

South African Prison Literature

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WHEN WE READ THE WORDS "prison literature" we experience a sense of familiarity: we know more fully what they connote than the words descriptive of most other coherent "genres" — even "love poetry" or "Bildungsroman." Our minds possess a set of superimposed details and images, one fitting neatly onto the next, from the poems of Villon, Verlaine, and Oscar Wilde, from the novels of Koestler and Solzhenitzyn, with some distortions of shape coming from the work of Stendhal, Kafka, and Nabokov. Even taking into account the infinite permutations of form, style, period, and geographic setting, we perceive rightly I think that prison literature has a greater homogeneity than most other classes.

This homogeneity of substance, tone, and mood — no matter the form — comes from the physical conditions out of which prison literature springs being always similar. It makes little difference whether the author or protagonist be felon, political dissenter, or a Josef K: a prison is a prison. Of course the line between felon and dissenter can be blurred in any country at times of political instability or panic, a blurring starkly elucidated by E. L. Doctorow in *The Book of Daniel*, his novel based on the Rosenberg executions in the United States. South Africa does not hold the patent for treating political prisoners cruelly, for encouraging the prison administration as well as ordinary citizens to see them as rats or scum, lower than the common jailbird.

Be the detainee thug or saboteur, murderer or merely doubting intellectual, his experience of arrest and incarceration will follow a pattern. There is always the fear of brutal lawless lawmen, the shock of being in custody, the realization of prolonged and

multiple deprivations, the post-trial despair, and a partial or consistent retreat into madness. Space shrinks and time expands, and even the shapes and colours of memory are distorted.

Then there is guilt, that harrier of the already harassed inmate. The quality and degree of guilt will vary from author to author, from, for instance, the tension between guilt and attempts at self-justification in Villon's poetry, to the all-pervasive sense of guilt in Kafka, to the agonizing but redemptive guilt of Rubashov in *Darkness at Noon*. But guilt is like an ugly chameleon, changing shape and trying to hide itself yet always in the prisoner's awareness.

South African prison literature follows substantively its European predecessors. As far as I know, the first extended work to come out of actual imprisonment (and not an imagined one as in a part of *Cry, the Beloved Country*) is H. C. Bosman's *Cold Stone Jug* — first published in 1969 although the events it portrays happened twenty years previously.¹ Bosman had killed his half brother in a fight and had initially been sentenced to death by hanging. His sentence was commuted to four years' imprisonment, but only after he had had the experience of being on death-row during an execution. He writes in detail of that horrifying time, and such details are to be repeated again and again in South African prison literature over the next fifteen years. Bosman says:

... the shadow of this hanging lies like a pall over the inmates of the prison, warders as well as convicts... There is something inside the most hardened warder or anti-social convict that makes him shudder at the thought of death, of violent death, of the gruesome ceremony of doing a man to death above a dark hole, at a set time, with legal formality that does not extend beyond handcuffs and leg-irons and a sack drawn over the condemned man's head and a piece of coarse rope knotted behind his ear.
(p. 15)

Bosman adds that when the trapdoor over the "dark hole" opens, there is "a mighty slam that shook the whole building, rattling the pannikin on the floor of the cell... And it was all over" (p. 30).

These details are harrowing enough in *Cold Stone Jug*, in spite of the possible comfort to some that in this manner society rids itself of murderers. When we find the same details, sometimes fuller and more visceral, in the writing of former political prisoners, they become unbearable. Our minds, like Breytenbach's in the passage below, move toward understanding the horror, but shy away, then stumble back uncertainly:

It must be like a wall . . . I try to imagine, as I did then with the heart an impediment to breathing, what it must be like to be executed. What it must be like to be. Executed. Hanged by the passage of breath and of words . . . the cell of the condemned ones stamping their feet, rattling their chains and raising their voices in a rhythm of life and of sorrow so intimately intertwined that it could only be a dislocation of the very notion of the body of God . . . the indecency from man to man of handcuff and hood and rope and trapdoor — the earth falling for ever away: we are the wind and we are the birds, and the singing, singing of weighted ropes . . .

