"HE WILL DIE IN ANOTHER WAY BEFORE HE IS DEAD"

The violence of the prison system in "The Double Dying of an Ordinary Criminal" by Breyten Breytenbach

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ABSTRACT • This contribution focuses on the analysis of some of the major themes in the short story *The Double Dying of an Ordinary Criminal*, which provides one of the strongest examples of prison literature. The story under scrutiny is taken from the collection *The Heinemann Book of South African Short Stories: from 1945 to the present*, first published in 1994; however, it is intended to be read as a fragment of a novel from the collection *Mouroir*, written by Breytenbach while in prison. First, the article will explore Breytenbach's political activism during South African Apartheid and his following exile and imprisonment. Then, it will present a short introduction to the South African prison literature genre. Then, Breytenbach's short story *The Double Dying of an Ordinary Criminal* will be analysed, with special emphasis on the themes of the double and death, and Breytenbach's indictment of prison conditions and the death sentence during Apartheid (1948-1991). Finally, the philosophical musings on death and mirrors in the second chapter of the story will be further explored, describing the role of writing and thinking about death.

KEYWORDS • Breyten Breytenbach; South African literature; Short story; Prison conditions; Death sentence.

1. Breytenbach's exile and imprisonment

Once a renowned Afrikaner poet, multilingual writer and painter, Breytenbach later fell from grace with the South African regime and was labelled a terrorist. Even though he belonged to a privileged ethnic group (white Afrikaners), he refused to take advantage of his position and fled to exile in Paris, where he continued to pursue his artistic career at the same time as he decided to intensify his fight against Apartheid[1]. He chose to accept the label that South Africa had slapped

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[1] Breytenbach's political activism started in June 1975, when he joined the Okhela, a splinter group of the South African Communist Party. In the summer of the same year, the author came back to South Africa in disguise, using a false name and a French passport. (Roberts, 1986: 304) This journey is described in A Season in Paradise, published in 1976. His activities included visiting friends and organising secret meetings to conspire against Apartheid (Roberts, 1986: 305).

on him, to the point of calling himself an "albino terrorist", thus highlighting the nonsensical discriminations based on the colour of the skin[2]. On an illegal trip back to South Africa, Breytenbach is arrested and sentenced to 9 months in prison, where he would write about his experience[3].

Breytenbach's prison literature is comprised of two works. The first is a novel he wrote while in prison, made up of scattered fragments. Its title is *Mouroir: Mirrornotes of a Novel*. The second, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist,* is a memoir published in 1985 and written after Breytenbach had already been released from prison. According to Egan, it works as explanatory material to better understand the cryptic nature of *Mouroir* (1988: 90)[4]. *Mouroir* – from French 'mourir' (to die) and 'miroir' (mirror) – is "a reflection of the processes of death" (Egan, 1988: 89). Breytenbach's musings on death are frequent, possibly because – as he himself would later admit – he doubted he would ever leave prison alive: the system was quite violent, and death was a frequent occurrence (Egan, 1988: 89). Luckily, he was released from prison two years before the end of his sentence, in 1982, and he quickly returned to Paris, where he obtained French citizenship. He currently writes about South African culture and society in Afrikaans, French, and English. *Return to Paradise* (1993) and *Dog Heart* (1999) are among his most recent novels written in English. Both deal with post-Apartheid South Africa. In this paper I aim to analyse one of the most emblematic short stories by Breytenbach: an excerpt from *Mouroir*, his collection of tales set within the prison system, on the threshold between fiction and autobiography.

1.1. Between fiction and autobiography: (re)writings from prison

Dying twice, and the way people are driven to despair inside the prison system, are the main themes of Breyten Breytenbach's (Bonnievale, Cape Province, 1939-) short story *The Double Dying of an Ordinary Criminal*. The main character in the story is arrested and sentenced to death in South Africa, as a consequence of a streak of violent crimes he committed. Breytenbach is himself in prison at the time of writing; he has become an unwilling expert of South African jail and – from observation of his fellow inmates – of what being sentenced to death does to a person. He sees prison as "a process", namely a "kind of grinding mechanism that dehumanizes all those in-

[2] As suggested by Sandra Saayman: "With the long title of his prison memoir, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Breytenbach points both to the label *terrorist* his 'betrayal' had afforded him, but also to the unstable nature of 'truth' with a capital T. By referring to himself as 'albino', he refuses the arbitrary 'racial' qualifications of apartheid. Thus this title is itself revolutionary, in that it overthrows the 'racial' categories of apartheid: Breytenbach refuses the label 'white Afrikaner' and creates a unique category: 'albino terrorist'" (2019: 2).

