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Communion in the House of the Dead: Notes on Some African Prison Poets

During his year-long imprisonment by the Kenyan government, the novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o was visited and subjected to a harangue by the senior superintendent of prisons Edward Lokopoyet. "He lectures me for an hour on the virtues of total submission. [...] He tries out the divisive policy of flattery and threats. [...] As he is about to leave, he says: 'And remember, don't attempt to write any poems here. Not unless I have given you permission. And even then I must see the poems and approve!'" (Ngugi 1981, 126-27).

Although, as Ngugi remarks later, "I have never anyway written poetry, inside or outside prison" (137), it is nonetheless revealing that the jailer should have assumed that an imprisoned writer would necessarily have to be a poet, as if poetry and subversion of the political order were somehow intimately linked. Indeed, notwithstanding his own disclaimer, Ngugi freely quotes an array of poets in his prison memoir in order to vary the texture and open up the narrative in true novelistic style to a chorus of voices and a diversity of textual expressions. Thus, Shakespeare, Dennis Brutus, Mahmoud Darwish, Shabaan Roberts, and anonymous Kenyan resistance poets (among others) collaborate with Ngugi in the formation of "his" text (the final word in *Detained* is pronounced by Bertolt Brecht, in the form of his poem "A Worker's Voice"). Even Ngugi's own prison novel, *Devil on the Cross*, is thematically indebted to the long satirical poem "The Five Bandits" by the Korean poet Kim Chi Ha (himself a victim of political detention). Ngugi states that it was precisely the jailer's visit that goaded him into resolving once and for all to find the ways and means to write, and this defiance may well have carried over into the *poetic* intensity of *Devil on the Cross*'s savagely Swiftian indignation.

Yet while an entire mythology has been built upon the image of the poet as a social outcast, often without particularly positive consequences for poetry itself, there is also little doubt that poets are viewed with mingled suspicion

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and disdain by the guardians of the dominant social order and thought, an attitude summed up in the Cuban Heberto Padilla's mordant poem, "Out of the Game": "The Poet, get rid of him / He has nothing to do around here / He does not play the game / lacks enthusiasm / He does not make his message clear / does not even notice the miracles / He spends the whole day thinking / always finds something to object to / [...]" (qtd. in Dolgoff 16). While poetry itself, particularly in modern capitalist society, is often dismissed as a harmless if perhaps somewhat frivolous pastime (that is, as long as it keeps within the prescribed social boundaries), it still retains a certain subversive aura to the extent it escapes the pull of the utilitarian.

The origins of poetry's "outsider" status in the Western world—and why it should be the literary genre to which rebels, dissidents, and detainees tend to gravitate—may be traced to Plato's *Republic*, where Socrates asserts its fundamental incompatibility with the elaboration of a so-called master narrative which the founders of the utopian Republic require to legitimate and perpetuate its laws and customs: "You and I, Adeimantus, are not, for the moment, poets, but founders of a commonwealth. As such, it is not our business to invent stories ourselves, but only to be clear as to the main outlines to be followed by the poets in making their stories and the limits beyond which they must not be allowed to go" (Plato 70-71). The realm occupied by poetic performance is a realm of ambiguity, deception, and emotional manipulation, and thereby contrary to the clarity necessary to govern the state. "So we shall be justified in not admitting [the poet] into a well-ordered commonwealth, because he stimulates and strengthens an element which threatens to undermine the reason" (337). If poetry is allowed to exist at all, it can only be in the strictly limited form of that poetry "which celebrates the praises of the gods and of good men" (339).

While Socrates and his disciples were never in a position to enforce their prescriptive/proscriptive dictates, *The Republic* nonetheless exists as a rationalization for keeping poetry and poets on a short leash lest they corrupt the common understanding. For Plato, the punishment for flouting the rules governing poetry involved exclusion from the republican walls rather than incarceration; the latter was an achievement reserved for a later age, and generally aimed precisely at those who refused to sing praise-songs with the appropriate fervor. But whereas late capitalist society has grudgingly found room for poetry in the margins of its metropolitan centers (and even in its prisons, where poetry workshops are often held), in the rest of the world, with

the metropole's now tacit, now explicit complicity, poets are frequently banned, censored, harassed, imprisoned, and even murdered.

