

The Song of the Caged Bird: *Contemporary African Prison Poetry*

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I

WRITING in the nineteenth century, in his poem "Sympathy," Paul Laurence Dunbar equated the incarcerated nature of black life in America to the life of a caged bird. As a black man with only the foretaste of genuine freedom that the Reconstruction Period in American society could provide, he could fully sympathize with the plight of the bird, and records it dolefully:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, —
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings —¹

Although Dunbar was writing specifically about a disillusioned Afro-American population ostensibly freed from the bonds of slavery, his words would apply specifically and at higher levels of intensity, as Ralph Ellison might say, to a majority of the black prison population, which from all reports was apathetic, cringing, and prayerful.

The burden of the song of Dunbar's caged bird has been radically changed in recent times through the efforts of a vociferous, insightful minority of black prisoners in America and Africa. The new themes are international. Considering themselves political prisoners regardless of the legal status of their incarceration, the Americans Malcolm X, George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, and Etheridge Knight, on the one hand, and the Africans Dennis

Brutus, Okot p'Bitek, and Wole Soyinka, on the other, sing no prayers nor carols of joy or glee. Rather, they have collectively developed what is by now a black tradition of stridency, violence, scurrility, rebelliousness, and irony. They fight their political opponents in a battle of words that has at least left the opposition psychically as scarred as the new songbirds.² As African political prison poets laureate, Brutus, p'Bitek, and Soyinka have had to deal with the private anguish and the public roles of the political prisoner. Certain themes tend to recur. Most importantly are politics, sexual deprivation, loneliness, boredom, prison brutality, lack of freedom, no privacy, imperceptible inroads into the prisoners' mental health, the waste of human potential, and, more globally, the psychological bondage of the African masses to their rulers, who in their turn are controlled by the Western world. From South Africa to West Africa, the song of the political prisoner bears a similar message. It comes out shrill and loud as the poets lament their personal plight or urge their audience to some form of revolution to spring the populace from the many forms of prison life that it has been subjected to. Indeed, any black poet who writes to liberate the black race from total submission in Western ways of life, thought, and culture is in a sense concerned with the prison theme.

Most of the works of interest on these themes and in these tones appeared in the 60's and 70's. These two decades witnessed the gestation and appearance in prose, for example, of Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), Kenneth Kaunda's *Zambia Shall be Free* (1962), *Soledad Brothers: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970), and Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* (1972). The inheritors of Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah, Jackson and Soyinka have in their diatribes against different personalities, governmental and social systems, and prison life had tremendous impact. In poetry, Dennis Brutus' *Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison* (1969) was the first book in this flowering of black prison poetry, followed by Soyinka's *Poems from Prison* (1969), now included in his *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), and p'Bitek's *Song of Prisoner* (1971). These poets from South Africa, West Africa, and East Africa, respectively, represent the essence of the African

prison poetry tradition and, quite importantly, the reaction of the peoples they speak for to colonial, neo-colonial and/or post-independence politics. The moods of African political prison poetry range from the urbane irony of Brutus (typical of the black South African reaction to apartheid) to the inchoate ramblings of p'Bitek's prisoner (symbolic of the political torment of Uganda) to the scurrilous vehemence of Soyinka (representative of Nigerian political aggressiveness). In spite of the variation in their mode, the burden of their song is identical: prison life is horrible, condemnable, and unacceptable.

II

In his collection, *Letters to Martha*, Dennis Brutus gives a hint of his attitude towards his prison material: "I cut away the public trappings to assert / certain private essentialities." It is the private angle of prison life with its humanistic emphasis which the public figure, Brutus, examines urbanely and objectively and with a remarkable ironical distancing. This apparently calm exterior, a recognizable black South African pose in racial politics, covers up an inner turmoil and seething. In one dramatic vignette, he presents himself as unprotected, but we perceive an inner resilience that only the spiritually strong can possess when opposing a contemptible but powerful enemy. He declares his stance thus:

and I have laughed, disdainng those who banned
inquiry and movement, delighting in the test
of will when doomed by Saracend arrest,
choosing, like unarmed thumb, simply to stand.³