[3] Breytenbach's experience of imprisonment included two years in solitary confinement at Beverly Hill Maximum Security in Pretoria. In 1977, after a second trial, he was transferred from Pretoria to Cape, in the criminal prison called Pollsmoor (Egan, 1988:89).

[4] As reported by Egan, in the chapter of *True Confessions* entitled *The Writer Destroys Time* the author describes the circumstances he had to face while writing *Mouroir*: he had obtained permission to write under surveillance of his wardens as long as he did not show his work to anybody, and, in exchange, the wardens would keep his work safe (1988: 90-91). The result is fragmentary and shrouded in mystery. The latter, because the author wanted to circumvent censorship on the part of those who could be reading his work, in order for it to eventually reach a public outside of prison. The former, because the warders would take from him the pages he wrote every day and would not return them (to prevent him from sharing his work), forcing him to write the entire novel without taking notes, relying solely on memory.

volved in different ways" (Breytenbach 2001: 259). The line – taken from Breytenbach's story – "he will die in another way before he is dead" hints at a twofold consequence of being imprisoned: the unnamed protagonist will be put to death, yes, but he will also be annihilated as a human being before he is killed. Inmates on death row suffer the horrors of death twice.

The story connects to the vast narrative about prison writing produced in South Africa during Apartheid (1948-1994). The range of this literature is wide and includes fictional works in the form of prison memoirs – i.e. *Robben Island* (1973) by D M Zwelonke – to bibliographical works with accounts of detention – i.e. *The Struggle Is My Life* (1978) by Nelson Mandela[5].

One of the aspects that is common to most prison writing is its claim, on the part of the writers, to be a factual account of events[6]. Within the sub-genre known as 'prison memoir', this claim is particularly widespread, mostly because of the autobiographical elements coming from the authors having experienced prison first-hand, and the political implications of the writing itself. Through their memoirs, the writers aim to paint a picture of their experience within the prison system that could simultaneously expose its brutality and injustice.

However, when authors claim they are writing 'the truth', what they mean is that they want to correct false notions about the prison system and re-establish their own sense of self. Their prose is never an objective, reliable account, and it often reads as personal, scattered impressions. This is due to a characteristic of autobiographies that is easy to grasp, but quite peculiar: their writers are both the "raw material and its interpretation", therefore never "a neutral medium through which events write themselves" (Gready, 1993: 490). Eventually, what makes an autobiography a reliable source of information is "the insider's intimacy with events portrayed" and "the manner in which experience is claimed as one's own". (Gready, 1993: 490)[7].

One last relevant feature of prison literature is how useful the very act of writing is in itself. Outside of any political aspiration, writing works for the inmate as a means of survival. In his prison memoir, Breytenbach defines writing as an extension of his senses: "it is itself a sense which permits me to grasp, to understand, and to some extent to integrate that which is happening to me. I need it the same way the blind man behind his black glasses needs to see" (Egan, 1988: 91).

The need to write and leave a mark is stronger when one is in fear for his life. For a prisoner on death row, writing could be seen as a last confession, or it could work as a means to temporarily escape their tragic reality, but it sometimes becomes a trap, leading them down a path they did not want to tread, instead of being a tool in their hands[8]. This could be a reason why *Mouroir* contains

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[5] For a list of literature about imprisonment produced in South Africa consult Jacobs' article *Breyten Breytenbach and the South African Prison Book* (1986: 96-97).

[6] In his article *Autobiography and the 'Power of Writing': Political Prison Writing in the Apartheid Era*. Gready notes that when it comes to prison writings, several authors take on the role of witnesses and claim to write 'the truth' about the prison system: "Molefe Pheto claims that the 'contents of this narrative are true' (And Night Fell, p. 8); even Zwelonke's fiction projects 'a hard and bitter truth; fiction mirroring non-fiction, true episodes and incidents' (Robben Island, p. 3)" (1993: 490). So Gready concludes saying that "there is a common belief among writers themselves that prison writing attains authority and authenticity through a narrowly defined conception of what constitutes the 'truth'" (1993:490).