Ultimately, poetry is subversive because, though speaking from the vantage point of the present, it tells both of a time before the present (insofar as it expresses and protects a collective memory), and of a prophetic futurity (insofar as it represents a praxis). Language, the protean gift humanity has forged for itself, is the shaping material and mysterious substance of *poeisis* (from the Greek word for "making," an etymological link even Plato could not undo). Plato's dismissive attitude toward the continued popularity among the Greeks of the Eleusinian mysteries (cf. *Republic* II, 377 and VIII, 560), with their Orphic fusion of festive procession, song, dance, and ritual, betrays his own misunderstanding of the communal necessity of mythopoetic activity. Using Greek drama as a point of departure while aiming the thrust of his observations toward a specifically African performance context, Wole Soyinka distinguishes two crucial aspects of this activity:

> (1) the recognition of the integral nature of poetry and dancing in the mimetic rite, and (2) the withdrawal of the individual into an inner world from which he returns, communicating a new strength for action. The definition of this inner world as "fantasy" betrays a Eurocentric conditioning or alienation. We describe it as the primal reality, the hinterland of transition. (1990, 33)

This passage assumes particular poignancy in light of Soyinka's own imprisonment in Nigerian jails between 1967 and 1969, for he is connecting the fundamental seriousness of the poetic enterprise to an ever-looming loss of freedom, a danger that menaces the collective as much as it does the poet. The latter is charged with a solemn task: to withstand the terrors and ordeals of the "hinterland of transition" and to return to the outside world with a legacy described as follows by the South African poet Dennis Brutus (imprisoned between 1963 and 1965; placed under house arrest between 1965 and 1966): "... bits to fill / the mosaic of your calm and patient knowledge / —picking the jagged bits embedded in my mind—partly to wrench some ease for my own mind. / And partly that some world sometime may know" (68).

By virtue of the wealth of its indigenous poetic traditions and its long history of resistance to colonial and neo-colonial domination alike, Africa, "the continent where the reality of metamorphosis is paramount, where you have the chance of seeing the simplest object transformed into a votive symbol or a still point of magic" (Breytenbach128), has been the site of a fraught battle between the practitioners and the institutional enemies of poetry, who love

nothing more than applause, whether genuine or (as is more often the case) feigned. In its cynicism, the erstwhile Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi's exhortation (from, appropriately, 1984) to "... all ministers, assistant ministers and every other person to sing like parrots" (qtd in Ngugi 1986, 86) not only encapsulates the progressive degeneration of the popular unity once advocated by the leaders of anti-colonial struggles into the enforced unanimity imposed by postcolonial elites, but manifests the kind of treachery that Frantz Fanon astutely recognized as "sell[ing] their country to the most terrifying of all its enemies: stupidity" (183). Ultimately, it is precisely this enemy against which those African poets who have endured prison are waging their battles. Drawing upon a generalized culture of resistance to which they themselves have contributed, they challenge the monologic utterances of the carceral universe and its institutional bulwarks on the "outside" by means of the "other voice," permanently unassimilable and elusive:

> It is strange how that creative revelation of Picasso's has taken to haunting me: *I do not seek; I find.* It is like an incantation sneaked in the mind under hypnosis. I ask it finally, what is it? What are you saying to me? [...] For instance that, passive or provoking, protagonist or acquiescing I was fated for this passage? That a visionary's course is one which, even with closed eyes and folded arms, finds? (Soyinka 1972, 93)

To go deeper into the self (to discover, indeed, what the self consists of) without losing it utterly; not only to make something out of nothing but to find the something in the nothing, the plenitude in the void; while all the time registering the minimum amount of compliance required to avoid reprisals from the authorities—these are the Herculean labors required of the prison poet. Against the totalitarian control of space and time, the prison poet becomes a mental traveler and a seeker of universes in grains of sand, scrabbling insects, spots on the wall, patches of sunlight. The Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi (imprisoned from 1972 to 1980) speaks of the ceiling of his cell as "a passive ocean [that] turned out to be the best possible screen for allowing you to imagine as much as you wanted so that you could assure yourself that your mind still had the power to create" (51). Indeed, the prison poet has no choice but to hone his[1] art to an acuity surpassing anything he has