I close my eyes and I cannot face the darkness. I cannot go to sleep except if I fall behind the membranes of my eyelids. Like a wall soundlessly giving way before nothingness. I imagine. I go . . . ²

(To stop for a moment: one hesitates to write of these things. The critic feels the strange obscenity of appreciating the patterns of language, the chants of the poetry in these grim accounts, as he or she sits in safety examining trends and traditions. *Criticus Vulturinus?*)

One extremely moving aspect of the pre-hanging ritual in South Africa is the way the blacks in prison sing for their own. White "condemns" have to hire singers if they want singing the night before (according to Breytenbach), but for the black condemned prisoner, his fellow-prisoners sing unrehearsed through the night, their voices harmonizing from cell to cell. In his collection of poems *Inside*, Jeremy Cronin includes a poem "Death Row" part of which tries to convey the sound and repetition of the harmonizing. In this case the singing was in honour of three black saboteurs, Moise, Tsotsobe, and Shabangu:

One voice leading:
Arraise ye, high up,

Everynight,
 Deeper, two in the chorus
Prisoners from your slumbers
 Called and
 To boil or
 Respond like a
 Ripple like a
 Lurch like a
 Ukuhlabelela
 is go
 Glow like a
 Growl like a
 Glow like a
 Boil like a
 Bean stew like a
 Ripple like a
 Bus queue weaves like a
 Moves like a
 Stalks like a
 Moves like a
 Fighter
 Ukuhlabelela
 Three voices
 Called or
 Moise
 Combine or responding
 Tsotsobe
 Weaving
 Shabangu
 In and
 Voices
 Each other
 Around of, sliding
 Into each night's
 Finale, all three
 Three now
 As one: *Tha-a-a*
Inta
nasha — na — ale
yoonites tha
hooman
reisssss, aMAAA
 — *dla! longleev*
sisulu-mandela-tambo
 shouted *longleev!*

Your voices, brothers
 Down these concrete
 Corridors of power.³

While Cronin concentrates on the cadences of the song, its elements of defiance, and the song's rootedness in the black daily life, Breytenbach emphasizes in poem 14 of *Voetskriif* the loss and sadness, the helplessness and fear, underlying the singing:

for the singers
 for you who sing from the darkness
 surely like bees in a land where no flowers bloom
 for you who beg for comfort where no comfort is
 who call on the Savior for rescue where no rescue
 can save you
 who sing as if your lives hung upon it
 while you know that your lives will hang⁴

Breytenbach's poem does end with images of "the bittersweet life" and the word "Halleluja" but the sense of death and nothingness is strong in the poem possibly because he is writing in response to the prisoners' hymn-singing and not to their political anthems, both kinds being in their repertoire.

This pre-execution singing is recorded by Rose Moss in her novel *The Terrorist*, by Breytenbach again in *Mouiroir* and *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*. There is no doubt that these descriptions of singing by fellow-inmates for the man to be put to death retain their ability to touch and dispirit the reader even after frequent restatement: the intensity of human suffering at those moments and the beauty and outrage in the singing prevent even the simplest restatement from degenerating into cliché. Some things can bear — in fact *deserve* — repetition.

But there are predictable elements in any prison-experience and these do run the risk of becoming hackneyed through repetition in writing. It seems to me that prison literature might be more vulnerable to cliché than other kinds because of the very circumscription of the prison environment. There are, for instance, countless images of birds as symbols of freedom; expected references to the smallness of space and the expansibility of time; the frequent transformation of women — mothers, wives, girl-

friends — into otherworldly or saintly figures; and the inevitable glorification of life on the outside.