[7] For more information on the concept of truth in autobiographies, see Coetzee's thoughts on the genre. In an interview by D. Attwell, Coetzee (1991) remarks the importance of the notion of truth. He defines autobiography as "the kind of self-writing" where the writer "is constrained to respect the facts" (Attwell, 1991: 118). He differentiates between two kinds of truth: "the truth to fact", a selection of events that form the reservoir of memories, and "the higher truth", which is to be discovered via writing (Coetzee, 1991: 117).

[8] Writing, Coetzee (1991) argues, "is not a two-stage process" where the author first decides what to write

so many references to dying. As we will see later, this specific aspect of prison writing is one Breytenbach is very interested in pointing out to the reader.

2. The Double Dying

The Double Dying of an Ordinary Criminal is taken from *Mouroir: Mirrornotes of a Novel*, a collection of "thirty-eight semi-connected prose studies of life in death" first published in 1984 (Egan, 1988: 89)[9]. The story is considered a fragment of a novel and it consists of two separate chapters, the first of them taking up most of the length of the narration. They also differ in tone, as one is more descriptive and plot-intensive, while the other contains a brief philosophical reflection on writing and the use of symbolism.

The first chapter, entitled "*Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero* . . .", opens with a lengthy geographical description of South Africa, to then move on to a short summary of the life of the main character, and finally describe in detail the most gruesome aspects of the prison system, where Breytenbach's reflections upon death and the capital sentence take full form. The author lingers on an overview of the implements of death, the people involved in the process and the actual means of execution deployed on the inmates. The flow of the narration switches often and quickly from a dark, sarcastic description of legalised murder, to intricate philosophical musings that call into play, among others, Hinduism and traditional Indian literature. Only one of the many suggestions in the story will be analysed in this paper: that of the concept of *double*, mostly in Breytenbach's reflections upon death. I will focus on his ideas of how the prison system deprives inmates of the will to live (so that they keep experiencing the ultimate loss even before execution), the concept of the double as expressed in the Indian tradition of Kali and Shiva, and finally on the author's musings on the role of symbols when writing about death.

2.1. An ordinary Criminal

The story revolves around the *double death* prisoners on death row experience. It is unsurprising that Breytenbach decides to give little information about the main character, as he is clearly only one of many anonymous criminals who are so very often sentenced to death in South Africa: they are interchangeable and never seen as human beings by the government or the general public. What we know of the unnamed protagonist is that he was born in the "country of the coast", that he is 28 years old and he most likely used to have a job, a wife, even children. The story, however, does not only engage itself with death: an important element of the narration is the concept of *double*, as made explicit in the title. From the very first pages, the writer drops hints about a complex system of symbols on this topic. In the starting description of the area where the story takes place, for instance, a site is mentioned that is seemingly out place against the background: a temple to Indian deities.

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and then writes it, but the opposite: authors write without knowing what they are trying to say and writing reveals to them what they wanted to say in the first place (Attwell, 1991: 118).

[9] Egan (1988: 89) explains the title and the structure of the collection. The subtitle – mirror notes of a novel – may be a reference to the form, namely fragments of prose (notes) that should be read cumulatively (as a novel) in order to understand its sense. The meaning of the mirror and its connection to words is explained in chapter two of the short story *The Double Dying of an Ordinary Criminal*.

> Here and there among the rippling and sharply whispering sugar-cane they erected rudimentary single-roomed temples for their gods, the inner walls decorated with bright representations: often the swarthy mother god, Kali, she who also at times assumes the aspect of Parvati or Sarasvati on the winged throne of a swan, or that of Shakti – the bride, companion and *alter ego* of Shiva the destroyer. (Breytenbach, 1994: 78)

Hinduism is a minority religion throughout South Africa, yet the narrator decides to add this reference for the powerful symbolism embedded within the figure of the goddess Kali. The goddess may assume the aspect of Parvati, which is the archetypal mother goddess of fertility, but also that of Sarasvati, the goddess representing knowledge and creativity. Kali is the Hindu "goddess of time, doomsday, and death" and is a striking figure, because she symbolises a powerful dichotomy: life and death; in other words, she embodies the double (Doniger, 2023)[10].

