Essential Gestures: Gordimer, Cronin and Identity Paradigms in White South African Writing

Peter Anderson

White writing like Nadine Gordimer's short story "Spoils" (1987), acutely conscious of itself and its mission, is writing as tua culpa, self-righteous writing, writing whose hypersensitive moral reflex seems almost indistinguishable from a stalemate of self-rejection and disgust. It is writing which strives to be a self-justifying literary act, too, because exact—holding itself up as a mirror of the bad faith, bad conscience and malaise of one of the most privileged social classes in the world (to which Gordimer herself belongs), the white high bourgeoisie under apartheid.

Admirably succinct, the title "Spoils" points not only to the spoils of imperial or colonial conquest (ultimately the source of the luxury of the white upper classes in South Africa) but also beyond or beneath such spoils to that which spoils, becomes rotten, the mountains of corpses, the slaughter on which the dominance of wealth and power is necessarily founded, and thus back again to exactly what spoils (or should spoil) the comfort and ease of those at the top of the pile—the clinging odour of death and corruption.

Internalised. Reflected back to the reader in the opening paragraph as though it were his or her own:

In the warmth of your bed your own fart brings to your nostrils the smell of rotting flesh: the lamb you devoured last night. Seasoned with rosemary and with an undertaker's paper-frill on the severed rib-bones. Another corpse digested. ("Spoils" 196)

Thus the rich life, defined by an incisive intellect, turns back on itself in a moment of morbid self-knowledge.

The use of the second person dislocates the paragraph from the body of the story almost as much as quotation does here. Who is speaking? The voice is
ambiguous. Fully authoritative although not yet identifiable, it comes to the reader as the voice of conscience before any other. The object at this stage then is not to delineate a fictional character so much as to enfold “you” in an identity which “you” can only find repellent. The writing stands as a polished act which reflects the reader through the narrator, not excluding the writer, of course: for it is the bourgeois subject who is trapped. “Your” appetites betray “your” rapacity. Archetypal innocence is dead, “devoured,” but—or more accurately, because—“you” treat it as a tasty dish. The greed of consumption is followed by the stupor of digestion. What’s in a fart?

No empathy with the victim, for sure. Even the writing itself stops short of that, getting no farther than the fact of the “severed rib bones.” The lamb is thus literally reduced to the bone that conscience has to pick with “you.” In this world there are only two possible beings, the beast and the lamb. And “you” know which “you” are. “Your” crime must reek not to high heaven but to “your own” nostrils in the hope, perhaps, that “you” will do something about it. (But what?) In the meantime, “you” are as bad as the butcher himself, equally violent and death-loving even though “you” seem to need your sensitivities protected by “an undertaker’s paper frill.”

One of the problems with a conscience as relentlessly persecutory as this is that it allows no possibility of respite. Only by total disidentification with a world so corrupt, based as it is on a surreptitious collusion with brutality, could there be any hope of exculpation. But to disidentify totally is exactly what the protagonist (“you,” the reader/writer/narrator, the bourgeois subject rotated in the story through second, first and third person pronouns without the specifying tag of a name) cannot accomplish. It is beyond “your”/“my”/“his” power. (Let us from now on simply call that subject “he,” in common with most of the story.) His carping, his conscience, form a precise measure of his impotence in the face of his own fundamental collusion. His moral stance constitutes the limits of his disidentification. He has a conscience; others have not. He can say of himself and of others, “You stink.” But he himself remains in the end as morally supine as his neighbours because he, too, can’t give up his cushy lifestyle, can’t let go of his own share of the spoils, even if they revolt him. In which case, a high-principled symbolic act like the renunciation of meat, other-worldly and non-violent as it may seem, would be fatuous and irrelevant, merely another pretence. Escape is not so easy.

