the "comic verbal composition". In this article I will not deal with the third category referred to as "various genres of billingsgate" (cf. Bakhtin, 1984: 5).

5. The 'life-as-spectacle' attitude

Bakhtin's "ritual spectacle" parallels what Breytenbach (1984a:363) calls "gal-lows gladness" which can be illustrated in the "albino terrorist's" mocking 'life-as-spectacle' attitude towards his prison experience, as well as in his use of the literary device of the trickster, according to which he self-mockingly scrutinises his own identity.

The concept of 'life-as-spectacle' is most explicitly employed by Breytenbach in the two trial scenes, which are staged in the narrative in such a way as to highlight the perverse rituals of the law and to undermine the 'monolithic' seriousness of its 'immortalised' truths. Breytenbach's trials had stirred considerable interest at the time of their occurrence (1975 and 1977) and the tragi-comic register informing the memoirist's recollections of them corresponds, to a large extent, to the literal truth that had played itself out in the courtroom and in Breytenbach's wisecracking, clowning attitude towards his interrogators. Peter Dreyer (1980: 16-17), one of the Breytenbach case commentators, for instance, describes the first trial in the following terms: "the public scarcely knew whether it was being presented with a Greek tragedy, a James Bond farce or an Agatha Christie thriller".

Breytenbach himself describes his trial as a "dance of the law" (60) and a "circus" (67): that is, the trial is transported into 'life-as-spectacle' as the memoirist seeks a detachment to make possible the creation of a reconstructed inner space, an inner space permitting a humorous interpretation of the dictum "the Law Is" (251): what is interrogated is the corrupt system of law and its lackeys. As Breytenbach describes it, the first trial was presided over by "an old flunkey going by the name of Silly" (p. 63), who must have received his orders from the mock-honorifically nicknamed Sitting Bull himself, i.e. the then prime minister, B.J. Vorster. Another representative of the Law is the prosecutor's senior assistant, a supercilious man who 'opens his heart' to Breytenbach by confessing that he is a Satanist. Breytenbach comments: "and we felt we might have something in common here, as he sensed, he said, an admiration for the Devil in me too" (63). Whether the state functionary realised it or not, his identification of Breytenbach with the devil suggested something of his fear that the prisoner, through his clowning, may have had the capacity to bring the solemnity of the proceedings into disrepute.

In this gallery of buffoons there is, however, one supreme clown, Colonel Huntingdon, who stands out by virtue of his utterly split personality. His schizoid mental associations allow him to believe that he is able to combine his duties as a Security Police officer with his having humane feelings towards the prisoner. Thus, he pretends – before the trial begins – to defend Breytenbach's interests, really believing that his intention is to assist the prisoner: "Why bother to have le-

gal representation? ... why don't you leave it in my hands? – I shall defend you!" (61). Later on, during the trial, Huntingdon, wishing to 'defend' Breytenbach, testifies to the latter's cooperation. As Breytenbach writes: "to my everlasting shame, [he] went up to testify to my cooperation" (66). The trial-circus ends with Huntingdon pretending "to be aggrieved and surprised by the severity of [the] sentence" (98).

What all these prison-carnival-figures, or embodiments of "State the Father", have in common is that "they are fascinated by the mechanism of the trial-as-ritual. They love to assist at the conclusion and the accomplishment of their handiwork" (64) because, as Breytenbach puts it in a lighter note now – that barely conceals the sinister undertone – they want "to make sure that the noose fits snugly" (64), and that "the show ... go[es] on!" (67).

6. The trickster-in-prison

The spirit of laughter and irreverence is not only apparent in Breytenbach's mocking 'life-as-spectacle' attitude, but is also mediated in the memoir through the use of the trickster figure. In Jungian psychology, which Bakhtin clearly evokes, the archetypal 'trickster' functions to restore proportion and perspective in relation to the network of constituting circumstances in which one may find oneself trapped. Once having developed a 'theory' about what is going on, once capable of predicting which 'play' is on, the trickster-in-prison begins to recast his experience as a contrived drama, in which he can play-act while keeping in touch with his sense of identity. The trickster is thus internally a liberated man: one who no longer confuses his own identity as individual human being with that of his socially inscribed role (in this case, as prisoner). As Jung has it, the trickster is an ambivalent figure, the embodiment of both sides, not 'either/or', but 'both/and'. He is "a wounded wounder ... [a] sufferer [who] takes away suffering through ... the transformation of the meaningless into the meaningful" (Jung, 1980:256).