The reference to a deity with a connection to the concept of double is far from coincidental. Breytenbach suggests a link between the goddess and the only known accomplice of the main character:

> He met up with a woman, much older, a companion and an *alter ego*, a person like him dwelling in the dark mazes of the city. As much and as often as they could afford to they smoked and they drank. Nights they then slept in empty plots by smouldering rubbish heaps, or in condemned buildings due for demolition. Sometimes they lay in water furrows. They also danced. (Breytenbach, 1994: 81)

The relationship between the unnamed woman and the protagonist is described in the same terms used for Shakti and Shiva (in the description of the temple), with the old woman being the "companion and an *alter ego*" of the protagonist, Shiva the destroyer. The phrase "they also danced" emphasises the connection between the couple and the imagery of Shiva and Kali, who are often represented as dancing together. For instance, in Kapalakundala's hymn in Bhavabhfiti's Malatimadhava, they appear as two "mad partners" united in a cosmic dance which is "destined to destroy the worlds" (Kinsley, 1975: 193). Similarly, the synchronised actions of the criminals in the story are doomed to bring about evil as they rob and kill their victims.

If we take into consideration this connection and the similarities between the two thieves and the deities in the Indian pantheon, we can see how the main character in Breytenbach's story is not such an 'ordinary' criminal after all, perhaps hinting at the fact that behind everyone's anonymous façade lies a personal tale that is ignored by the blindness of the state's death machine.

2.1.1. Thinking about death

The life story of the main character, the one the writer chooses to relate to us from an external point of view, is but a pretext to expose the tragic conditions the inmates who were sentenced to death live in, inside South African prisons. However, that story does contain a few similarities with the author's personal life, and those lend credence and authority to the story as a truthful tale.

Breytenbach, who experienced first-hand the fear of dying and the sense of loss that comes when death is near, noticed differences in the way different communities face it. "Some people", he mentions in the story, "are dead before they even come to die". He is referring now to the "Un-

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[10] On the concept of the double as a form of twin self, in literature and psychology, see Otto Rank, *Der Doppelgänger,* 1914.

coloured", as he calls them, so – for the most part – white inmates, who lack strategies for developing any sense of a spiritual community in prison. The "Unwhites" (meaning the black inmates), on the other hand, are known for "directly open[ing] up in song" after one of them is told the date he is going to die, and for accompanying him with their singing on his last walk to the gallows (Breytenbach, 1994: 82)[11].

It is interesting to notice how the author wonders whether the "Unwhites" should include Jews, a well-known target of mass killing and discrimination in Europe. Did they feel the same sense of community, in the gas chambers, that could lead someone to break up in song, and did they?[12] The song takes the condemned to a trance-like state, where they become one with the music and move in unison through the final corridors leading to the gallows, casting away perhaps the most dreadful aspect of the imminent death: loneliness[13].

On the contrary, for the ordinary criminal "there is no such grace because his like […] don't sing easily". (1994: 83) Breytenbach seems to suggest that those who are "Uncoloured", such as our white protagonist, follow a much more individualistic creed and fail to create a sense of community even in the direst circumstances: they do not band together, they do not sing together, and, ultimately, they die alone. Even though no one has a chance to escape their death sentence, at least the "Unwhites" manage to push away despair and find mutual solace by being escorted to their final moments by the voices of the other members of their community.

Not so the protagonist of this story, who "must pray death (or life) all the way out of himself", meaning both that he is forced to go through it alone and that he feels the need to remove himself from the situation completely, banning from his own mind all thoughts of (impossible) salvation as well as those of (terrorizing) imminent death. And this is why "he will die in another way before he is dead". As Breytenbach further explains, "he becomes his own ghost" (1994: 83).

That particular turn of phrase – 'he becomes his own ghost' – does not just refer to the psychological condition of the inmate, the sense of desperation that comes from feeling utterly alone and forgotten. It is meant to reveal that the protagonist (and so many like him) has reached a condition of physical deterioration that has reduced him to a shell of who he once was. His body is described grotesquely, as if only a skeleton remained: "The eyes are deep and bright in the sockets. It gives his head the appearance of a skull. His quiff falls lank over the forehead. He sneers without any fear of the warders" (1994: 83).

The inmate is reduced to a lifeless bag of bones, where almost no spark of energy survives. Just by thinking about the gruesome death that awaits, and the lack of comfort of any kind on the way there, the criminal seems to experience it as a reality and succumbing to it even before it materialises. However, perhaps a likewise significant thing to note is how the main character "sneers" at the prison guards. His desperation has rendered him fearless, because no repercussion or punishment for his open disregard of his keepers could ever be worse than the coming death. The writer quotes none other than John Milton on this subject, to clarify that those who have lost all hope have nothing left to fear.

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[11] Egan (1988: 93) suggests that Breytenbach in this story is describing a death-song of the condemned blacks, one he heard constantly during his stay in the Beverly Hills penitentiary.