To pick up the narrative at this point, right after the “mirror of conscience” paragraph:
“Become a vegetarian, then.” She’s heard it all too many times before; sick of it, sick of my being sick of it. Sick of the things I say, that surface now and then.
“I want no part of it.”
We are listening to the news.
“What? What are you going on about? What?”
What indeed? No: which. Which is it I choose to be no part of? The boy who threw a stone at the police, had both his arms broken by them, was sodomized by prisoners into whose cell he was thrown; the kidnapped diplomat and the group (men, as I am a man, women, as she is a woman) who sent his fourth finger by airmail to his family; the girl doused with petrol and burned alive as a traitor; those starved by drought or those drowned by flood, far away; the nineteen-year-old son of Mr and Mrs killed by the tremendous elemental thrill of 220 volts while using an electric spray gun on his motorbike. The planned, the devised, executed by people like myself, or the haphazard, the indifferent, executed senselessly by elemental forces. Senselessly. Why is there more sense in the conscious acts that make us corpses? Consciousness is self-deception. Intelligence is a liar.
“You’re not having great thoughts. That’s life.”
Her beauty-salon philosophy. Stale, animal, passive. Whether I choose or not; can’t choose; can’t want no part.
The daily necrophilia.
“Become a vegetarian, then!” ("Spoils" 196)

The passage describes a jaded, vicious circle. It is the triumph of the platitude, “That’s life,” the pat complacent put-down of the man by his wife. Her “beauty salon philosophy,” gleaned from other women of her class and from the glossy magazines that offer the truly narcissistic fantasy fare for all levels of the bourgeoisie from the aspirant to the established, reflects the type of common sense that Gramsci saw as the philosophy of the ruling class. What if violence, horror and death rule? “That’s life.” Her ideology is set, then. What about his?

He is aware from the start that his protests have lost their force, become repetitive, even counterproductive. These days, they only “surface now and then,” almost despite himself, as involuntarily as a fart. His exclamation: “I want no part of it” is a revolt into negativity, not a new direction. It amounts to an attempt to cancel himself out of it. Out of what? (Let us hold his clever switch from “what” to “which” in suspension for the meantime.) Quite simply, out of being the beast, the devourer. He wants “no part of” either the lamb or the news because he is aware of colluding in violence and the abuse of power by the act of consumption: consumption is corruption. But what is a
bourgeois if not a consumer? His role in the economy determines him more deeply than any particular personality he may be or have. For that reason, he "can't choose; can't want no part." He is condemned to devour. "The daily necrophilia."

But if, as we have seen, the writer herself forms one possible identity of the "bourgeois subject" being rotated, then the narrative mirrors her own predicament, too. She is writing about (her own) writing. It is clear that the accusatory moral mode has failed in its high aim—to effect political change by persuading the dominant class of its wrong-doing—but there seems to be no rhetorical alternative. At the outset of "Spoils," then, Gordimer employs the accusatory moral mode again, although she is perfectly aware that her voice sounds so like a stuck record now that even those most intimate with her are "sick" of it.

In an interesting article on T.W. Adorno and contemporary white South African literature, Neil Lazarus, himself an expatriate white South African, argues that writers like Gordimer are "radical Cassandras" (Lazarus 131) crying to the deaf ears of the dominant whites of an impending apocalypse, the revolution, and as such unenviably marginalised both by their situation of being within but against the white community, and by their inability to be a representative voice of the black experience. "To the extent that their writings are representative, they are representative of enlightened white opposition to apartheid, no more and no less" (145). Lazarus goes on to quote from Gordimer's apologia of 1985, "The Essential Gesture:"

The white writer's task as 'cultural worker' is to raise the consciousness of white people, who, unlike himself, have not woken up. It is a responsibility at once minor, in comparison with that placed upon the black writer as composer of battle hymns, and yet forbidding, if one compares the honour and welcome from blacks that await the black writer, and the branding as traitor, or at least, turned backside of indifference that await the white, from the white establishment. (145)

Gordimer's anal interests are curious—farts, backsides, money, high morality, control—but the counter-reading of her work in terms of a possible personal obsessiveness, tempting as it is, would require a psychoanalytic framework which would not overall be helpful here. Her prescription for the task of the white writer is disappointing if not misleading if considered in terms of her own case, because it is so disingenuous.