Jeremy Cronin's poems in *Inside* are the verse of a well-trained journalist with sharp senses and they generally do not fall into sentimentality. He does begin "For Comrades in Solitary Confinement" with the rather maudlin lines:

Every time they cage a bird
the sky shrinks. A little

but goes on to place with startling "rightness" an ibis seen through mesh-wire as

the visible, invisible, visible
across the sky
the question mark — (p. 25)

and writes about a guinea-fowl's call sounding like "a pocketfull of marbles / weeping deep in her throat" (p. 28). Breytenbach in *The True Confessions* writes about acquiring wild birds as temporary pets: "wagtails . . . Cheeky chaps in their grey morning suits, like ushers for a high-class wedding. Or slightly navicular lamps for burning oil in ancient shrines" (pp. 122-23). Predictably, he focuses on the return of the swallows, the cycle of the seasons, and the prisoner's attempt to establish his own rhythm of survival. In poem 3 of *Voetskrif*, however, he does a masterly job of using bird images to constitute those flashes of inner vision that ignite into a complex poem. In the fragment below, the reader notices how outside sounds set off a synesthesia in the poet, engaging all his senses, while the image of the bird is a kind of hub around which the sensations spin:

out-of-doors everything flies
and the wind is a fighter-falcon crookback over its prey
(comma on the page) so that the clouds
seek shadowy-hideaways and the trees are butterflies
a screech blasts from the train and see how the hills rock
the houses are kites and the voices of folk
are the sounds the spoors of flying on light
the sun is a birdgadget of harsh metal
metal-talk of artifact fire of joy but the night
she
of the white eyes in wings is more violent

for she eats up beauty for she bleeds the sun
 sucked-tit dry, she cannot be seen but here-and-there
 on gutters and cleftsticks in cells under nails
 she

she of the cold body and the voices of people
 the rustling of holes in the sky

all that I cannot see flies
 (here is the message) even the heart
 would spring from the ribcage nest
 feeling great with the foolish down and spittle
 of my poor words (my word-blunders) all decked out

“fly, my bloody little mousebird, fly!” (p. 3)

Breytenbach is not above occasional commonplaces: referring in poem 5 to a message sent to his wife as “. . . a bird on the wing / with the first daylight when the heavens open . . .” or imagining in poem 9 that a bird he hears in the eaves is itself a message from his wife. In poem 17 of *Letters to Martha*, Dennis Brutus afraid (perhaps understandably) of engaging with the cliché of symbolic birds, retreats into pomposity and wordiness:

the complex aeronautics
 of the birds
 and the exuberant acrobatics
 become matters for intrigued speculation
 and wonderment (p. 18)

He goes on to say that “clichés about the freedom of birds / and their absolute freedom from care / become meaningful” but the reader of this poem is not quite sure what that meaning is.⁵

Rubashov measures his cell, as does Cincinnatus C in Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*. Breytenbach, determined to tell *all* in *The True Confessions*, writes that his cell “could not have been much larger than six feet: I could barely brush the walls with my arms outstretched. In length it must have been about nine feet. But what it lacked in floor space it made up in depth: it was a good five metres high, with an open space for the last two metres, blocked off from the catwalk by a wiremesh . . . (p. 123). And Jeremy Cronin, analysing the space that forcibly encloses him and suggesting his reaction to it, says:

Overhead is mesh
 To one side the morgue
 To one side the gallows wing, this
 Is our yard

Into which a raggedy
 By happenstance
 Butterfly has flown.

Fluttering
 Halfway to panic
 Halfway to give a damn . . . (p. 4)

The impulse behind the measuring and the analysing must be to gain recognition of the limits of one's space and thereby control over it. Of course, it is easier to encompass space mentally than time. Many prisoners have spoken of a sense of relief following their resignation to their condition, to the fixed routine of the prison, to their established status within a hierarchy. Breytenbach writes of the prisoner's general hatred of anything that disrupts routine or expectations, and he tells of even a condemned man crying and beating his head on the wall because the incorrect library books were delivered to him (p. 125).