[12] In the text: "The sound of the voices is like that of cattle at the abattoir, the lowing of beasts smelling the blood and knowing that nothing can save them now. Perhaps the Jews too, had they been a singing people, would have hummed thus in the chambers where the gas was turned on. Maybe they did?" (Breytenbach, 1994: 82).

[13] In the text: "And so they move with the ultimate daybreak through the corridor as if in a mirror, rhythmic but in a trance, not as men alone but as a song in movement. They are no longer there; just the breaths flow unceasingly and warm and humid over the lips" (Breytenbach, 1994: 82-83).

> All hope is lost
> Of my reception into grace; what worse?
> For where no hope is left, is left no fear!
> (blind Milton) (1994: 83)

This is a quote from *Paradise Regained*. Specifically, this is part of Satan's "Let that come when it comes" speech from Book III (McCarron, 1976: 15). After Satan tried unsuccessfully to tempt Christ by offering him military power, Christ asks Satan: 'Know'st thou not my rising is thy fall / And my promotion will be thy destruction?' (Milton, 1970: 499) Satan's reply begins with "Let that come when it comes", followed by his lines about hope, grace, and fear, written above. For Satan, the hope of being forgiven by God is lost. As there is no hope that he will be forgiven, he has no fears. Similarly, the protagonist knows that he has no hope to achieve the grace of God. In addition to that, it is possible to suggest that the protagonist has no hope of being spared from execution either. This is the reason why he sneers at his warders, as he fears no other evil than those already about to befall him.

It seems likely that this is one of the ways Breytenbach suggests prisoners face death twice, once by dying and another time before then, by losing all hope of any form of spiritual or physical salvation.

3. The State death machine

The author's aim to expose the living conditions in South African penitentiaries could not be complete without an accurate description of the prison system. Breytenbach makes it, in turn, a clinical, cynical recount of workings and procedures, and a more abstract, dream-like series of philosophical musings that hint at the real horror underneath, without addressing it face-first. In the story, the viewpoint widens from the personal events of the main character to the people and the tools that are involved in the dark process of putting prisoners to death.

The minister ("a chaplain, a with a rank in the service") is the first figure the narration shifts to, decribing the role of a failing spiritual guide, whose duty should be "cleansing" (purifying) the soul of the condemned before execution. There follows a grotesque description of the inmate's soul – a thin, ephemeral substance "like smoke", that "so easily slips through the fingers" – being dragged out of the condemned to be cleaned and smoothed out, as if it were a piece of cloth (Breytenbach, 1994: 83). The priest is reduced to a janitor, whose impact on the mental condition of the inmates is minimal, if not outright negative. The executioner, the second role examined by the author in this story, is neither more helpful nor in charge of a less menial job. He is described as "the tailor who will fit you out in a new life", because of his dressing up prisoners in preparation for their hanging (1994: 84)[14]. And this quickly shows how the only requirement for the position is likely lack of empathy and a desire to make some money on the side, with the comfort of anonymity: "His post or position is private and part-time. When, through resignation or death, a

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[14] On the importance of the prison system's managing every small detail of the inmates' lives, see Foucault's consideration on penitentiary institutions: "Prison has to be a comprehensive disciplinary system. In more than one way: it needs to take charge of all the aspects of the individual, from his physical appearance to his propensity to work, to his daily behaviour, moral attitude, and inclinations; prison, a lot more than school, work or the army, who always imply a certain amount of specialisation, is "all-encompassing" (Foucault, Michel, *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975, p. 238, my translation from the French).

vacancy occurs, anyone – a pensioner for instance, or the father of numerous sickly children who needs a little extra income – can submit his application to the magistrate.” (1994: 84)

We can see above how this is part of a perverse mechanism where the government offers jobs to those in need, who are willing to kill people in a way that is approved of by the authorities, thus normalising state-sanctioned murder.

In the following part, titled *The gibbets*, Breytenbach further remarks on the ritualistic function of the death penalty in South Africa: “an obscure tradition that takes place in a privileged place, in the darkness of the night, and in the heart of the labyrinth”. It was not, however, always the case. In years prior to the time of his writing, “the pillory was erected prominently in a square or on a hilltop” and “the ceremony” was held in public, without any trace of shame. In fact, the writer continues, “it was such an intimate part of everyday life and death, and a rude form of amusement (1994: 85). In the 1970s and 1980s, on the other hand, death is not paraded in the streets anymore but lies hidden in a place where it is best forgotten and only tolerated because it takes place far from view. Breytenbach sarcastically comments that this is because “no longer are we animals with the snouts in the trough of death”, “civilization has come over us” (1994: 85).