Gordimer talks of the "white establishment" as if it were comprised of a spectrum of the hidebound, from paranoid racists who would brand her as
“traitor” to the more passively aggressive, whose apparent indifference amounts to contempt. She chooses to exclude that ample slice of the “white establishment” which she herself represents, the anti-government white capitalist sector. Liberal in its thinking, more powerful in the economy than its low presence in parliament would suggest, this sector of white society tends to be supportive of such political change as would secure the present (let alone the future) of capital in the country. Gordimer is exhibiting an indifference of her own, therefore—to the numerous honours she has been accorded over the years, the literary awards, the teaching of her work in the liberal universities, and so on. As well as suggesting how little she thinks of the actual esteem in which she is held, the omission turns her argument into a facade. By projecting an image of herself as more spurned and isolated than she really is—an image which could be taken at face-value only by an audience with nothing to go on but her own word—she is upholding a myth of the alienated writer heroically at odds with the philistines and fascists, romanticising her tartness. But if in “The Essential Gesture” she is intent on making a good impression on a non-South African or international audience at the expense of the truth, then her own uncompromising moral stance becomes inadvertently ironic, a gesture indeed. It would appear that the moral rigour she directs at others is not just an understandable way of compensating for her own guilt, then, but also possibly a way of placating a wider (buying?) public. Excoriating the local yokels begins to look like a way of promoting herself to the international elect. The audience which concerns her most is the international and not, despite its necessity as a target, the one closest to home, the white South African.

The question of audience is crucial. *Pace* Gordimer (and never mind the white South African), no writer in the Western world is likely to encounter the kind of welcome and honour accorded to, say, an oral poet like Mzwakhe Mbuli (to name even only a comparatively weak composer of “battle hymns”), who has sometimes performed his loose-jointed declamatory poems to tumultuously affirmative political rally audiences of thousands. At the same time, it is clearly not necessary to be “representative” of an audience in order to address that audience. It is not inconceivable, for example, that a white writer might have something significant to say to a black audience in South Africa not only despite being, but even because s/he is, white.

Certain white writers, like the poet Jeremy Cronin, have in fact done so, despite the black/white polarisation of apartheid society which would seem *a priori* to rule it out. It was while he was serving a seven-year term of imprisonment for political activism (seen as “terrorism” by the South African authorities since he was working for the then banned African National
Congress) that Cronin wrote *Inside*, published by Ravan in South Africa after his release in 1983. In April 1984, interviewed by the researcher Susan Gardner, Cronin quietly discredited the notion of mutual exclusivity in black and white writing (or apartheid in literature) by pointing out his own indebtedness to black South African poetry, naming some black poets in particular:

Serote, Madingoane, Mafika Gwala. I think I learnt a lot from reading their poetry, and now since I've been out, listening to some of it. But I am a white South African and write and speak English like a white South African. Since I got out, I have been involved in a series of poetry readings, at political meetings, commemoration meetings to largely black audiences, mainly working class people. ... I've learnt a lot from doing that. One learns that the parallelism and repetition built into much black poetry is functional in such a situation, where you need to repeat things in a large hall of people, kids running around, mothers with babies on their backs and so forth. ... Yes, I've had very nice experiences in reading, it's been fulfilling and a great relief after composing inside prison with a very hazy notion of eventual audience. It was a bit of an act of faith to write for black South Africans and it's been very reassuring to find that at least some of the poetry does get across. (Gardner 16)

Cronin has demonstrably reversed the attitude of the dominant white by coming to the readings as a learner, not an imposer of culture. The question of the relationship of his own poetry to the work of black poets will have to be reserved for another paper, as the more pressing question right now is: What does Cronin's poetry say in performance to black audiences? In the absence of empirical research, it is necessary to depend on the message encoded in his presence on the political platform: "I, a white, have been imprisoned like so many of you, and for the same reasons. I, a white, stand with you in your struggle for freedom." If so, then is Jeremy Cronin a token white?

A token is one whose presence is a concession to good appearances, not one who speaks his own words. Also, if Cronin were not contributing effectively in his own right as a member of the African National Congress/ South African Communist Party alliance, then tokenism might be a charge worth considering. But it was as an activist and not as a poet—for his poetry was and still is openly available in the country—that Cronin was forced into exile when the massive wave of detentions under the various States of Emergency arose after June 1986, and leaders of the extra-parliamentary opposition were arrested and incarcerated throughout the country.
It is of course one-dimensional to reduce Cronin's readings to the political message implied simply by his presence. Plenty more is involved. The political meeting offers a lively and not uncritical space, and the fact that "at least some" of Cronin's poetry was well received is a test of the oral dimension of his work in terms of popular reception under pretty robust conditions. But if the political rally provides a powerful context for dramatic presentation, it is by that token the wrong place for painstaking analytic probing. That the poetry is saying far more than might be available on first impact, whether heard or read, provides sufficient justification for a close reading under the tauter and more searching conditions of the critical essay.