His courage in the unequal struggle is the mark of his victory and heroism. He can therefore afford to be matter of fact in reporting the deplorable conditions under which he and the other prisoners find themselves on Robben Island:

Cold
the clammy cement
sucks our naked feet
...

we sit on the concrete,
 stuff with our fingers
 the sugarless pap
 into our mouths.⁴

As if such indignities and deprivations are not enough, the prisoners, these descendants of a race of slaves, are psychologically demoralized by being chained together in pairs. Brutus' choice of aspects of prison life to emphasize demonstrates his acute awareness of the humiliating experience that is prison life, its emasculation of the black South African in a hideous system that remains apparently unchanging.

Brutus touches on the perennial conflict between the warder and the gaoler, a relationship that the reader readily extends to the apartheid rulers and the black populace:

the grizzled senior warder comments:
 'Things like these
 I have no time for;
 they are worse than rats;
 you can only shoot them.' (p. 53)

The punctuation marks here are important, as if Brutus is reporting an actual speech he heard. It is with such disarming simplicity and a hint of innocence that the poet manages adroitly to put his enemy in the wrong. The factual reporting allows the reader to make even extreme associations, between the situation reported and the brutality of the Nazis towards the Jews, for example. It is intended to arouse the moral awareness of the international community, to get us to view seriously the individual scenarios that take place in South African prisons, and by extension, in South Africa itself. Brutus' strategy is to engage in a quiet, unobtrusive, and insistent attack on his enemies, in an approach that is compatible with Martin Luther King's philosophy of political non-violence. Part of his attitude is a modesty and humility that will not jubilate over victory in any form. Instead, Brutus feels a certain selflessness in his

vague heroism
 mixed with self-pity
 and tempered by the knowledge of those

who endure much more
and endure. . . . (p. 54)

Yet he too has endured, and has the poetic ability to let us share his experience.

Brutus maintains a detached mood and achieves self-effacement with the use of imprecise pronouns like "one," "you," "your" instead of "I." His objectivity lends an air of truth and sincerity to his account as he explores the degeneration of the human mind in prison through observing various prisoners and their ways of coping with their terrible status. Deprived of basic necessities of life like sex and music and prevented from watching objects of nature like stars and the carefree bird, some prisoners take recourse in psychosomatic illnesses or fantasizing. Others move towards "Coprophilism; necrophilism; fellatio; / penis amputation;" (p. 57). Sodomy is rampant. Many find peace from their cares in the very private world of the insane. Yet through it all, with patience and without self-praise, Brutus not only survives the numerous hardships, the lot of the prisoner, but, like Malcolm X, matures through contact with so much hideousness and suffering. Here he differs markedly from Soyinka, as we shall see, who delights in engaging in battle with the enemy. Rather, Brutus acknowledges the status of the political prisoner and from that premise continues to fight the opposition:

we were simply prisoners
of a system we had fought
and still opposed. (p. 64)

With such a limited day-to-day experience, "clichés about the freedom of the birds . . . become meaningful" (p. 66) and a subtle metamorphosis takes place in the prisoner. Brutus suggests the poignancy of his plight in an incident when he switches off the light in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the stars but receives a "warning bark" in reply that arouses fear and destroys the meditative, romantic mood that the poet found himself in. Brutus knows the psychology of fear, as shown in "A Letter to Basil," and his knowledge gives him spiritual strength amidst the vicissitudes of his life:

To understand the unmanning powers of fear
and its corrosive action
makes it easier to forgive. (p. 74)