Both the description of past habits and the one of the current situation are deeply troubling. While on the one hand it is undeniable that it constitutes a form of progress that cruelty and harm are not celebrated and acclaimed under the public eye as they used to be, hiding them inside a dungeon is not more humane or kind; it is merely an additional layer of hypocrisy, a means to comfort ourselves in the notion that society has become more respectful towards life and perhaps less violent. The secrecy surrounding the death penalty, notes Breytenbach, aims to preserve “the artificial gloss of an insouciant existence”: sweeping state-approved murder under the carpet helps keep alive the pretense of an existence devoid of tragedies, trauma and conflicting choices (1994: 85)[15]. While our lives continue unperturbed, protected from the horror experienced by the prisoners and away from reminders of death, the inmates are the sacrificial victims in a ritual created to shelter and isolate the public in a quiescent bubble of denial.

The ritual follows a strict pattern that leaves nothing to chance. The prisoners sometimes attempt to rebel to it in the most extreme ways, such as by trying to take their own lives just to make a difference and not “fit the pattern”. Or they act violently, in the hope of being killed in what they see as a less demeaning way. For instance, while in line to be executed, they throw a blanket over the officer’s head and try to smash him against the wall, or they jump on to the back of the man in

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[15] In an article about capital punishment, Michael Meranze (2003) conducts a reflection on Foucault’s “Discipline and Punish”, a known staple within traditional narratives of penal history. In addition to Foucault, authors such as Michael Ignatieff and David Rothman are mentioned as writers who “open the way to a reconsideration of penal policy” (2003:192). For the purpose of our analysis, it is most interesting to read Meranze’s comparison between penal systems in different times: ‘Whereas seventeenth- and eighteenth-century penal systems punished trough direct seizure of the body, nineteenth- and twentieth- century penal system sought to reform the mind. Whereas seventeenth- and eighteenth-century penal systems operated through the infliction of pain and death, nineteenth- and twentieth-century penal systems focused on discipline and denial of freedom. Whereas seventeenth- and eighteenth-century penal systems functioned through public displays of legal power, the penal systems of the following era hid themselves behind walls. And whereas, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century penal systems aimed to spread terror and sought retribution, nineteenth- and twentieth-century penal systems banished vengeance in the name of reformation. (2003: 194-195)’

front of them in order to interrupt their own fall. This never yields the expected result: the prisoners are punished for their aggression and end up being badly hurt, but the ritual proceeds regardless of their interference and regardless of whether the inmate has already almost killed himself some other way, thus making this another example of additional deaths piling up on top of the last and inevitable one.

> The blind shaft is as inevitable as the sunrise; the ritual leaves no room for any deflection or improvising. The last route is secure and actually no longer part of the personal hell. (1994: 85)

The author chooses a poetic or literary way (blind shaft) to refer to the pit the corpse falls into from the gallows. In fact, the trapdoor, once opened, is a sort of vertical tunnel leading to darkness (blind), not open to the surface. The fall into the dark is inevitable for the victim, just as the night is inevitably followed by sunrise. The ritual of death leaves no room for deflection because it does not spare its victims, nor for improvisation because it is methodical and repetitive.[16] The author is perhaps suggesting that death (the last route) is secure both in the sense of being certain and being safe. Death represents a safe space for the criminal because it is no longer part of their personal hell, better represented by waiting for death and fearing it.

3.1. Being prepared to die: the preparation room and death as regression

The author's long reflection on the last hours of the inmates and their forced survival in a state of half-life is an introduction to yet another interpretation of the concept of double death previously expressed with the phrase "he will die in another way". The idea of death as a slow regression from life is never made explicit in the story, but it is often hinted at. Because of how layered the idea is, Breytenbach once again turns to metaphor and a connection to the religious figures of Kali and Shiva. The earliest reference to their myth, in Breytenbach's story, draws a line between their traditional dance and the criminal activities of the protagonist and his partner, which showcases Kali's role as a destroyer and bringer of chaos. Later in the story, however, we see how Kali's other characteristics, the ones connected to creation and rebirth, are highlighted by introducing the figure of the mother of the main character, who visits him in the preparation room.

This is where the last few pieces of the puzzle fall in place, as the author recounts the final moments of the protagonist in the company of his mother[17].

