

NOTES OF A BASTARD SON

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Breyten Breytenbach: *Notes from the Middle World* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009).

This book is not for the faint-hearted or the easily depressed. The reader may need to arm him or herself with Thomas Hardy's maxim, 'If a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst'. Breytenbach's focus shifts from the global to the local as he rails against a variety of ills. A favourite target is the Pax Americana, and 'Bushism' in particular: 'Powerful forces are redesigning the frontiers of morality or simply erasing them in the name of "security," "faith," and "civilization"'. The language is sometimes deliberately extreme: 'We are all of us creaking and cracking under the pressure of globalized greed and a homicidal lust for power . . .'. The intention is to shock. Implicit in this, of course, is a belief that things can and should be otherwise – that a saner, more tolerant, less violent and less unjust world is possible.

When Breytenbach turns to Africa, he pulls no punches. He despises the 'posturing and protocol' that passes for public life, where the need to 'prance' is simply 'a camouflaged expression of impotence'. Along with this comes 'hyperbole, grandstanding, demagoguery, the manipulation of myth and prejudice, graft, corruption and nepotism' – an all-too-familiar checklist. What distinguishes Breytenbach is his refusal to accept the excuses usually offered for this sorry state of affairs (colonialism, racism, the legacy of apartheid, etc.). What can justify (for example) the almost total acceptance of 'the lemming imperative of materialist consumerism'? Are we helpless pawns, doomed to imitate the materialism of the West? This insistence on agency, this refusal to place the blame for everything elsewhere, is a salutary corrective to prevalent attitudes

In 'Mandela's Smile' Breytenbach takes an almost despairing view of our prospects in the 'new' South Africa, and interrogates his own perhaps naïve expectations. He excoriates our post-1994 dispensation with its 'never-ending parade of corrupt clowns in power at all levels'. At one point he admits that his 'bitter advice' to a young South African would be to go: 'For the foreseeable now, if you want to live your life to the fullest and with some satisfaction and usefulness, and if you can stand the loss, if you can amputate yourself – then go.'

This is the counsel of despair. At the same time, however, Breytenbach retains a stubborn belief in our creative potential as human beings: we have the capacity to reinvent and re-imagine ourselves. It is no surprise, then, to find Breytenbach pleading (like Richard Turner) for the necessity of utopian thinking. He argues for the need to imagine 'an existence that will be more compassionate and decent'. However much he laments 'our barbaric new age', he never entirely abandons the hope that things might be different – even if 'utopia' now means simply 'clean and accountable government.'

This belief in creativity (or the imagination) runs like a thread through the collection of essays and informs his discussion of art and of identity. In 'Obamandela' he declares, 'Every man (and woman) is an invention of self.' One result is the construct known as 'identity'. A preoccupation with his own complex identity – as Afrikaner, as 'bastard African', as South African and as global 'uncitizen' – is a recurring theme. Breytenbach registers the loss involved in exile, and explores (at length) his occupation of an inbetween space which he calls 'the middle world' or MOR (from *amor, mortis*). The later essays take a more inward and often private turn – the addressee is frequently Breytenbach himself. This often resembles an exercise in sophisticated navel-gazing: readers who are more interested in the urgent public issues of our place and time may well fall by the wayside.

At their best (and Breytenbach is seldom inarticulate) these essays are a powerful philippic against the forces that make for indifference, conformity and political correctness. In this respect it invites comparison with Cronin's 'Even the Dead'. Underpinning both Cronin and Breytenbach is 'an ache for social and economic justice' – a longing that (one hopes) will never be entirely extinguished.