To state my argument explicitly: in terms of literary practice, whether in performance or on the page, Cronin's poetry goes so far beyond what Gordimer and Lazarus would impose as the limit, that the question of the actual potential of so-called white writing is worth reopening, while the premises upon which both Gordimer and Lazarus construct their thinking need to be exposed to critical reflection.

Lazarus's approach is so definitive as to tend towards closure:

In one sense, at least, contemporary white South African literature is just what we might expect it to be. It is an obsessional literature, haunted and introspective, urgent and compulsive. It tracks relentlessly and more or less pitilessly over the ever more restricted terrain to which, by virtue of its situation, it is condemned. It is a literature of parsimony and narrow depiction, in which the motions of generosity and expansiveness have had to be stilled, as unaffordable luxuries. (Lazarus 131)

Although Lazarus's easy use of "we" might annoy the South African reader because of its urbane assumption of the detached perspective of the international audience, which might justifiably be seen as aloof and out of touch, his depiction of the "situation" of the anti-apartheid white writer like Gordimer is accurate and valuable. From the second sentence onwards, he could almost be suspected of writing with "Spoils" in mind, so useful are the insights he offers as co-ordinates to a reading of the work.

Of course, "obsessional" white writing like "Spoils" certainly is, but, at least in the case of Gordimer, as I have already hinted, it may not in the long run be possible to avoid a strong Freudian construction of the obsessional quality itself. Also, to employ a hermetic racial category on its own terms, no matter how deliberately, and concentrate on those qualities which make the writing specifically "white," is to submit to a logical straitjacket. The binary opposition of "white" and "black" in racism is absolute, and "white writing"
will tend to be treated in separation from "black writing," reinforcing apartheid in literature—a contradiction which a critical practice which sees itself as oppositional will sooner or later have to face.

Closure is a mistake. It is a mistake to come to any foregone conclusions about "what we might expect" of a developing literature. The "situation" of any writer can only be determined with reference to that specific writer in terms of the ideology s/he actually does represent. Cronin, again, although white and middle class in origin, has made the vital crossing which both Lazarus and Gordimer regard as impossible, from the strictly anti-apartheid politics of the "enlightened white opposition" to the broader pro-liberation politics of the black majority. In this way, I think, he has escaped the predicament of the stuck record or radical Cassandra. To merge with the mainstream is not to be marginalised, but to be added as one strand to the tough and enduring fabric of majority resistance. It is to contribute to a common and emerging culture, rather than to play the role of a splinter of conscience under the skin of the oppressor in a society regarded as irrevocably bifurcated from the start.

It is no secret that apartheid has permitted only a tame opposition to function above ground. The difference in spirit between Cronin's work and the type of white writing whose central anxiety is a "specter of the apocalypse" (Lazarus 132) may best be summarised in Susan Gardner's words: "Apocalypse is not revolution," and Cronin's response: "Precisely." (Gardner 18). Cronin represents an alternative tradition to the one examined by Lazarus and exemplified by Gordimer, a radical tradition which has taken the full brunt of apartheid's repressive might but never been completely broken. A number of the poems in *Inside* both recover and celebrate that tradition. "Walking on Air," "Group Photo from Pretoria Local on the Occasion of a Fourth Anniversary (Never Taken)," "For Comrades in Solitary Confinement," "Death Row," etc. Total exclusion from the apparatus of state power has only made stronger the bond of that tradition with the vast masses of the people, thwarted of their rights in the same way. It is the humanistic socialism of that tradition that Cronin represents.

SECOND THOUGHTS

My brother comes on a visit.
The shirt he's wearing looks
Very familiar indeed. The little
Upstart bastard... will I really
Ever get back to my clothes?
Or at least, is he who returns
Likely to be remotely the same?
A bit cranky perhaps stronger
Broken down more determined—
All of these things are
At least possibilities, you can’t
Mothball yourself. Even in here.
And...?
Okay. Life goes on.
My clothes should be worn. (Cronin 108)