1 I use the male gender here only because the five poets I discuss in this essay are male; it should not be interpreted as sexist or exclusionary.

done before. (Amidst all the soaring rhetoric about poetry's necessity in a carceral sub-world, it should not be forgotten that the genre, particularly where the irregular line-endings of free verse are concerned, lends itself *strategically* to cigarette papers, matchbooks, flyleafs, miscellaneous scraps and detritus, etc. that are the individual prisoner's hoard. Poetry in prison, it seems, is above all an interstitial art.)

In a war of nerves with a better equipped opponent, ancestral cunning and oblique strategies of resistance, forged in heritages of struggle and sharpened by endless confrontations with necessity, become vital. Ngugi quotes the poet Anitar's declaration of the essential values required of the prisoner in the constant fight against dehumanization: "I will not leave a word for the railers / And I will not ease the hearts of my enemies by the violation of my honour / I have borne with misfortune until I have discovered its secret meaning" (101). Values previously affirmed as desirable on the "outside" must become the stuff of everyday existence, the negation of the carceral negation. (Which is not to deny the painful and inescapable truth, voiced by Breyten Breytenbach [incarcerated in South Africa between 1975 and 1982] in the name of countless long-term prisoners, "any man after five years in prison is no longer a man"(1985, 318). Not that dehumanization is total, simply that something irrecoverable dies in the individual.) Jack Mapanje (imprisoned in Malawi's Mikuyu Prison between 1987 and 1991) meditates on the exasperated question asked of him as he was being released after worldwide pressure:

> [...]
> Why didn't anybody warn me they might ask
> Who I was on my release? But try these
>
> Afterjokes for answer: he's mere *maccah*,
> Just another burr that'll tenaciously
>
> Stick to your cloth when you walk these
> Wearing grass-roots; he's the persistent
>
> Brown ant that crept into the elephan's
> Ear, scratching, scratching, scratching,
> Until elephant destroyed himself; watch
> Your trousers; he won't shrug off your
>
> Soggy sock that easy; so don't ask whence
> *Imbongi* comes! [...] (72)

Here, the poet subverts the tradition of praise-singing (*Imbongi* is a name given to a praise poet) and uses it to build himself up rhetorically by means of deflation (and to beard the impotent elephants of power in their den). Surely Plato would not gainsay his right to "praise the gods and good men," even if the poet himself may be the only one who fits at least the mortal end of the equation while in the company of his self-appointed superiors! The prison poet, indeed, is required to be a trickster, and Mapanje's chameleonic style, which switches from mock-English formality and understated wit to verbal pratfalls ("Soggy sock") and unlikely enjambments, reflects the triumph of a practiced rhetorical duelist of the sort so prevalent in African cultures. (Compare the "Grand Seer"'s outburst in the face of Wole Soyinka's unrelenting satyagrahic resistance: "... Believe me we want you out of here faster than even you want to get out ... you are the most uncomfortable figure any prison officer could hope to have in his charge" (221).

In short, resistance is essential to the prisoner's *ars poetica*; the one cannot exist without the other. The poem is the performative declaration of will and rebellious intent, a confirmation of the self even (and especially) in its vulnerability. It is little wonder that even when the South African authorities were willing to publish some of Breyten Breytenbach's poems while he was still imprisoned, they drew the line at the following: "The title [of the poem] was 'Help,' and the body of the text consisted of 'Help!'" (1985, 157). The inner hum or cry, the rustle or whirlwind of language in "stone countries" of all sorts, is always dangerous to the uniformed guardians of equally uniform speech and thought.