> From the land of Coast his mother arrives with her grey hair and her black back. Together with the preacher she visits him daily – but she of course is behind a glass partition since contact visits are not permitted. Death is contagious. When she prays, her hands, the knuckles and the joints, are so tightly clasped that it must be a tiny god indeed who finds asylum in such hand-space, a god like an idea worn away over the years, rubbed small, like a seed. (1994: 88)

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[16] As explained by Achille Mbembe in *Necropolitics* (2019), State control of every aspect of a prisoner is of the utmost importance in the prison system: "The ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictated who is able to live and who must die. To kill or to let live thus constitutes sovereignty's limits, its principal attributes. To be sovereign is to exert one's control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power."

[17] The mother of the protagonist has been briefly introduced at the beginning of the story: "His mother became very old and started wearing a black dress with thick woollen stockings. Her back was bent high between the shoulder-blades" (1994: 80)

She is wearing a black dress and her presence is, at the same time, a symbol of imminent loss and a reminder of where the protagonist comes from. The ordinary criminal has retracted from life, while waiting for death, moving back as if towards her mother's womb, where death and life unite like in the figure of the Indian goddess.

Moreover, the description of her posture at the beginning of the story – with her back bent between her shoulder blades – is similar to the posture one would have when they are praying, the action she is now performing in the preparation room. As the mother of the protagonist prays, her hands are so tightly clasped that, as the narrator suggests, a tiny god could be hiding in them. Since she is praying for his son's salvation, the tiny god could be a representation of the protagonist himself. As she prays for his life, the protagonist becomes gradually smaller. This passage in the preparation room describes the "dying of the ordinary criminal" as a regression: in the hands of his mother, he is becoming a foetus.

The metaphor becomes clearer as the end of the first chapter draws near. The last time his mother is mentioned is right before the protagonist is killed:

> The mother is already waiting on her knees in the undertaker's hall where the box with the rests, the shell of the sacrifice of atonement, will be brought: at her request the family will take care of the burial. What the gods don't wish to eat will be fed to the earth. There is no more room between her hands. From her body something like a bleeding bubble up, the reminiscence of a foetus, and breaks in her throat like the dark cooing of a dove. (1994: 89)

She is waiting for the rest of her son's body, to give him a proper burial, in a position similar to that of the Virgin Mary waiting for the body of Christ, in another reference to instances of rebirth. And it seems to make no difference that, in this case, the deceased is someone whose life was far from exemplary. His mother's hands are now clasped even more tightly, to the point of not leaving any room for a god, no matter how small, between them. The bleeding and the memory of the foetus leaving her body remind us of an abortion.

As a result, a silent scream of grief erupts in her thoughts. The connection between the miracle of life (motherhood) and death (the rope) is here clarified:

> He stands underneath the tree. Upwards, higher than the ceiling and then the roof ridge, is heaven; peace blue; stars have been incinerated by the light. A fish mirrors. The hangman, who has been leaning his head on folded hands, comes to adjust the rope, the umbilical cord. (1994: 89)

Here we see the protagonist waiting for death under a tree, another religious symbol of rebirth. A deformed image of the Earth reflects against the sky as the rope/umbilical cord is cut, an act connected to both the end and the beginning of life. The circle is finally closed: life and death are shown as two sides of the same coin, an image reflected in a mirror, in inextricable unity.

4. Reflecting (on) the trauma

The rope metaphor resurfaces in another form in the second chapter of the story, a much shorter but more intense reflection on the themes that are brought up in the first part: death, doubles, and mirrors. The author switches to the use of "you" and "we" to address the reader directly as he opens the chapter introducing a new element, the importance of writing:

> One is loath to write too soon about something like the foregoing. You let the days pass you by although you're aware of the fact that you'll have to open the thing sooner or later. You allow the days to go hard in your throat. For it is like a contusion around the neck. (1994: 90)

In this passage, we understand that even if the writer does not write about something that is on his mind immediately, he will still need to do it at some point, because the memory acts like something hanging around his neck. The comparison becomes clearer some lines later as the narrator states: “The pen twists the rope. From the pen he is hanged”. Writing is a sometimes painful but always unavoidable activity that the writer cannot escape:

> And yet the matter must be disembowelled because we are the mirrors and mirrors have their own lives. Mirrors have a life too and that which gets caught in them continues existing there. Reality is a version of the mirror image. (1994: 90)

People are mirrors, because they reflect memories demanding to be narrated. These memories have a life of their own, whether the person holding them wants to write or even think about them or not[18]. Painful memories, in particular, do not go away and turn into ropes around our necks. And reality – the mirror image – may change based on people’s perception, to the point where the truth that is told by a writer ends up being merely their own version of reality, a deformed image that is only a reflection of the truth itself[19].