To transform "the meaningless" is to subvert the arbitrary meaning which the state machinery is determined to impose on the individual. In attempting to subvert the meaning of trial and imprisonment, the albino terrorist turns to mockery. Probably one of the best illustrations of the autobiographer's paradoxical self-mockery is to be found in the title of the memoir itself, which is meant to cast doubt on the truthfulness of "the true confessions" that the ensuing pages claim to offer. While the word *confessions* recalls St. Augustine's and Rousseau's time-honoured autobiographies, the second part of the formulation, "of an albino terrorist", suggests (in the context of apartheid) the debunking of official language and veracity. Breytenbach evidently is playing around with his

own ambivalent status as “an albino in a white country” (260) by looking at himself from more than one point of view.

This point is reinforced at the end of the book: on being released from prison, where he had served time as a ‘terrorist’, this trickster goes for a swim in the ocean and is surrounded by black children for whom he is just another ‘albino’. “I was surrounded by small Black children who saw nothing wrong with this Whitey being in the water with them. Ignorant little bastards – haven’t you heard about Apartheid yet?” (331). Breytenbach’s whiteness here has an extremely ambivalent connotation: the newly released prisoner does not claim any right to admiration for having once attempted to strike a blow at the very structure of racial discrimination to which he now draws the children’s attention.

Clearly, the ritual spectacle has involved stratagems of comic verbal composition, Bakhtin’s second category of the carnivalesque: a strategy closely linked to the coping mechanism of preserving the personality in the hostile environment. Throughout the memoir, for example, “the albino terrorist” has been aware of the multitude of personae lying behind the name Breyten Breytenbach – in his schizoid role as “an albino in a white country”. This is evident when we simply list all the other names he seems to consider appropriate for defining the various circumstances in which he finds himself, and which call forth different frames of mind. Breytenbach calls himself Dick, Antoine, Herve – which are all various political aliases adopted prior to his incarceration; Jean-Marc Galaska – the name under which he returned to South Africa in 1975; in prison he becomes Mr Bird, Bangai Bird, the less educated inmates calling him Professor, Professor Bird; after his hair has been cut and his head shaved he becomes Billiard Ball; there is also Jan Blom, an earlier poet-mask of Breytenbach’s, as well as Don Espejuelo, literally ‘the knight of the mirror’, who is responsible for the metaphysical meditations. These personae serve temporary purposes for the trickster, whose taste for nominal transformation seems to point to the fact that “there is not one person that can be named and in the process of naming be fixed for all eternity” (13). This kind of awareness may also be detected in the scene in which a warder asks Breytenbach who in actual fact he is, while the “albino terrorist” pretends not to be quite sure either: “He wanted to know whether I was indeed Breytenbach. A metaphysical question admittedly, but I took the risk of saying ‘yes’” (233).

7. Conclusion: The limits of laughter

As a further point of comparison and consideration, I finally wish to turn to another autobiographical text that was conceived in the spirit of laughter and irreverence. It is tellingly entitled *History’s Carnival: A Dissident’s Autobiography* (1979), and written by the Soviet mathematician Leonid Plyushch, who served

time in prison and psychiatric wards for his anti-totalitarian attitudes. Plyushch (1979:301) says:

The role of laughter essentially is to overcome fear, death, and everything deadening and dying. It has been said that Rabelais's laughter broke ground for the French Revolution. The Russian Revolution was accompanied by buffoonery and satire.

When referring directly to Mikhail Bakhtin and his concept of 'the carnivalesque', Plyushch (1979:301-302) briefly summarises the theory of "the all-destroying and all-creating laughter" as follows:

... laughter destroys the old and moribund and gives birth to the new ... it throws dirt at everything that degrades and oppresses man. What are the limits of laughter? If laughter in its totality engenders a dialectical attitude toward the world, then, it too should be dialectical in both negating the old and creating the new. Otherwise it is reduced to a laughter of nihilism, cynicism and madness.

