



Like mould
Grief settled on our eyes
May it not unteach us
To dream, to resist, to fight

Eugenia Ginzberg
18 years in Siberian labour
camps

INSIDE: Jeremy Cronin (Ravan, Johannesburg, 1983)

A review by Keith Gottschalk

Political poetry faces a number of challenges. Many poets, alienated from commuter routine, office monotony and injustice, prefer to retreat into versifying about the countryside or recreation, individual relationships or spiritual tranquility.

Similarly, many readers dislike reading poems squarely focussed on town, work, collective organisation or political struggles. Further, any genre of poetry placing high value upon the content of its message must strive for precision, concreteness and communicability, without loss of complexity.

How does Jeremy Cronin's *Inside* rise to these challenges?

Inevitably, the facts of Cronin's life profoundly influence the expression of his experiences, his poetic voice and persona. To know his personal background helps us to understand his poems. Cronin was born into a naval officer's family. He had a Catholic childhood, became a Marxist scholar in adulthood, lecturing in philosophy at UCT. He was orphaned at five, jailed at twenty six, and a widower at twenty seven. All these strands of his social being weave into the tapestry of his poetry.

Inside is Cronin's first collection, winning the 1984 Ingrid Jonker Prize. The poetry is arranged in sections: prison poems; childhood, historical myths; family; love poems; and an omnibus finale of vignettes, parables and contemplations.

TECHNIQUE

Inside's poems glow with all the skills of poetry -- vividness, compression, ambiguity. The lyrically sensuous double entendres include the "river that carries many tongues in its mouth" (p. 57); a sea anemone that "folds a secret in its mouth" (p. 37); and the holiday bungalow with "nights of candles" (p. 80).

While not as consistently elemental as Neruda, *Inside* does deploy the symbolism of light and water, of wind and stone. In a culture dominated by Christian symbolism, light and water carry, of course, connotations of transfiguration and healing respectively.

The collection's poems celebrate sunshine for shining off a cell floor, and "dripping light" off an object dipped in water (p. 3). Above all, light symbolises the poet's late wife, Annemarie, who is admitted to her husband as light admitted through glass (p. 75); each of her eyelids is "a teaspoon of light" (p. 79).

Water is the womb from which life evolves (p. 47); it shelters organisms

both friendly and fascinating (pp. 35-37). Surveillance, human and electronic, makes prisoners feel like flesh in an aquarium (p. 19), they try to combat claustrophobia by imagining swimming out into water (p. 82). And above all, rivers flow through time, triumphing over it, to achieve their goal (p. 57).

One compression succeeds in telescoping into twenty five words the social order and its ideology - militarism, theism and colonialism: the child "who know at five, because learnt by heart, the naval salute, the sign of the cross, the servant's proper place, and our father who art" (p. 39).

The issues that an adolescent must come to terms with, personal and political, are hinted at in the wryly humorous description of his late father's naval uniforms suspended from coat hangers:

"... solemn ... solemn
Ancestral ranks with their wire
Question marks for heads (p. 102)

More chilling than the two laconic, restrained descriptions of torture (pp. 12, 27) is the psycho-manipulation of the interrogators, attempting to play off a non-political wife against her detained husband "chaperoned by smiling, matrimonial policemen" (p. 13); and the climactic singing of three condemned insurgents awaiting hanging:

Three tongues floating over
That audible
Drop which gathers ... (p. 29).

Jeremy Cronin is as specifically a Cape Peninsula poet as Stephen Watson. Cast into Babylonian captivity, the poet mourns that

Removed from the city now I live
an exile ... (p. 90).

Faraway city, there
with salt in its stones ...
In that most beautiful
desolate city of my heart (p. 71).

The wind is both quintessential Cape Town -- and the tragic chorus accompanying the colonial subjugation of Hoerikwaggo into Cape Town:

" ... " ... the wind,
So I fancy, mourns, thin
Thin with worries:
Goringhaicona
Goringhaiqua Gorachouqua ...
The names of decimated
Khoikhoïn tribes - their cattle stolen,
lands seized
As their Warriors died
Charging zig-zag into musket fire (p. 50).

The literary radicalism characterising *Inside's* poems complements their political radicalism. Cronin has publicly argued the need for writers to contribute to creating a democratic, national culture¹. Such committed poets must try

To learn how to speak
With the voices of this land ...
To write a poem with words like:
I'm telling you,
Stompie, stickfast, golovan ...

To understand the least inflections
To voice without swallowing
Syllables born in tin shacks, or

To understand the least inflections
To voice without swallowing
Syllables born in tin shacks, or catch
the 5.15 ikwata bust fife
Chwannisberg train ..." (p. 58).