For the poem in prison is always written on a grey page of monotonous monologue. As Ngugi has observed, "[t]he rituals of mystery and secrecy are calculated exercises in psychological terror aimed at the whole people -- part of the culture of fear—and at the individual detainee—part of the strategy of eventually breaking him" (20). Poetry is compelled to show its superiority to the totalitarian ritual imposed by prison life, not certainly by ignoring it or writing it out of existence in the space of the poem, but by incorporating it and transcending it in a ritual more powerful and enduring (because connected to the mysteries of the "human reason"): that of a manifold communion prefiguring a greater political and spiritual communion among all those desirous of breaking the carceral spell.

Because the moment of arrival marks the initiation into prison existence, the authorities orchestrate it carefully with due regard for appearances, literally assaulting the prisoner's subjectivity and doing everything possible to sever a

sense of integrity and connectedness. The poet therefore responds by imaginatively projecting himself into the thoughts of the authorities, acknowledging the ritual nature of the "score" they are endeavoring to get him to "learn," or by identifying with those who share his predicament and drawing solidary sustenance from their presence. In either case, it is a matter of evaluating the balance of forces and—at least verbally—trumping the card that Power has dealt.

A few hours after his arrest in 1972 for "crimes of opinion," Abdellatif Laâbi was tortured before being consigned to his cell. In his memoir *Rue du Retour*, he describes awakening alone, blindfolded and numb, in the chamber after a particularly brutal session. As consciousness returns, he hears the distant song of a muezzin, which evokes a childhood memory of attending Friday prayers with his father. Recalling the simple, unquestioning faith that filled him at that moment, Laâbi succumbs to tears, but as he becomes aware of his continued solitude, he chooses momentary rebellion over passive obedience, removes the blindfold, surveys his surroundings—including the instruments of torture strewn around the cell—finds his jacket hanging on a hook, extracts a lighter and a cigarette from the pocket, lights the cigarette, and then returns to put on the coat.

> To merge with the movement of the life-restoring sap which is once again beginning to irrigate your body, gathering together the severed and broken pieces. The miracle of being alive. To be a man is nothing except the awareness of this miracle. [...] To connect ourselves in this way to the pulse of the world and the inimitable adventure of unfolding life. (Laâbi 33-34)

The seductions of past moments of obedience and submission become, in the torture chamber, a sinister invitation to permanent physical and spiritual blindness and (Laâbi's own word) self-pity, which can only be countered by self-willed and hence defiant action, no matter how tentative and enfeebled. Although surprised almost immediately by his tormenters and savagely punished with the "parrot's perch" torture for his daring to regain consciousness and restore some semblance of free will to his circumstances, Laâbi, even at the edge of death, can still envision himself as "a fragile germination in the flux of anonymity" (41).

Dennis Brutus casts a cold eye on the emotions coursing through his mind when he hears his prison sentence, which run the gamut from "sick relief, / [...] / apprehension—/ [...] / exultation - / [...] / vague heroism / mixed with self-pity." Here as elsewhere in his prison poems, the language is

stripped down to the utmost economy, as if to emphasize that words in an impoverished environment are precious and must be chosen with care, never wasted. The movement of emotions gradually ascends until brought down to earth by the amusedly distant "self-pity" and by the somber thought of the "...knowledge of those / who endure much more / and endure" (Brutus 54). The repeated "endure" looks ahead to the steady, unrelievedly oppressive rhythm of the marching convicts and the endless round of days. Yet the very constancy of endurance constitutes a perpetual check to prison control, and the poet makes clear that it is from that endurance rather than momentary emotional transits that he must draw his courage.

Mapanje begins his account of prison life with the requisite strip-search. He eases his way into the subject with the airily feigned casualness of a storyteller in a bar, reminiscing about past strip-teases witnessed before abruptly narrating the degradation of his enforced "performance."At times he repeats the instructions given to him, tries to break the inexorable process with sidelong remarks and feigned jocularity, but the ominous threats of possible death (and the rigid incarceration of the poetic language in couplets) betray his real fears. At the conclusion, the poem, by means of alliteration and deftly allusive internal rhyme, experiences a lurching plunge into dehumanization, darkness and cold finality:

> Now the stinking shit-bucket tripped over drowns
>
> The news about the lights being left overnight for
> You to scare night creepers, as the putrid *bwezi*
>
> Blanket rag enters the single cell and staggers on to
> The cracked cold cement floor of Mikuyu Prison. (Mapanje 45)