These lines express the length and the roughness of the road that Brutus had patiently trod. He has learnt to forgive and even pity the offensive prisoner who cannot help being perfidious to his kind out of fear of the authorities. Also, Brutus' South African whites, referred to as "O my people" in a poem, "The Mob," brutal from fear and so unmanly, become, in a sense, Brutus' fellow prisoners. In an ironic but humanistic mood, he pities them and forgives them for their wrongdoings in a surprising spirit of maturity and brotherhood reminiscent of Christ's indomitable reaction to Peter's denial of him. When Brutus arrives at the tragic conclusion that the whole of South Africa is a prison, he has to work out a *modus vivendi* for himself. To remain sane,

one comes to welcome the closer contact
and understanding one achieves
with one's fellow-men. (p. 60)

His feeling of pity is similar to Baldwin's in the American situation as expressed in his letter to his nephew in *The Fire Next Time*. Brutus triumphs over the sadism of the South African government through his humanism, which pleads for imitation by the authorities. His rebellion against the dehumanization is the act of writing; the power of his cosmopolitan truth and urbane tones all the more condemns the apartheid regime, which emerges by contrast as primitive.

It is therefore surprising that "an African writer thinks that the poet's social involvement in Dennis Brutus's poems is a check on the artistic effect," although, as D. S. Izevbaye is quick to add, "most critics do not endorse this view, nor do they agree that as a rule poets should be less vociferous about social problems."²⁵ This raises a perennial issue about aesthetics and the social involvement of the writer, and here the issue must be resolved in the writer's favour. It is obvious from the *Letters* that the occasion and experience of prison life that political imprisonment affords have given poetic inspiration to Brutus, as it has to other

writers in other parts of the world.⁶ His turning his experience into a work of art is certainly as valid as a poet who turns to nature for inspiration. Brutus deals with the nature of man in power, the artist as prisoner, and these are powerful modes of knowing man and his ways. Brutus' writing is artistic rather than overtly propagandistic. He writes to connect his inner life with the outside world and those who love him so that his mind and theirs can be, relatively, at rest. He is conscious of this as he informs us that his poetry is

some evidence of my thought and caring:

...

partly to wrench some ease from my own mind.

And partly that some world sometime may know. (p. 68)

That need to connect with posterity, a reason for the enduring, is a genuine artistic feeling. By handling the subject of prison life, mulling over it, seeing its corrosive effect on both the gaoler and the gaoled, Brutus grapples through it with the existential human predicament that man finds himself in. His message, even if ultimately didactic, as most good literature is, is humanistically convincing and artistically enunciated.

III

Okot p'Bitek had been writing in the 50's and his memorable works were written in the late 60's and early 70's, a turbulent period in East African politics. It marked the time when progressive Kenyans were disoriented, bitterly disappointed by a Kenyatta leadership that had no relationship with his Mau Mau radicalism. There was instability under Milton Obote's rule in neighbouring Uganda. Political history was being made in Rhodesia, where Ian Smith held Britain to ransom and Zimbabweans bore the brunt of the impasse between the two. With this instability in the background, p'Bitek's political prison poem, *Song of Prisoner* or *Song of a Prisoner*, as he more aptly titled the American edition, was not just timely but was to be prophetic: soon a brutalizing force would sweep through Idi Amin's Uganda. In the tumultuous East African political climate, it was conceptually easy for p'Bitek, though he himself had only had

brushes with the authorities, to write about the fate that awaited a political prisoner.

Writing from personal experience, Etheridge Knight had made a memorable statement about prison life: "The fact is that physical brutality is as nothing compared to the brutality of the soul incurred by years and years of cancerous prison life."⁷ p'Bitek would agree with him. In *Song of Prisoner*, he concentrates imaginatively on the nature of a prisoner's mental health and conjures up for the reader the primitive conditions under which the prisoner is detained. The brutal treatment p'Bitek's prisoner has received leaves him physically incapacitated and mentally disoriented. The burden of *Song of Prisoner* is a dramatization of his mental disorientation.