The first line is casual, flat, as though nothing much can be expected from a routine visit. The heavy stress involved in the colloquialism, “Very familiar indeed,” shows how knowing a reaction has been provoked, however. And the outburst: “The little/Upstart bastard...” goes beyond pique or an indignant marvelling at impudence. It concentrates a sense of outrage at being supplanted that dates back to early childhood and the primal politics of the family. As elder brother, the poet feels tricked, taunted by what looks like the deliberate wearing of his shirt. During his years in prison, his brother has grown enough to begin raiding his wardrobe and, so to speak, stepping into his shoes. “Bastard,” at one level a common expletive for meanness, is at another more complex level quite literally if irrationally and therefore absurdly, an accusation of illegitimacy. As in monarchies, so in families: blood-lineage constitutes the right to belong. From the perspective of the ousted elder brother, the newcomer must be discredited: “The little/Upstart bastard...” The fantasy of the brother’s illegitimacy is therefore also a magical guarantee of the elder child’s unassailable supremacy, as if he and he alone were by virtue of birth, king.

Although the intensity of his reaction betrays it as regressive, the irony of tone makes the lines slightly comical. The three dots which divide “bastard” and “will I really” signify among other things a shift in attention, a backward-looking longing for his identity in the pre-prison (or, if we carry over the early-childhood interpretation, ultimately pre-sibling) era. There is self-pity in the lingering complaint, “Will I really/Ever get back to my clothes?” In effect, of course, the shift amounts to a centring of all attention in himself, eclipsing the “bastard.” Irony remains in play, however, holding in check any tendency to capitulate to a woeful sentimentality. The poet is aware all along of the resentment he is trying to disguise and perhaps escape by means of a bout of self-centred rationalising, as his discomfort until the final two lines suggests.
"Or at least" is another switch, an implicit concession that the first formulation of the question was somehow unsatisfactory, as well as a signal that he is about to tackle it again. When he does, he attempts to shape it more objectively in the third person. What he is actually feeling, however, is distance, estrangement, a sense of longing for what has been irretrievably lost. "He who returns" therefore has a romantic ring. But is he really the haunted hero, with no hope of being "remotely the same?" In an earlier poem, he has already been kidded out of romantic rhetoric in his poetry by his wife who, when he protested, "I'm trying to say it like I feel," replied: "Then you'd better think twice" (Cronin 82). And the title of the present poem is after all, "Second Thoughts."

"A bit cranky" on the other hand looks at least comparatively grounded, a bit of a caricature. Cronin seems to be poking fun at himself for getting old and crotchety. It is just as well that this is not being offered seriously, though. The crankiness of age would be a poor excuse for an outburst which relates not to the difficulties of growing old but of growing up. Then, in the phrase "perhaps stronger," comes the beginning of the truth. "Perhaps" admits vulnerability, tempering into something more tentative and therefore more human and realistic the claim that long term imprisonment makes one stronger. "Broken down more determined" is constructed like an ostensive definition of the strength in question, replicating in its run-together ruggedness both the battering the poet has taken in prison and its consequence, the resolve into which he has hardened.

He continues the argument with himself:

All of these things are
At least possibilities, you can’t
Mothball yourself. Even in here.
And . . . ?
Okay. Life goes on.
My clothes should be worn.

The relegation of both his sentimental and his more realistic speculations to no more than "possibilities" has the effect of suspending them as equal, lending "you can’t/Mothball yourself" the weight of a conclusion. "Mothball" hints at a stifling stasis. It brings to mind not only shut closets and clothes folded away for whole seasons if not years (and, in terms of the interlocking allusiveness of poem to poem in Inside as a whole, the clothes-closet as a place to hide), but by analogy the perpetual time-present of imprisonment as suggested throughout in the grammatical tense of the poem.
Cronin’s conscience, like Gordimer’s, is offering him his identity wrapped in a smell. Unlike Gordimer, however, Cronin is not stuck with the smell. Possibilities are at least potentials for development, and development cannot be arrested. “Even in here.” For his thinking, as already demonstrated, is capable of moving through progressively acceptable stages.

And . . . ?

This gentle but knowing nudge suggests that he is stopping short. Something has been forgotten. “And . . . the shirt?” The test of his struggle lies not in the attainment of a Q.E.D., no matter how telling its truth value, but in an unlocking of mere defensiveness and the attainment of a broader openness to life. Under the gaze of a candid maturity which has been evident all along as irony—the level which makes the poem mildly amusing and thus a convincing story against the poet himself—he drops the last aspect of avoidance attributable to his infantile aggression, and gives in.