Why I have mentioned Plyushch here is that the issues he raises have peculiar pertinence to the way we may want to see Breytenbach today. His brand of mockery has been regarded by some in South Africa as little more than nihilism. It is difficult for politically radical critics, for example, to erase the recollections of Breytenbach at his own trial: instead of seeing Breytenbach in command of any 'ritual spectacle', these critics are embarrassed to recall the Afrikaner-dominated security police pleading for the minimum sentence on behalf of one of the sons, albeit a 'prodigal son'. An inevitable question, therefore, might be: what is the value of Breytenbach's essentially intellectual rebellion in relationship to the majority of the oppressed? How one answers this depends on how one situates oneself in South African politics. The positioning is not simple and would need to account not only for a 'community of the oppressed' but also for a 'community of the oppressors': that is, we would need to locate Breytenbach firmly within the community in which he inescapably has his roots. Accordingly, we may wish to see his laughter as an attack directed back against the dour Calvinist way of life of his own background. Certainly his actions have been interpreted by some as a form of attack on Afrikanerdom and this has not prevented his being acclaimed by the Afrikaner literati; his prizes tend to be awarded for 'literary craftsmanship' rather than for the 'political content' of his writings. Such a clear-cut separation of functions features in many critical responses to his work.

The reaction against Afrikaner Calvinism may be a valid one that should not be interpreted as merely cynical or nihilistic. Neither should we really be merely cynical about the fact that Breytenbach's suffering was of a different, less physical kind from that of the black oppressed. His rebellion may not have been

grounded in the physical deprivation of the disenfranchised; we should not, however, underestimate the effects of psychological torture on the sensitive mind. In fact, his rebellion of the mind touches very personal convictions. Behind the carnivalesque in Breytenbach, as well as Bakhtin and Plyushch, there are allegiances to what one might call a 'symbolic community' of those practising morality as a private act: something based on deep moral and religious precepts. Although this attitude towards incarceration (incarceration in the broad sense of the word) may be prone to attacks by social commitment, it should be borne in mind that the individual gestures of resisting either physical or psychic /"total" (Davies, 1990) incarceration acquire collective and political significance by each dissident's suggesting a symbolic role model in facing forms of extreme oppression with dignity. Thus, through a feedback effect, these gestures come to strengthen the collective struggle itself. The various strategies of coping with and reconstructing the hostile space become, in effect, political gestures, in that politicisation means – according to Emma Mashinini (1989:24) – "I am human. I exist. I am a complete person". The feeble and lonely voices of dissenters speak of the right to bear witness, as individuals, to the suffering of the many who do not possess the power of articulating their suffering and/or investing it with meaning. This represents "a new symbolic community: the community of those who suffer and live to tell and are ready to suffer again for the right to tell" (Tamas, 1993:15). But, to reiterate, behind the societal claim is a spiritual core. The right to bear witness to, and tell about, one's own and others' suffering has more than verbal implications. As I have suggested, the implication is spiritual in nature. Whereas Bakhtin was a devout Christian, Breytenbach and Plyushch share deep-seated beliefs in Zen Buddhism. Of course, in the harsh political climate of South Africa in the 1980s (when Breytenbach wrote *True Confessions*), one might have been tempted to reject Breytenbach's interest in, and practice of Zen Buddhism as an indulgence. It is a fact, nonetheless, that despite the diversity of styles and subject-matters he has adopted throughout his writing career, Breytenbach's interest in the general principles of Zen Buddhism has been constant. In drawing parallels with the Russian prisoner's interest in Zen, we are reminded that Breytenbach belongs to a broader intellectual community and that his writing is neither simply an effect of the rebellious sixties in Western Europe (where his 'modernism' had its apprenticeship), nor can it, as I suggested above, be confined to South African political specificities. Rather, this symbolic network gives the overworked terms of 'universalism' and 'autonomy of art' spiritual strength and social substance. Whether this makes Breytenbach less a South African writer and more of an 'international' one is, within the terms of this paper, beside the point.

Clearly, Breytenbach's spirit of irreverence has nothing to do with "the laughter of nihilism, cynicism and madness". What I am suggesting is a possible answer to Plyushch's question: "What are the limits of laughter?" An appropriate under-

standing of the laughter of Breytenbach as prisoner and as memoirist suggests its value for his survival as a whole human being.

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