In his private capacity, the prisoner worries about the fate of his family — his children and his wife — and frets about the future of the children of a prisoner. p'Bitek also deals with the prisoner as a public person. This prisoner is severally referred to, from the viewpoint of the government's law enforcement agents, as "A vagrant / A loiterer"⁸ and "A foreign bastard" (p. 52). He confesses to the assassination of a public figure, a "capitalist reactionary." The hero thus is established as a political prisoner who claims to have killed to free his people. Intriguingly, we never know whether to believe him or not. He is mentally deranged and is occasionally given to boasting and delusions of grandeur. Ironically, he insists, like any government, that he is for law and order and Uhuru. From the government's viewpoint, however, the assassination is against law and order and earns him the loss of his freedom. In spite of his heroic act, his "uniformed Brothers" (one is almost tempted to refer to them as uninformed) club him in his cell. Cowed by their brutality, he becomes less belligerent than most political prisoners. Panic stricken, he confesses unabashedly:

I plead fear,
I plead helplessness,
I plead hopelessness,
...
I am an insect

Trapped between the toes
Of a bull elephant. (pp. 33-34)

Earlier he had cried out,

I plead insanity,
I am
Mad,
Can't you see? (p. 24)

And yet he later insists,

I am not senseless,
I am not cowardly,
Not dastardly,
I am not a thug,
I am not insane,
This is not
Cold-blooded murder,
I did not do it
For the money. . . . (p. 67)

Incidentally he had informed us that he was "hired" to eliminate his victim (p. 58). His contradictions and shifts in point of view could confuse the reader. However, in the schema they are indicative of the prisoner's deteriorating mental state. He reminds us in vivid, unforgettable images that

There is a carpenter
Inside my head,
He knocks nails
Into my skull. (p. 42)

We should at this point believe the prisoner since these statements are revealing and might help in our understanding of the poem and prevent us from encountering the difficulties G. A. Heron faced in his interpretation.⁹ Heron rightly observes that "Section 3 illustrates the way fantasy, the present reality, and memories are confused and intermingled."¹⁰ To cover his interpretive difficulties, however, he blames p'Bitek: "In spite of the importance of this fictional structure, Okot is very careless about the internal fiction of the poem. Much more descriptive detail goes into what are almost certainly fantasies than into information about the past of the prisoners and there are inconsistencies in the informa-

tion we are given. In Section 7 the vagrant tells his wife to 'Dream about our first meeting / In the forest' (p. 58), yet in Section 13 the same man talks of 'our first meeting / At the dancing arena' (p. 102).¹¹ Heron's mistake is in limiting the confused state of affairs to Section 3 rather than seeing the entire poem as a representation of the prisoner's confusion. The prisoner-singer hallucinates a greater part of the poem. p'Bitek, not writing a memoir, remains detached, a position that enables him to present his prisoner as a creature succumbing to the rigours of prison life, helplessly but steadily moving towards insanity. The incipient madness is graphically captured in the constant, broken thoughts, the scrambled time scheme, and the gross disregard for spatial limitations. His arguments are contradictory: he rebels against his dead father and blames him for marrying somebody unworthy of him — the prisoner's mother (pp. 36-37). Yet, in an about-face, he sharply criticizes his mother for marrying his father (p. 52). His self-depreciation demonstrates the depth of his depression. At one point the prisoner threatens to exhume his father's bones in order to hang him by the neck! (p. 38). Rudderless, he desperately attempts to connect with his gaolers who prefer to "communicate" with him by brutalizing him. But, like other schizophrenics, he has moments of sanity, as when he criticizes his country's social conditions. Thinking about the Chief's dog and his own children, in very clever juxtapositioning, he asks

How many pounds
Of meat
Does this dog eat
In a day?
How much milk . . . ?
...
Have you seen
The mosquito legs
Of my children? (p. 22)

He wins us completely to his side by the poignant sarcasm implicit in his phrase "infant pregnancies" to describe the bloated stomachs his children have to bear as a result of malnutrition.