Coping with the passage of time and the way time seems to extend itself immeasurably is a harder matter. Toward the end of his sentence, Bosman became disoriented in time, beginning too early to anticipate his imminent release, and beginning to fear insanity. The idea of spending time or *life* in prison began to take on physical proportions:

I began to conceive of an awful "life" existing in the penal section, and afterwards in every section of the prison. I imagined this "life" as a vast, fat black serpent, trailing through all the corridors of the prison, through the walls and everything; filling the whole space between walls and the roof, and the entire hall, and the whole prison; and this gigantic snake was alive and breathing, and it couldn't draw breath properly because it was so closely confined between walls and roof; and this was "die lewe" [life] in the prison. The prison itself was a live thing, sweating and suffocating in its own immurement. (p. 176)

Jeremy Cronin describes how at one point he was joyfully counting the months to his release, but in the process began to realize

that time could not be so simply calculated. He understood, too, that he and his comrades had parcelled time in terms of outside political victories, but that that very counting could lead to despair for those still inside:

But there're those other times

parcelled
 in separate
 brown paper packets
 A time that walks in circles.
 A time that flattens itself
 incredibly thin
disappears
 into the backs of mirrors
 or drips from the taps.
 When I first came to jail,
 some of my comrades had served
 thirteen years —
 drop by drop, they've been inside now
 since before the armed struggles
 in Mozambique and Zimbabwe
 had even begun . . . (p. 23)

He also speaks of a time so extended that

. . . without appetite —
 you consume
 with the stale bread of yourself,
 pacing to and fro, to shun,
 one driven step on ahead
 of the conversationist
 who lurks in your head . . . (p. 25)

Brutus also describes this state:

In the greyness of isolated time
 which shafts down into the echoing mind,
 wraiths appear, and whispers of horrors
 that people the labyrinth of self. (p. 6)

This condition Breytenbach terms “eating head,” that is, talking to and with oneself interminably, to the point of madness, a condition that for him (unlike for Bosman) was more dangerous at the beginning of his term. Later, he explains:

. . . the same events coming around again, the rhythms being repeated, the familiarity of your situation — these deaden you to

the passing of time. You look down from the bridge and you don't remember any water having passed under it. The past has the taste of haven't aged: the years were empty. People come and go, the equations remain the same. You forget perhaps that you were then a different person, that you have become that entity which inhabits this time which consists of clearly defined patterns, repetitions, the same again and again. You yourself are purified or reduced to some other personality. (p. 126)

Breytenbach's experience was different from Bosman's, perhaps because of his longer sentence. Bosman served four years, Breytenbach was sentenced to nine but served seven. But Breytenbach insists too, more eloquently than Bosman, that he did not "survive," that some essential part of himself was destroyed during his term. The reader must perforce believe him, and yet his very book written after his release challenges this insistence. *The True Confessions* is a long compelling account, couched in a taut prose that regularly rises into the rhythms and disjunctions of poetry and just as regularly sinks into the foulest obscenities against his jailors as his anger breaks through — therapeutically, one would think. It is indeed a book the reader cannot put down, written by a man not predominantly a prose writer and, till recently, not an English one, out of the full force of his considerable talent. The book conveys deeply and minutely the effects of prison-life on the mind and body, discusses the South African political structure in all the ramifications of its own entrapment, and partially clarifies Breytenbach's sense of himself as a poet and a painter. The reader would like to believe that the book is evidence that Breytenbach has not only survived imprisonment personally but has been expanded by it artistically. What the real losses are (I do not mean the loss of years off his life), the reader can only speculate about with humility and respect. Bosman suggests something of this kind of damage when he states toward the end of *Cold Stone Jug*:

I did not know that, in actual reality, I would never again in my life wear a suit that did not have numbers on it.

I did not know, then, how a man who has once been in prison feels for the rest of his life when he is outside. For I left prison twenty years ago. And I have been conscious for every moment of the time, since then, that I am an ex-convict. Every suit I

wear has got prison numbers plastered on it. If the world can't see those numbers, I can . . . But the world can also see them all right . . . (p. 213)

The passage imparts a sense of diseased self-consciousness and a loss of self-esteem, the products perhaps of Bosman's guilt. The tone of much of *Cold Stone Jug* is jaunty, humorous, at times swaggering, all arguably attempts to hide the shame and guilt that nonetheless forces itself at times on Bosman in the guise of self-consciousness.