African words, and entire proverbs, are integrated into the poems (pp. 18,30, 85). Above all, these are poems, par excellence "Death Row" and "Our Land Holds", to be read out *aloud*, as much as in private. Cronin seeks to restore the indigenous dimension of dramatic presentation, of oratorical delivery, to its rightful place in modern poetry that has atrophied to the printed page -- and to commercial unviability.

Entire events are not directly described, but narrated through the sounds they make, such as in "Death Row". This use of onomatopoeia is sometimes skilfully synthesised with alliteration, assonance and rapid-fire word association to evoke in English a close parallel to the fictive ideophone² so beloved by our indigenous languages: "To boil / Respond / Ripple / Lurch / Glow / Growl / weaves / Moves / Stalks like a beanstew / bus queue / fighter ... (pp. 29-30). This extract, re-arranged to bring out the technique discussed, should be read out aloud as fast as possible.

Reviewers in the English-medium daily press either ignored the collection, or dismissively commented that "these verses are less poetry and more ... plain-spoken utterances". On the contrary, Cronin's craftsmanship stretches beyond the symbolist and phonetic skills examined above to surrealism and mythopoesis.

All the surrealist poems in *Inside* are linked by the prisoners' variant of the Einsteinian space-time equation: claustrophobically little space; depressingly long time. Mirrors (whose illusion doubles space), rivers (which flow through time), and pools (which stagnate) are Cronin's metaphoric instruments to transmute the physics of potential madness into the metaphysics of illusion for survival.

Examine the poem marking the half-way point of Cronin's penal sentence, which mourns

 those other times
parcelled
in separate
brown paper packets.
A time that walks in circles.
A time that flattens itself
incredibly then
 disappears
into the backs of mirrors
or drips from the taps (p. 23).

The metaphors of the prisoner killing time by walking in a circle; the slow, monotonous corrosiveness of dripping taps, are stark. But how do we decode a Dadaesque time wrapped in brown paper packets? Brown paper packets contain "letters / seven years of letters / under my arm" (p. 24). And the political prisoners' ration was "Never more than 500 words / One letter per month quota" (p. 69). With one month equalling one page, seven years are wrapped up in one brown paper parcel

Similarly the poet-prisoner, claustrophobically confined to a three-paces-by-three cell, asserts the right to "this necessary space" (p. 36) entered through "the tunnels of my eyeballs" (p. 85), "A small room / Behind my eye-

brows" (p. 81), where lives the "I, the swimmer behind eyelids" (p. 86). Even there, you're always close to talking to yourself.

one driven step on ahead
of the conversationist
who lurks in your head (p. 25).

This human right to space leads to Alice in the Looking Glass revisited:

Hold my hand and step
into the mirror ... wade in
bellyheight ... shoulderheight...below
the meniscus of time (p. 82).

It is noteworthy that Breytenbach's prison writings, so different from Cronin's, repeatedly mention the joys of mirror, and one prison book of his has the French word for 'mirror' as its title. With a mirror, there is both the forced confrontation with oneself in stark reality, and the possibility of illusion.

Cronin's effortless ranging between the public and the private is most awesomely displayed in his mythopoesis of the tongue. With Erato, Cronin celebrates the tongue as communicator of sensual pleasures, both literally and as symbolising the sex organ. With Kalliope, the poet celebrates the tongue as communicator of thought and fact *via* language, something also touched on by Breytenbach's prison writings.

The mythopoeic "Ark of Language" function of the tongue, to link persons to persons, to convey ideology, is repeatedly touched on: "let flesh be made words (p. 45); a letter is "I, flesh made paper ... My tongue turned into paper" (p. 69). This theme fills the poem "Cave-Site", much of "Litany", "Plato's Cave", the opening of "The River that Flows Through Our Land" (p. 57), and "To learn How to Speak", with its evocation of the title of Mtshali's first collection: "At the back of my throat / Its cow skinned vowel" (p. 58).

One layer of richness in *Inside's* poems is the evocation of secular realities through religious imagery:

Like Jonah I recall the darkness.
At ritual and appointed hours,
in cod liver oil my tongue
would be anointed (p. 37).

The process of a rosary's mnemonic beads triggering off prayers is playfully inverted to love words leading to touching

... bump, bump,
the tingling, the warm
rosary down your spine (p. 70).

A beautiful reworking of Psalm 129 (130 in Jewish Bibles), which is part of the Catholic burial service², enriches the elegy to the poet's father. Cronin elides the facts and consequences of burial: "where lowered was a widow into widowhood" (p. 40), the passive voice capturing and reinforcing the feelings of helplessness at the graveside.

In the poet's pen, the classic lament of the bereaved over the dead (out of the depths I cry unto Thee) deftly becomes the lament of the dead calling out from the grave to the bereaved:

From the depths crying out, this dissolution in the wind
Water, fish, oil, factory, and
The burial acre just beyond (p. 40).