Once we have grasped the true nature of the prisoner's situation and the attendant effect on his health, the poem becomes intelligible as the soliloquy or song of a *schizophrenic* prisoner. The entire poem is sung in the first person. From the text, we have no cause to believe, as Heron proposes, that other prisoners are involved and also lament their plight using the same first person. There is no indication of a change in the singer.¹² The title, *Song of a Prisoner*, under which the poem was published in America, is important in grasping the notion of one singer who comes to represent the other singers. The controversial Section 11, the section on the minister of state, is by and about the same prisoner. At this point he suffers from delusions of grandeur and believes he is a minister. Since he was a former bodyguard to some dignitary, the sophisticated life of a minister would not be beyond the prisoner's comprehension. His subconscious wishes surface in this section, and he solves in one swoop the problems that have preoccupied him — the fate of his family, their poverty, and his disconcerting relationship with his parents, marked by his confusion about whether his father is dead or alive. He imagines himself writing out "fat cheques." Furthermore, he thinks he will not be absent from his family for too long, which is in keeping with his earlier optimism when, filled with self-importance, he felt the "best lawyers" would defend him and understanding judges would spring him from prison. The minister section thus serves as an exercise in wish-fulfilment fantasies.

Suffering from claustrophobia, the prisoner desperately wants connection on a world-wide basis to escape the constrictions of his immediate environment. He wants communion with Russians, South Africans, Indians, the French, and the Chinese. From these global thoughts, his mind drifts closer home, and he feels a need to connect with the Munyoro and the Kikuyu. He is obviously suffering from ideological confusion, or else he is an incorrigible idealist. p'Bitek takes us through "the entire history of the moods of imprisonment; we are swept through the whole awful landscape of imprisoned despair."¹³

I think the prisoner is deluding himself when he says:

I am intoxicated
With anger,

My fury
Is white hot. (pp. 12-13)

His inability to dramatize his anger beyond mouthing it belies his position. He is clearer about himself when he says, "I am dizzy / With frustration" (p. 13). And a few lines later, "My head is bursting. . . ." What we see in this prisoner then is a human wreck, the living consequence of the brutality of incarceration. Although he complains about his physical discomforts, he has already undergone a metamorphosis mentally without knowing it. He is, tragically for him and for us,

A young tree
Burnt out
By the fierce wild fire
Of Uhuru. (p. 15)

Despite his difficulties he rambles through some thoughts of the outside world. Like the prisoner Soyinka, who writes about air raids in "Flowers for My Land," p'Bitek's prisoner expresses the same anxieties:

Roaring kites
Split the sky
And excrete deadly dungs
On the heads
Of the people,
Pots and skulls
Crack. . . . (p. 32)

Ironically, he still concerns himself with the people's property and lives, as shown in the phrase "pots and skulls," although, as the last two stanzas show, he is in truth a tragic hero, rejected and unacclaimed by the people he fought for. Incarcerated and deprived of meaningful human contact, the closing lines stress his desire for sex and freedom:

Open the door,
Man,
I want to dance
All the dances of the world,
I want to sleep with

All the young dancers
 ...
 Let me dance and forget
 For a small while
 That I am a wretch,
 The reject of my Country. ((pp. 117-18)

Detached from the sordidness of prison life, p'Bitek has been able to give us a vivid and penetrating account of the excruciating loneliness that the isolated political prisoner has to endure by showing us the inroads into the mental health and physical condition of a previously happy family man.

IV

If Dennis Brutus in his prison poetry represents the spirit of the urbane politics of black South Africa and Okot p'Bitek's prisoner the tumultuous nature of post-independent Uganda and/or East Africa, Wole Soyinka's well-known collection *A Shuttle in the Crypt* comes out of the exacerbating and acrimonious politics that bedevilled post-independence in impatient Nigeria and/or West Africa. Soyinka, as spokesman of the Nigerian intellectual world, shows, by his sarcasm, by his iconoclastic disposition, and by his acerbic critical spirit the general contempt felt for the government and the pain of living under a regime impervious to human need, one which neglects the present historical prospects for improving the life of the average person, and instead fritters away the national wealth. His political disaffection and his forthright vociferousness earned him detention by a government without a clear philosophy, surviving only in a kind of drift from one day to the next.