Having been forcibly initiated into the grey squalor of prison mysteries, the poet is compelled to transform it into an area of transition. Metaphorically, the imagery of irons and chains that rattle through the carceral universe is also a challenge to Ogun, the Yoruba god of creativity: "To dare transition is the ultimate test of the human spirit, and Ogun is the first protagonist of the abyss" (Soyinka 1990, 158). This is the perilous moment when the poet must plumb his internal abyss and seek to give its formlessness an appropriate linguistic form. Of necessity he will avail himself of the *trobar clus*, the willed obscurity of expression that stubbornly resists immediate apprehension by the outside. To the extent that the poet can weave a complex textual web

(Soyinka's "shuttle in the crypt") and prove his ability to "escape," the intent of his words will paradoxically assume greater clarity.

Inspired by his physical proximity to the passage of five prisoners to that final abyss whose only transition led to the other side of life, Soyinka wrote one of his most profound poetic sequences, "Chimes of Silence." He both accompanies and—as he must in order to speak—stands apart from the condemned men, attempting through the work of the imagination to imbue their deaths with poetic and human resonance, in contrast to the impersonal brutality of their hanging. From his solitary confinement, he hears but does not see "a private ritual solely for, solely witnessed by me. I listened to an enactment of death in the home of death, to the pulse of a shuttle slowing to its final moment of rest, towards that complete in-gathering of being which a shuttle in repose so palpably is. It was, in this sense, both horror and consolation" (Soyinka 1972, vii-viii).

Soyinka considers the shuttle, the emblematic trope of his struggle for poetic clarity in the darkness of the prison-tomb, to be synonymous with the mental/corporeal motion which is the breath of life. By projecting himself into the death of others, he is symbolically enacting the moment of his own end. (As *The Man Died* shows, this was not intellectual game-playing; at one point, a long fast clearly brought him close to death's country.) By using language to express the unsayable, he forges a hermetic but no less palpable link of solidarity to the bodies and souls of those unseen prisoners. In the following all-too-brief excerpt, the intricate web of words and imagery (note the pun of "sibilant" with "sibylline," the resonant contrast/similarity between "dearth" and "death," and the conflation of the "old women" with the Greek Fates and the Yoruba "our mothers") creates the unsentimental yet all-embracing consolation the poet searches for in his transitional realm:

> Passage. A streak of earth on whitewashed stones—
> Ghosts. Here old women spat their frail
> Sibilant juice, and time was essence
> Of the bitter nut seeping from withered gums,
> We took their love. Through intertwine
> Of owlish figures on the loom, they gave
> And wove a spell against this hour
> And kept a vigil upon dearth and death. (Soyinka 1972, 44)

Breytenbach speaks of the regulation of prison life by all manner of artificial rhythms that by dint of repetition take on the inexorability of laws of nature.

Yet even in the most controlled environment, the elements with their attendant seasonal rhythms, odors, and sounds make themselves felt. Brutus, working in the stone quarry on Robben Island, describes a brief rainstorm with his characteristic precision—"it came in a quick moving squall / moving across the island / murmuring from afar / then drumming on the roof / then marching fading away" (71)—and overlays its rhythm upon the tramping feet of the workers in the stone quarry. But while prison cannot wholly sever the human connection with elemental pulsations, it nonetheless interposes itself between the individual and the air he breathes with such overweening force (for carceral worlds move not to the pace of the heart but to the militarized march or servile shuffle) as to cause the sorrowful communion described by Breytenbach:

> it rains: does it notch tic-toc sounds?
> oh heart of spades bloom pulsing the doom
> 'tis in dead hours when one walls in and sorts
> out all breath that one knows: life is an ant-
> line with neither nest nor baited goal
> only a rumour of fumbling existence
> shiverishly wiped from feeler on tentacle,
> [...] (1988, 28)