However, even though reality is different from people’s perception and even that of the writer, it cannot exist in itself, without someone who tells it. “The eye and the hand (the description) embroider the version of an event, the anti-reality without which reality never could exist’ – description is experiencing – I am part of the ritual” (1994: 90).

The word ritual was already used when talking about the death penalty, a ritual the condemned cannot avoid. And here Breytenbach adds:

> the ritual must be completed in us also. Before death points? Does death depend on us?
>
> you hang the life
> tied to death
> until it dies
>
> you drop life
> gibbeted to death:
> until death is (1994: 90)

The couplets reflect on the author’s question just above. Death is a part of the ritual of life (a reflection in tune with Heidegger’s notion that from the moment man is born, he is aware of his

[18] The double’s connection to death is clear in Otto Rank’s *Der Doppelgänger,* 1914: “The prospect of dying becomes bearable only if there is a Double to grant us another life after this one. […] in the threat of death there returns, within the role of the Double, the very idea of dying that the subject needed to protect himself from, because, according to widespread belief, the Double itself is a herald of death and every wound it suffers affects the subject” (Rank, Otto, *Il Doppio: il significato del sosia nella letteratura e nel folklore,* Milano, SugarCo, 1979, p. 102, my translation from the Italian).

[19] Breytenbach here shows his disagreement with those who claim they only speak the truth in their memoirs. As confirmed by Gready, Breytenbach is more aware, compared to other writers, of what can be considered “the truth” in autobiographies. (1993:490)

transience), and life is in itself a painful process not unlike being hanged until death. So death is dependent on the fact that we live, the two again inextricably tied together like in the figure of the Indian goddess Kali.

If there is an answer at all it is encoded in the text: death may in part depend on us, specifically on our continuous fear of it, on our having death instincts, and, last but not least, on our duty to narrate the death of others. This last point is made evident later when the author says that he – the writer – "hangs in the mirror" and that "he, thus keeps on hanging and kicking in the remembrance" (1994: 90-91). As far as concerning the reader, he says: "You only need to close the eyelids to see each detail before the eyes. And the writer just as the reader (because the reader is a mirror to the writer) can seemingly make nothing undone" (1994:91).

The readers are therefore themselves part of the ritual – here closer in meaning to life, in a broader sense – because they offer a counterpart to the writer, functioning as their mirror: the writer's task is to narrate life, and the readers' task is to understand and interpret the narration. However, none of them can change the state of things: reality. The author adds that "he" – the writer, but also the reader – "cannot reopen the earth, cannot set the snapped neck" […].

In other words, neither the writer nor the reader can return to life or escape death. One last reflection reveals some doubt about this, as he asks: "Or can he? Is that the second death?". In essence, thinking about death is perhaps a way to experience over and over again the trauma of dying.

5. Conclusion

These reflections on dying twice and mirrors lead us to a number of conclusions. Foremost, that Breytenbach is suggesting that people are in a way mirror images of others and the experience of fearing death is one that is most commonly shared among humankind. Then, that writing about this experience can be painful and drive both writers and readers to linger on thoughts of death long enough to feel the moment of passing an additional time: once by dwelling on it and then when it happens. But, according to Breytenbach this ritual is one neither writers nor readers can escape, because it seems unavoidable that they would experience those feelings throughout their life, whenever they stop to think about the end of life.

In addition to this, in Breytenbach's story we see a vivid portrait of living conditions in the South African prison system in the 1970s, and on the atrocities of the death penalty. In South Africa, thoughts of death are still quite common, as shown by the hundreds of suicides, murders and many other forms of violence mostly because of how widespread private justice still is. The conditions in the penitentiaries have changed dramatically between the 1970s and today, and the death penalty is no longer in place. However, members of popular political parties have recently been very vocal about wanting it reinstated.[20] This seems like a very good time to start reading about it again, and to start thinking again about capital punishment and how many times it kills a person.

[20] Seen as a colonialist tool, the death penalty was abolished in many African countries (Konaté, 2021: web), including South Africa, where the people voted against it in 1995. Dying by the rope should not be a risk for criminals, in South Africa, and yet a number of local politicians have recommended its reintroduction in order to put a stop to the recent high rate of crime the country is experiencing.

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