According to George Jackson, "Capture, imprisonment, is the closest to being dead that one is likely to experience in this life."¹⁴ He was writing from experience after many years as an inmate in different American penitentiaries. During his detention, Soyinka, like Jackson, spent many months in solitary confinement designed to break him psychologically. The impact of the prison environment and the temperament of the prison-poet are best illustrated in *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, which the author insists "is a map of the course trodden by the mind, not a record of the

actual struggle against a vegetable existence."¹⁵ His emphasis is not the same as Jackson's (with whom he deals in the "Epilogue,") who spent most of his life in prison fighting his gaolers in order to prevent the loss of manhood acceptance of prison entails.

A Shuttle in the Crypt with its Freudian overtones conjures up a sexual image as in the opening, invocative poem "O Roots!". Unseen, the roots sustain the visible tree, just as the gestation and composition of his work kept Soyinka mentally healthy. The unravelling of the work with its hidden strengths reveals as much of the social milieu in Nigeria and, by extension, the world, as it unveils to us the type of man that Soyinka is. The dynamic energy that *A Shuttle*, the restless shuttle, and the penetrating roots release serves as a constant reminder of the prisoner's sexual deprivation and his wish-fulfilment dream for sexual satisfaction, whilst at the same time the shuttle reminds us of his manhood. In conjunction with the dominant sexual image is the Poesque idea of being buried alive in a crypt. The prisoner shuttles back and forth from life to death, tormented by the fear of imminent death and the knowledge that his fellow prisoners were dying slowly, unheeded by the authorities.

Some parts of *A Shuttle* cover the same ground as Soyinka's prose work, *The Man Died*. This is particularly so in the piece "Relief, Or, Wedding in a Minor Key." The first stanza concentrates on the hedonistic tendencies of the important government official under consideration. Through an adroit juxtaposition (a characteristic ironic device in this prison poetry tradition), the reader contrasts the official's life style with unmentioned prison conditions. In prison, cutlery would ironically bear some "coat of arms" (the identification mark on prison property) and food would be distributed by "liveried service," or in p'Bitek's words elsewhere, "uniformed Brothers." With the utmost Popean viciousness, Soyinka pursues his enemies with a vengeance:

Empty that plane
Of bread, damn bread! Turn its nose
To a different wind, to a perfumed wind
Fill the hold with cake and wine
And champagne guests —It's time

For MY wedding. And —
Shut those hungry mouths!

This is a bitter lashing of the irresponsible official who diverted for his own personal use a plane carrying food for the relief of war victims.

In "Future Plans" Soyinka is Swiftian in pungency, in a mood evocative of the dominant strain in another poem, "Gulliver." The attack on the people in authority is pleasurable in this instance since we, in a holier-than-thou attitude, are not at the receiving end of Soyinka's "boots," nor are we, we think, the "butts" of his attack. He writes,

The meeting is called
To odium: Forgers, framers
Fabricators Inter-
national. Chairman,
A dark horse, a circus nag turned blinkered sprinter.

The Swiftian reduction of the enemy to the status of an animal is devastating.

A dark mood and dark laughter colour many of the poems. In "To the Madmen over the Wall" Soyinka touches on mental degeneration in prison. He becomes Shakespearean, in the mood of Lear in his mad despair. By sheer effort of will, he, Soyinka, will not succumb to the constant "hammering" in his head. Without books to read or writing materials to ease the tedium of isolation, he conceptualizes himself playing roles similar to those of famous literary characters, as in the section "Four Archetypes." The hero of heroes, he is Joseph, a type of the innocent confronted by people with no virtue or shame; he is Hamlet, the prevaricator; most aptly, he is Gulliver, a giant towering over little men with little minds; lastly, he is Ulysses, that indefatigable, romantic adventurer, dedicated to a quest for life. In "Background and Friezes" Soyinka takes exception to the government's public relations mechanism that seeks international praise by covering its atrocities:

Week Seventy-five:
Observers welcome. Cheap
Conducted tours — behold!

