

**Breyten Breytenbach, A Monologue in Two Voices.**

Sandra Saayman. 2013. Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books. 86 pp. ISBN: 978-0-987-0429-41.

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In *A Monologue in Two Voices*, Sandra Saayman argues that Breyten Breytenbach's poetry and prose should be read alongside his paintings and drawings. The book focuses particularly on the literary and visual texts that Breytenbach produced during and about his imprisonment in the 1970s and 1980s. Saayman considers not only representations of the personal experiences of the author/artist but she also identifies instances in which Breytenbach engages with broader political issues including the death of Steve Biko, progressive Afrikaner identities, and postapartheid nationalism. Much of the book's archival and academic value lies in its beautiful reproductions of more than 40 of Breytenbach's drawings and paintings, including nine pencil drawings that have never before appeared in print.

Saayman's book is structured into three chapters that focus on specific recurring themes in Breytenbach's work. The first chapter identifies a number of instances in which capital punishment is explored in several literary and visual texts. In the second chapter, entitled "He has the smell of writing on him", Saayman discusses Breytenbach's interrogation of the figure and function of the author/artist. The final chapter considers the significance of colour (and

its absence) in both his paintings and in his prison memoir, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984).

While Saayman makes a promising case for an oeuvre-wide reading of Breytenbach's creative output, her own reading lacks depth and insight. Whereas the book argues that different genres and texts can be read together by identifying recurring images or themes, it fails to show how these recurrences generate new meanings in the texts or extend scholarship on his creative work. In the first chapter, for example, Saayman traces a number of instances in which executions and decapitations are represented in Breytenbach's texts, but she fails to show what new insights these textual resonances may provide. Instead, the book contains a number of very interesting ideas that are never meaningfully developed or linked.

The mere identification of and some general remarks on the repetition of certain ideas and images across different genres and texts does not evidence the extensive textual possibilities of the oeuvre-wide reading that Saayman proposes. Significantly, the book does not engage with existing scholarship in any meaningful way and the observations about Breytenbach's work therefore seem superficial and disconnected from decades of research. By not situating her analysis within the dominant threads of critical reception of his poetry and prose, Saayman fails to demonstrate how these dominant ways of reading are complicated by the comparative approach that she proposes. In addition to eschewing

decades of both English and Afrikaans literary criticism, Saayman's book also fails to contextualise meaningfully Breytenbach's work in relation to the Sestigers, his relationship to the liberation movement, or his own locatedness within particular configurations of racial and cultural politics.

Although Saayman's insistence on oeuvre-wide readings of Breytenbach's work is an important contribution to South African literary and cultural studies, her argument lacks theoretical rigour. In place of a nuanced reading of the theoretical relationship between the image and the literary text, Saayman's introduction tends to rely more on personal conviction than academic scholarship. Saayman's very short introduction begins with the assertion that "[i]t is tricky to look at paintings on the walls of a gallery while simultaneously reading a novel" (1). Facile assertions such as this point to the way in which the writer's somewhat personal style is directed more towards readers' common sense notions of representation than to extensive scholarly debates on the subject. Where a few theoretical works are cited, they are not integrated into a coherent theoretical framework. There is similarly very little theoretical coherence on the contested role of authorship in literary criticism and there are slippages in Saayman's discussion as she both valorises authorial/artistic intent and later moves to deny its centrality.

*A Monologue in Two Voices* is neither sophisticated scholarship nor an accessible coffee-table book, despite the fact

that it has overlaps with both forms of publication. The uncertainty about the book's unfocused readership manifests further in its composition and arrangement: not only does the book contain a two-page message from Breytenbach written exclusively in Afrikaans but it also contains a poem written in French that is similarly not translated. The inclusion of untranslated and therefore largely inaccessible Afrikaans and French texts in a book written in English points to a poor conceptualisation of form and function.

Besides the impressive collection of paintings and drawings, Saayman's book contributes very little to either Breytenbach scholarship or comparative approaches to reading cultural texts. Readers interested in oeuvre-wide approaches to Breytenbach's work should instead refer to an earlier collection of essays entitled *a.k.a. Breyten Breytenbach: Critical Approaches to his Writings and Paintings* (2004). In particular, Marilet Sienaert's insightful and compelling chapter – "The I of the Beholder: Identity and Place in the Art and Writing" – combines excellent close reading and tight argumentation with a sophisticated conceptualisation of the relationship between Breytenbach's poetry and pictorial texts. Reading Sienaert's chapter only further highlights the stark inadequacies of Saayman's project.

More speculative than insightful and more descriptive than analytical, *A Monologue in Two Voices* never quite fulfils its own potential and is ultimately a disappointing enactment of an oth-

erwise promising approach to reading  
Breytenbach's creative output.

**Work Cited**

Sienaert, Marilet. "The I of the Beholder: Identity and Place in the Art and Writing". *a.k.a. Breyten Breytenbach: Critical Approaches to his Writing and Paintings*. Eds. Judith Coullie and J. U. Jacobs. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, (2004) 221–47.

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