Walled away from the rain, its aroma of fresh earth, its healing moisture, and its attendant cooling breezes, the prisoner can only apprehend it by the steady drumbeat of its fall. The assonant "notch tic-toc sounds" conjures up images of castaways marking off their days in notched sticks—or prisoners drawing cross-hatched calendrical patterns on the walls; this is a regular rain with no sleeting wind to introduce new rhythms. Even those who are on the "outside" have been awakened at times before dawn by such a rain and felt inexplicable sadness. The poet hears his mortality spelt out in his heartbeat and imprisoned breath as both enter into the tolling of the rain; "oh heart of spades gloom pulsing the doom" alludes to spades as both "death card" and gravediggers' tools, along with the ill-fortune that can sway an individual's destiny. The outer cold ripples through "shiverishly wiped" (reminiscent of Soyinka's "A wet print on my forehead. Rain" (1972, 258), but here there is no consolation, only a futile gesture before the inevitable (and perhaps sought-after) end. In this distant storm that is no storm, Breytenbach encounters the rain that will fall only after all creation has vanished from the earth.

Yet even in isolation, the incarcerated soul has its familiars in the animal kingdom. Not necessarily the cockroaches, dung-beetles, and mosquitos that add their scrabblings, scratchings, and bitings to the litany of humiliations undergone by the prisoner—although Soyinka couches a lengthy meditation on the historical circumstances that led up to his imprisonment in the form of a "Conversation at night with a cockroach," and Mapanje has some wickedly eloquent lines dedicated to fleas, scorpions, and rats—rather, the freest creatures a prisoner can see (and for that reason the most often written about), birds. Breytenbach's alter ego is "Bangai Bird," and in his prison memoir he writes of taming a wagtail and keeping it in his cell for a short time. These same wagtails gravitate to Malawi's Mikuyu Prison and in a grotesque parody of the relationship of the outside world to the prison world, proceed to sleep "standing / On one leg, head under wings, snoring / About today, fabricating their stinking / Shit on the courtyard for us to mop / Tomorrow..." (Mapanje 51).

Birds symbolize the alchemical principle of volatility as well as the soul, and are thus doubly charged with the power to inspire thoughts of freedom. Prisoners read signs or portents into their appearance at certain times; certainly the implications of a crow leaving behind a feather in the courtyard where Wole Soyinka was sitting in solitary confinement were immediately detected by the poet: "... it is an act of deep benevolent selection that the loose feather should drop off over and into the tiniest yard, at the feet of one whose need was surely the most desperate" (1972, 259). His ritual fashioning of a pen out of the quill affirms the kindred spirits of poet and bird, both "scratchy as the crow's cawing" but no less intimately bound in a covenant of freedom:

> ... But newly
> Sounds the raw theme of your haloed throat—
> As trumpets at the lofty breach in walls
> Of immolation (1972, 260)

In the poet's grasp, the feather that contributed to the bird's powers of light now enables him to "perform" these powers through mimetic language. The poet writes a variation on the "raw theme" of the bird who has breached the physical walls (and dropped a feather-bridge between heaven and earth) in order to present him with a talismanic gift of sound-as-thought and thought-as-sound, the core of the poetic act. Together, the crow and the poet are twin Joshuas blowing down the walls of Jericho (a favorite Biblical tale for prisoners and enslaved peoples alike).

But after each epiphany, the individual prisoner is left to confront a self irrevocably altered by the warping routine and unending surveillance. Communion with the self will occasionally take the form of an imposed ordeal in order to test the firmness of a capacity for resistance and even through privation (e.g., fasting) to regain some sense of control over the mind and body. The somber "animystic spells" that Soyinka pronounces are directed first of all at disciplining the self to create and enter a space temporarily freed of contingency. Breytenbach performs Zen meditation in his cell as a guard mutters threats through the judas-eye. But even the strongest may break under the weight of things, and the poet must dramatize this danger in order to mend the frayed threads by which the self hangs:

> *memory one*
>
> I remember:
> for that one measureless moment
> my hands cupped around the sun
> a cage
> and I saw
> fluttering, fleeter than any colour or outline
> and I sipped
> till my tongue was still with the pain (Breytenbach 1988, 7)