Our hands are clean.
The rains have fallen twice and earth is deep.

The quiet cynicism of this last stanza links it tonally with another poem in the work, "Live Burial."

In "Live Burial" Soyinka laments his plight as a private person. The first five lines of the poem focus on the problem of space in the prison cell:

Sixteen paces
By twenty-three. They hold
Siege against humanity
And Truth
Employing time to drill through to his sanity.

The mention of the exact number of paces in the cell suggests the frequency in the prisoner's pacing up and down through boredom, loneliness, and frustration — the feelings that lead the prisoner to claustrophobia and madness. As line three indicates, the harm that is inflicted is not just on himself but on the whole of humanity. Soyinka would agree with Jackson that a well-balanced society does not need prisons; the operation of a prison system in itself is a comment on the society that finds it indispensable. In the second stanza, Soyinka, rebelling, a typical political prisoner, identifies himself with Antigone, the outsider and archetypal rebel against constituted but irresponsible authority. He becomes scurrilous towards the warders as he handles the subject of sexuality. The subject of sex understandably assumes considerable importance in a prison population of able-bodied men (and women) forcibly deprived of sexual fulfilment. In the prisoner's terrible state, he perceives the sexual role of the warder:

The voyeur:
Times his sly patrol
For the hour upon the throne
I think he thrills
To hear the Muse's constipated groan.

The warder, predictably, is the sexual deviant, not the prisoner. In the fourth section the poet pokes fun at the gaolers who issue inane bulletins on the state of the gaoled. The title "Live Burial"

makes nonsense of such bulletins and suggests the human wastage the nation incurs from incarceration.

In "Flowers for My Land" Soyinka speaks in his public voice mourning the carnage of the Nigerian civil war:

I saw
 Four steel kites, riders
 On shrouded towers
 Do you think
 Their arms are spread to scatter mountain flowers?

Aware of the injustice in society, he exhorts his audience to

Take Justice
 In your hands who can
 Or dare. Insensate sword
 Of Power
 Outherods Herod and the law's outlawed.

When power is in the wrong hands, the result is injustice and an urge to use that power is demonstrable. Justice must therefore be restored. From hindsight, these lines are prophetic of the later turn of events in Nigerian history that meant yet another military *coup d'état*. In the closing lines of the poem, Soyinka openly incites the downtrodden to unite and start a revolution:

Orphans of the world
 Ignite! Draw
 Your fuel of pain from earth's sated core.

The lines are reminiscent not only of Marx and Engels but of Sartre's summation of Fanon's message: "Natives of all underdeveloped countries, unite!"¹⁶ Soyinka's orphans are to "ignite" (not merely unite) and the fuel for their fiery revolution will come from the oil that has bedevilled Nigerian economics. In another sense, the fuel of pain can be taken as the blood that parents or orphans have shed in Nigeria and elsewhere in the course of bloody revolutions. The spilt blood calls for vengeance and should incite the orphans to act to see that justice is restored. Soyinka's poems from prison serve as a "fuel of pain" that burns steadily and alerts the reader to the precariousness of his position in society.

The most striking aspect of the poems in *A Shuttle* is their unSoyinkan simplicity, since one can grasp their import at a casual first reading. We are far from the opaqueness of *Idanre*. We would be mistaken to attribute this dimension of Soyinka's creative style — a departure from his more characteristic Poundian pose and relative inaccessibility — to a mental deterioration owing to his circumstances in prison. Rather, the poet shamelessly courts the public and so must state his case simply, lucidly, and captivantly to put his opponents in the wrong. The topical nature of his thematic preoccupations makes the nuances understood although, ultimately, this topicality might render the poems ephemeral, necessitating some footnotes a few years hence. Added to this is the emotional involvement of the poet with his subject matter, which prevents him from maintaining his usual artistic distance from his material. The repercussion is a noticeably strident note, which I appreciate because of its radical political and social assumptions. The immediate value of the poems is undeniable both for Soyinka's well-being in prison and for the vicarious pleasure it gives to the reader as he sees Soyinka reducing the poseurs to size. The impact on Nigerian public opinion can be surmised by the fact that soon after Soyinka's papers were published, that regime which had been impervious to people's aspirations was ousted, and the populace felt good will towards those who effected the *coup d'état*. Soyinka has thus surprisingly had the influence usually accorded the traditional oral poet.