This metaphor of evocation raises the issue: why is a materialist invoking religious imagery? Cronin's integrity proscribes him from hypocritically concealing his atheism under a pretence of religiosity. Indeed, close reading of the imagery invoked reveals no trace of any ecstatic experience or mysticism. Religion is depicted the way it is imposed upon atheists -- "the darkness": rituals prescribed by others, at times they prescribe, with participation enforced by parents and teachers. And a ritual empty and unsatisfying. In solitary confinement

... without appetite
you commune
with the stale bread of yourself

Olive Schreiner's prayers for a baby who will live go unanswered (p. 53). It must be remembered that Cronin is writing in a culture dominated by Christian symbolism, and that religious metaphors, specifically Christian metaphors, will for many readers, facilitate empathy. Besides, though a Marxist in his mature years, the stages of Cronin's intellectual evolution include a Catholic childhood and contact with philosophy. Thus he on occasion naturally expresses unequivocally materialist ideology through Catholic or Platonic metaphor.

His years of university lecturing in philosophy reveal themselves to the reader in the parable of Plato's Cave (p. 48); the medieval scholastics' debate on quiddity (of glass, p. 75, and the "sense of the stoneness of these stones", p. 58); and Gilbert Ryle's distinction (p. 89).

Two poets possibly exercising an influence on Jeremy Cronin's artistic development are Seamus Heaney (writer of poems on Northern Ireland), in Cronin's appreciation of the sound qualities of words, and the Peruvian communist poet César Vallejo⁵. Vallejo's "from multiplicand to multiplier" suggests Cronin's "I, multiplicand, you the power of ten" (p. 90). And again, Vallejo's "rumbbb...trrrrarr rah...chaz" could have felicitously encouraged Cronin's uninhibited jurassic onomatopoeia:

tchareep grrrtch-grrtch
tchareeep tchareeep tchareeep...
kree-kree-kree-kree
sssszzzz (p. 47),
* * * *

So far I have been concerned only with Cronin's skills. But what values do these poems espouse? The poetry exemplifies what Peter Weiss calls the "aesthetics of resistance", an insistence on rigor and honesty in perception. Honesty in not retreating into legend and mysticism. Honesty in demythologizing and exposing the reality of oppression and exploitation. Rigor in describing tyrants and their tyranny, without escape into parable and naturalistic metaphor.

In *Inside's* poems the special branch is the special branch, not darkness. Labour recruiters, Cecil Rhodes and prison warders are named, dated and placed. The condemned, not K or Winston Smith but Johannes Shabangu, David Moise and Bobby Tsotsobe.

The unequivocally materialist poetics of *Inside* diametrically challenge the dominant aesthetic of postwar British poetry with its cult of gentility, mysticism or psychological angst. Mostly, *Inside* does not retreat into individual, otherworldly salvation, but advances into collective resistance in this world:

Those warriors who've left behind
Their fallen spears that out land
Like a peach its pip
Holds now:

This unfinished task (p. 50).

The finale evokes to readers of English poetry John McCrae's

To you from failing hands we throw
The torch: be yours to hold it high.

Umkhonto, the name of the underground army, means, of course, "spear".

Why does Cronin choose the Johannes Stephanus Februarie sketch (pp. 16-17), "Walking on Air" (pp. 5-14), and "Death Row" (pp. 26-31) for all his public recitals? Because, surely, the first of these poems testifies to the resilient integrity of the individual behind the mask of servility; the second, refusal to betray one's comrades, whatever the personal sacrifice; the third, solidarity and defiance in the face of death. The poems celebrate these qualities of the character as exemplary. These aesthetic values become striking when one analyses the diametric contrast between how Jeremy Cronin and Breyten Breytenbach describe the same event, such as pre-execution singing of the condemneds, or the same emotions, such as love for one's wife. Consider Breytenbach's

in the middle of the night
the voices of those
to be hanged within days
rise up already sounding thin
with the tautness of stiff ropes.

and Cronin's

... the condemned
how they sing
their breaths in their mouths
like residents
about to quit a burning city, how they sing
their breaths like shackles,
how they sing
they who will jolt from obscurity to the light...

The elegies are classical laments for the doomed going meekly to their deaths, reminiscent Nelly Sach's holocaust poetry. Diametrically opposed in style and impact is Cronin's "Death Row", turning the condemneds' singing into an act of defiance, a collective affirmation of commitment to the struggle.

Breytenbach's love poems for Yolande similarly follow the classic genre: praising the beloved's beauty, with active lover and passive beyond:

I can smell you
more delicious, lighter than thoughts of a flower.