Painful gaps, short-circuits in consciousness (emphasized by the jagged disparities in line lengths), elided words forever lost in some traumatized region of the mind. At the outset the poem promises mystical visions recollected in tranquility, but with the appearance of "a cage" on its own sparse line, the thought process begins to break down; the poet thinks of a bird but cannot name it nor give it shape ("colour or outline," perhaps, but not its living essence). He drinks—from the chalice of bitterness or the waters of forgetting?—and if his "tongue was still with the pain," it is because he either cannot speak of anything else ("still" as an adverb denoting a continued stretch of time) or because he cannot say anything more ("still" in the sense of "quiet"). The one possible source of healing may be found in the title, which promises the disinterment and resurrection of other memories, a process that initially requires working through the deepest pains of the self (cf. Soyinka: "... tell these walls / The human heart may hold / Only so much despair" (1972, 18) before it can gain the open space beyond the threshold of the final.

But the agonies of the incarcerated self are mirrors of the deeply alienated "lonely crowd" of prison inmates, with whom communion if it exists at all is only momentary and perhaps even deceptive—depending on the specifically carceral nature of the society that built the walls, armed the guards, determined what sentences fit what crimes or for that matter what constituted a "crime" in the first place. In prison poetry there cannot fail to be a deep yearning for unfettered communication—little wonder that some of the most impassioned declarations of love have been written either by prisoners to other prisoners (in the case of Jean Genet) or by prisoners to their lovers on the "outside" (Breytenbach's poems to his wife are some of the most achingly passionate lyrics of modern times, in any language). But it is always problematic for the poet to establish an immediate relation of trust with his fellows, whether because "politicals" and so-called "common" prisoners do not mingle, or because he may be under special surveillance. Still, ties must be forged, if only because individuals are not monads.

Of all the poets under discussion, Dennis Brutus and Abdellatif Laâbi are the most attuned to describing the ties of solidarity that spring up even in an atomized collectivity. Laâbi emphasizes the liberating function of jokes and Homeric laughter in maintaining a sense of solidarity among his fellow political prisoners: "The prison guffaws with an open throat and this colossal laugh bursts like the gunpowder of defiance" (90). Internecine political tensions and schisms, superseded in the Moroccan jail by the collective need for mutual aid, are perceived by the poet as illusions endemic to the "outside" world. Brutus, though, possesses a more tempered optimism, and considering that his comrades on Robben Island included Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, his observations are of particular historical as well as psychological interest. He declares in one poem: "one comes to welcome the closer contact / and understanding one achieves / with one's fellow-men / fellows, compeers" (Brutus 60). However, he also learns that the prison environment functions according to its own densely knotted and twisted power-principles, and his attempts to understand why things should be that way are compassionate yet clear-sighted:

> [...]
> why did this man stab this man for that man?
> what was the nature of the emotion
> and how did it grow?
> was this the reason for a warder's unmotived
> senseless brutality?

> by what shrewdness was it instigated?
>
> desire for prestige or lust for power?
> Or can it—strange, most strange—be love,
> strange love?
> And from what human hunger was it born? (Brutus 55)

One is reminded here of Frantz Fanon's concluding prayer in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "Oh my body, make of me always a man who questions." Communion is not achieved simply by breathing the same air or sharing the common label of "criminal" even in a particularly loathsome system such as South African apartheid; it is rather groped towards, often painfully, and with the aid of just such questions as Brutus is asking himself. That prisoners and warders may enter into relations of tacit or affirmed complicity; that common interests may be flouted in the name of momentary personal advantages to be gained; that, as another poet-prisoner, Oscar Wilde remarked, "Each man kills the thing he loves" (and isn't Brutus pointing out that each man also loves the thing he kills?)—all this may well derive from a frustrated desire for love and communion rendered vicious by the oppressive carceral environment. In short, people must be taken as what they are rather than what the poet (or political prisoner) wants them to be: for prematurely placing his trust in a fellow inmate who was secretly working for the prison administration, Breyten Breytenbach very nearly was hit with a longer sentence.