V

“[C]an there anything / good come out of / prison?”¹⁷ Etheridge Knight asks with his tongue in his cheek with words reminiscent of the famous Biblical statement. Brutus, p'Bitek, and Soyinka are three formidable contemporary African prison poets, who have consistently displayed a fearless, proselytizing zeal in their works. Their prison writings occasionally exude a Christ-like selflessness mixed with the romanticism of knight-errantry in the daring stance in the poems. Their sense of mission can be expressed in Brutus' words elsewhere: “But it [the image of the stubborn knight-errant] only made sense to me when in prison another

image came to me; of my mother, in the afternoon sunlight, reading of Sir Galahad's search for light and beauty, and on the glowing colours of a picture of a knight entering a dark forest."¹⁸ These three writers finally leave the reader with the impression of a gallant mission accomplished. They skilfully take us through the adventure of the dark forest of the prison, fraught with its peculiar dangers, and yet they emerge untainted by the association, cleansed by the purifying quality of their poetry, and upheld by their resilience. Their prison poetry makes the reader thoughtful with the persistent image of waste in the deplorable way a part of the population exists in the living-dead conditions of prison. The underlying notion in the poems is one of service rendered first to the country of the writer and next to the masses of the world. Though this might appear cynical, the reader sees one of the unexpected uses of political imprisonment: it serves as a source of poetic inspiration to a long line of writers in a table-turning literary manoeuvre. Like their predecessors in other parts of the world, Brutus, p'Bitek, and Soyinka, three contemporary African "troubadours," have performed a needed service by using their poetry to cast a penetrating light on the dark prisons of African society.

NOTES

- ¹ Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy," in *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1913), p. 102.
- ² Dennis Brutus acknowledges his victory over the South African authorities in a poem, "Let Me Say It."
- ³ Dennis Brutus, "A troubadour, I traverse all my land," in *A Simple Lust* (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 52.
- ⁴ Brutus, "Letters to Martha," in *A Simple Lust*, p. 52. All further references are to this edition and appear in the text.
- ⁵ D. S. Izevbaye, "Criticism and Literature in Africa," in *Perspectives on African Literature*, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 30.
- ⁶ The output of respectable prison writing from Socrates to Kafka to Solzhenitsyn, for example, and popular works like *Papillon*, should by this time demonstrate that prison writing has come to stay as a distinctive, acceptable genre.
- ⁷ Etheridge Knight, "Inside These Walls," in *Black Voices from Prison* by Knight et al. (New York: Pathfinder Press, Inc., 1970), pp. 128-29.

- ⁸ Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Prisoner in Two Songs* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971), p. 16. All further references are to this edition and appear in the text.
- ⁹ G. A. Heron, *The Poetry of Okot p'Bitek* (London: Heinemann, 1976), pp. 76-83.
- ¹⁰ Heron, p. 81.
- ¹¹ Heron, p. 82.
- ¹² Heron, pp. 79-80.
- ¹³ Edward Blishen, "Introduction" to *Song of a Prisoner* by Okot p'Bitek (New York: The Third Press, 1971), p. 36.
- ¹⁴ George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Bantam, 1970), pp. 19-20.
- ¹⁵ Wole Soyinka, Preface, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (London: Rex Collings, 1972). All further references are to this edition and appear in the text.
- ¹⁶ Jean Paul Sartre, "Preface" to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 9.
- ¹⁷ Knight, "Cell Song," in *Black Voices from Prison*, p. 141.
- ¹⁸ Dennis Brutus, "Childhood Reminiscences," in Per Wastberg, ed., *The Writer in Modern Africa* (New York: Africana, 1969), p. 98.