Even such a sensuous poet as Antjie Krog stays within this genre:

jou mond teen my keel...
jou buierige orgaan onbekend en Eluard-oker
is intiem en n meester in spasiëring.

Of course, Breytenbach's prohibited marriage does put these classical sentiments into a reformist context, à la Cronin's

when to say plainly:
'I love you'
is also

a small act
of solidarity with all the others (p. 68).

Jeremy Cronin's love poems for Annemarie are feminist in their values, questioning roles within marriage. Verbs, rather than adjectives, set the pace; comradeship, not domination, sets the tone. Nuptial frolics are mutual liveliness:

... a-hooked and kicking we
ssshh - wildeye, like
two katonkel, made love (p. 72).

Even in visual imagery, Cronin's emphasis is not a still life beauty, but body language - her stride (p. 74); signalling emotions with eyelids (p. 79); help with clandestine leaflets (p. 67); and above all, "an unbreakable strength" (p. 79).

A personal literary mannerism of Cronin is what we might call the terminating rejoinder, used to convey that tyranny is not acceptable, that the underdog continues to kick back¹

But laws only
postpone matters - somewhat (p. 11)

and the most poignant lines in the collection:

Every time they cage a bird
the sky shrinks. A little (p. 25).

This reviewer feels humbled by the moving absence of bitterness or anger from a poet confined in one or other penal institution for almost seven years. The only reproach to the jailers is in "A Tale of Why Tortoise ..." (p. 98), and that is crafted with Aesopian obliqueness, with the emphasis falling not on reprimand, but healing the emotional scars. This reflects the materialist values of Cronin's aesthetic. Conspicuous expressions of hatred are seen as emotional self-indulgence; ostentatious displays of 'love thy oppressor' are viewed as more concerned with saving one's own soul than getting on with the duty we owe to our fellow humans: forging effective resistance to the system of oppression.

The predominant style of *Inside's* poems, their lack of archaisms, the values espoused - egalitarian and militant, rationalist and collective - place this collection squarely in the materialist school of writing; indeed, the leading example of materialist poetry in South Africa or Africa.

Since Jeremy Cronin's first published works in *Contrast*, *Izwi* and *Ophir* a decade ago, his poetry has shown stunning development in power, style and scope, and richly deserves the laurel of the Ingrid Jonker prize. Let us hope his poetic voice continues the ascent to strength.

It is saddening that our English literary establishment has not honoured *Inside* as the Afrikaans Writers' Guild has; nor has the English-medium press appreciated the collection as Afrikaans literary reviewers have⁶. Are English-language litterateurs too trapped within their great humane tradition to accept literary innovation? Let us hope that they can transcend their conditioning to see alternative genres as not alien, but as enriching and complementing their own.

As in the Third Reich's concentration camps, so Pretoria's *gevangenis* and military archipelago continue to scourge human beings, ranging from communists to Jehovah's Witnesses. Already, Jehovah's Paul Mathew (three years in detention barracks for conscientious objection) has written many gentle verses,

so far unpublished. From Jeremy Cronin, from Paul Mathew, and from many to follow, our poetry will "learn how to speak / With the voices of this land"

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. At the Raven Press launch of *Inside*, reported in "Compassionate Convict", *Frontline Books*, 4, 1984, pp. 19-21; also at UCT poetry recital, 22 March 1984
2. By a fictive ideophone I mean the African linguistic convention that some properties of substances, qualities of character, and other abstract concepts can make a specific 'noise', written as fictitious onomatopoeia
3. Jessie Prisman, 11 January 1984: "On the Bookshelf", *Cape Times*
4. I am grateful to Augustine Shutte, for elucidation of these points, and explaining the philosophic references below
5. I owe these suggestions to Stephen Watson. I am also indebted to him, and to Peter Horn, for general advice and criticisms. Responsibility for the opinions in this essay is, of course, mine alone
6. Compare the silence of the *Argus*, or *Sunday Times* with its equivalent, *Rapport Ateljee*, 15 April 1984: "Jeremy leer eie gedigte 7 jaar lank agter tralies". Similarly, compare the faint praise and evasive tone of the *Cape Times* review cited in reference (2) above with the enthusiasm of *Die Burger* review, "Hy is Jeremy", 2 April 1984

Notes on Contributors

NICK VISSER is senior lecturer in the Dept of English, Rhodes University and editor of *English in Africa*.

MICHAEL GREEN teaches in the Dept of English at Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit in Johannesburg

IAN GLENN teaches in the Dept of English at the University of Cape Town

MIKE VAUGHAN lectures in the Dept of English, University of Natal at Durban. He is an associate editor of *English in Africa*

ROB NIXON is a South African studying for a Ph.D in the Dept of English, University of Columbia in New York