Prison life is deliberately designed as a parody of the religious concept *sub specie aeternitatis*. The carceral universe is also a parallel universe, planned with meticulous detail to avoid unauthorized slippage, leaks, penetration from the outside world, which is always presented as desirable as an object of contemplation but never as a source of inspiration or communion. History is essentially multiple and unpredictable; prison a monument to the Omnipotent Monad, the All-Seeing (Judas) Eye. And yet, as the poet knows, precisely because prisons are historical creations, not ontological necessities; because the "outside world" is not an undifferentiated entity but a site of struggle over meaning, power, knowledge, and the age-old, eternally valid question, "what does humanity live by?"; because, in short, prisons and the prison universe emerged under specific conditions (in the case of Africa, relatively recently) and a change in these conditions could as easily sweep them away—because of all these considerations (and many more as well), the poet must reaffirm a communion with history, not as a fixed principle but a living heritage that even in prison is always being augmented and deepened. By recognizing, as did

Mandela, that there is no easy walk to freedom but that this walk is undertaken every day regardless of the conditions, regardless of the weight of the Sisyphean rock of oppression, the poet ensures that he will return from the carceral realm of transition:

> The real unvoiced fear is: will this protagonist survive confrontation with forces that exist within the dangerous area of transformation? Entering that *microcosmos* involves a loss of individuation, a self-submergence in universal essence. It is an act undertaken on behalf of the community, and the welfare of the protagonist is inseparable from the total community. (Soyinka 1990, 42)

During the revolutionary struggle of the American Industrial Workers of the World in the early part of the century, when organizers and free-speech fighters were frequently jailed by the authorities, the organization's militants devised the slogan, "We're in there for you; you're out there for us." For the prisoner, the smallest gesture from the "outside" assumes transcendent importance in a world based on anomic, compartmentalized isolation; equally, however, this solidarity only attains its fullest significance when it is reciprocated. Indeed, what stands out in African prison writing is its unalloyed yet unsentimental humanism, born from a profound conviction that despite their pretensions to omnipotence, the rulers and their prison minions are already defeated: "You speak to those who can still hear the cry of man," declares Abdellatif Laâbi at the close of his memoir (178). And the very existence of the single scribbled poem sets the seal on that defeat and echoes that cry. As does Jack Mapanje's unexpected discovery, while swabbing out a filthy abandoned cell, of the *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin* scrawled on the walls by his predecessors in detention:

> I have marvelled at the rock paintings
> of Mphunzi Hills once but these grooves
> and notches on the walls of Mikuyu Prison,
> how furious, what barbarous squiggles!
> How long did this anger languish without
> charge without trial without visit here and
> what justice committed? [...]

The graffiti are a historical palimpsest. For all their elemental crudity and rage, the poet situates them in an indigenous tradition of creativity which uses the available resources as a ground for *poeisis*. The "barbarous squiggles" are part

of a history that encompasses not only poet and anonymous, vanished detainee as kindred Malawians, but as inhabitants of a world that for all its pretensions to eternity is nonetheless vulnerable to an individual act of willed intent as well as to the ravages of time. The poet wonders if perhaps he should not add his own thoughts to the wall, or even delete what he has found (in the interests of good literary taste and of the necessity to do the job he has been commanded to do). Finally, he refuses, for after all he has the power to weave these graffiti into the poetic text of historical memory:

> [...] No, I will throw my water and mop
> elsewhere. We have liquidated too many
> brave names out of the nation's memory;
> I will not rub out another nor inscribe
> my own, more ignoble, to consummate this
> moment of truth I have always feared! (Mapanje 53-54)

The victim of censorship and repression cannot himself perpetrate a similar act of exclusion and effacement, above all because it is his own rage, his own predicament that are given inchoate yet powerful form and incoherent yet eloquent voice on the wall before him. For even contemplating such (literal and metaphorical) "liquidation," he realizes that he is momentarily complicit with a larger project of historical erasure. His task as the poet is not to reshape history in conformity with the demands of "creative" self-gratification, but to extract the profoundest implications from even the most fugitive tracings of past and present resistance. The human path that the African prison poet's ritual of communion has triumphantly and agonizingly carved out of the carceral stone is embarked upon through endurance, connection, extension, and transformation.

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