Naturally the extent of guilt experienced by a prisoner will differ from person to person and, we assume, be stronger on the part of the murderer or thief than on the part of the "political" — one who perceives himself fighting for his concept of justice. The reader of Breytenbach's *The True Confessions* grows enthralled in the complexities of emotion weaving in and out of his narrative, in the combinations of anger at the self, anger at the jailors, shame, defiance, remorse, and tangled outbursts of self-justification. Breytenbach's was, of course, a special "case." He was an Afrikaner, the son of a respected Cape family, the brother of a Colonel in the South African equivalent of the Green Berets. His love for his country and his frustration toward it had infused his poetry in the past. His manipulation of the Afrikaans language had extended and enhanced that language's possibilities and had forced even the establishment to acknowledge him as its greatest poet. When he returned incognito to South Africa to recruit members for his Communist group (the strategy of which he explains in *The True Confessions*), he was detected immediately and arrested on a charge of treason. He broke down, cooperated with the police and, during his trial, apologized abjectly for his actions. His shame at not being a "good" agent is clear in the book, as is his even greater shame at being so soft in the hands of what he terms the "Greyshtits," members of the secret police and all their toadies. But playing against his shame is his hatred of the South African system, of the whole maze of oppression that leads inevitably to the stone maze of Pretoria Central Prison with its "dark hole" at the core. Breytenbach's self-examination and revelation, his admitted weaknesses and lack-of-forethought, his Baudlairean addressing of the reader as "Mister Investigator," all

touch and excite us: we understand and forgive even while sometimes we smile sardonically and shake our heads: we want to know more. We love him.

Jeremy Cronin's body of work is much smaller than Breytenbach's at this stage and in those of his poems we have there is not much expression of fury or shame, though there is more sadness than in Breytenbach's work. But the two trials were very different and Cronin on his release continued to make his home in South Africa, while Breytenbach boarded a plane for France a few days after his sentence was reduced and he was let out.

Perhaps it is hardly worth the reader's while or the exercise of his curiosity to look for guilt in the work of former political prisoners, except that we all know enough about the deep sources of human guilt not to suspect that the very condition of imprisonment will force guilt to surge upward like a bad taste in the mouth. There is little detectable guilt in Brutus's poetry, but in Mongane Serote's long poem, *No Baby Must Weep*, written after his release, there are several images of self-disgust and frustrated anger. For instance:

i sit here
bursting words between my wringing fingers
like ripe boils (p. 28)

and

i have lain here
when the tears of my tormented flesh flowed
i walked here
when my manhood shook and the load of my curses was
unbearable (p. 48)⁶

Serote's long symphonic poem is, however, not an overt exploration of his prison experiences but rather a reconstruction of his pre-prison life, his perceptions of *his* Africa, and a recording of the knotted feelings that being a black man in South Africa caused in him. It would take more than even a careful reading to establish where the impact of imprisonment comes into the poem and where the force of overall restriction, poverty, and political oppression.

There are novels and poems I have not touched on, particularly those which, though allied to prison literature, deal with the

“anteroom” of the prison, as it were, novels like Ebersohn’s *Store up the Anger*, Brink’s *A Dry White Season*, Bernstein’s *Death is Part of the Process*, and many poems in the *Staffrider* magazine, where people are being arrested and maltreated by the police but have not yet been officially consigned to prison. A prison is the background to the narrative of Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter*, and summary arrest and torture inform Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Although there is talk that the South African government means to release more political prisoners, even Mandela (and did recently release thirteen of them), the numbers of detainees are still too shamefully numerous there. It seems likely, therefore, that South African prison literature will continue to appear and, for all I know, could be much more prolific, written by people using the vernaculars, languages that most whites, including me, do not understand.

NOTES

- ¹ I am using the *Human and Rousseau*, Cape Town, edition of 1981.
- ² *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (Johannesburg: Taurus, 1984), p. 194.
- ³ Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983, pp. 29-30. The word *ukuhlabelela* means, I think, the great destroyer.
- ⁴ Johannesburg: Perskor, 1976, p. 29. This is my translation which cannot begin to reproduce the consonance, alliteration, and pace of the Afrikaans. The same applies to my translation of the poem on pp. 66-67. Breytenbach uses colloquialisms and slang that do not have exact English equivalents.
- ⁵ London: Heinemann, 1970.
- ⁶ Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1975.