Okay. Life goes on.
My clothes should be worn.

Cronin’s morality is therefore an achieved morality, not preconceived and imposed like Gordimer’s, but hardwon; affirmable only insofar as it can be seen both to encounter and adequately transform the initial and irrepressible backlash of primal feeling. Here, he achieves a self-overcoming all the more credible because it does not involve further repression, but a letting go to life as process which culminates in a generosity.

So much for “a literature of parsimony.”

The humanistic socialism implicit in the poetry is complex, too. The poem does not privilege rational argument so much as test it against what must be changed—in this case, the investment of personal identity in private property. Such an investment can be infantile, like the politics of royalty. To be a socialist is to subscribe to the more rational perspective of the adult, without the illusion that infallibility is thereby guaranteed. On the contrary, every thought is and should be, open to a calm and steady critical gaze. Socialism cannot simply be imposed but must be worked for inside each person, since it depends for its achievement as much on the painful and difficult process of becoming a mature human being as on the straightforward control of the apparatus of state power.

Both personally and as a poet, Cronin cannot be confined to either of the binary options of black and white offered by the apartheid system, therefore.
Even when in the Gardner interview he says of himself: "I am a white South African and write and speak English like a white South African," he is not simply invoking racist terminology by way of automatic invalidation of himself in a typical liberal guilt impulse as Gordimer might, but speaking specifically of the language, English, and using sociolinguistic distinctions to make a point: black South African English is different from white South African English. Linguistically, both are dialects of a common language and as such equal and valid.

The intellectual value of Cronin's ideological position can be gauged by the implications of this stand on linguistic difference. In racist discourse, it goes without saying, any difference at all between black and white, let alone the linguistic, is seized upon in terms of potential discord and antagonism as if difference in itself constituted proof of a need for apartheid. According to the liberal or "enlightened white opposition," on the other hand, difference is better ignored, as if it could be dissolved into some vague notion of Universal Man. Cronin's position is a dialectical advance on both. While he takes difference into account, and so does not fly in the face of the patently obvious by trying to deny it, he also seeks, as distinct from the gut-reflex of a blood-clouded mythology like race, to promote real understanding by explaining difference within the parameters of a rational discipline. Such an approach allows him for instance to rediscover at firsthand the functional necessity of parallelism and repetition in black oral poetry in performance, devices which even so highly attuned and sympathetic a poet as the American liberal, Robert Pinsky, tends to dismiss as poetically "primitive."¹

Language as such is a central concern of Cronin's own poetry, as is the more specific problem of "South African" as a set of languages. Cronin sees language in all its flexibility and complexity as springing from the body, from an impulse to the erotic, consisting in childlike (e.g. "tongue's joy stick" in an image of the apparatus of speech as an aeroplane which "you," the pilot, control [Cronin 52]) and therefore spontaneous and playful elements of movement and sound, even as or before these are combined in a purposive drive towards communication, into organised and organising structures like speech or print. His South African concern culminates in the personal, poetic and political project charted at the conclusion of the third section of Inside, "Venture to the Interior," in the poem beginning: "To learn how to speak/ With the voices of the land" (Cronin 64). ("Voices," note. Plural. Cronin's African Nationalism opposes at every point the monolithic single-mindedness of Afrikaner Nationalism, whose own anthem is entitled "Die Stem"—literally, "The Voice." "South Africa is a multilingual country," Cronin writes; "even the English we speak is many Englishes, layered with occupation,
defiance and conquest. To speak South African is to disturb history ...” (51).

It is language, too, that can outwit all the heavy-handed efforts of the State at total control. In the concrete corridor of an apartheid prison, the prisoners, not without a sense of humour, devise ways and means of talking. Talking—simply making contact and communicating—affirms in quite an everyday way their identity as people rather than victims of a dehumanising system, and can amount to a political act of solidarity, imparting the strength to resist. Let us take one of the poems from Inside, and examine it for its “essential gesture.”

_MOTHO KE MOTHO KA BATHO BABANG_  
(A PERSON IS A PERSON BECAUSE OF OTHER PEOPLE)

By holding my mirror out of the window I see  
Clear to the end of the passage.  
There’s a person down there.  
A prisoner, polishing a doorhandle.  
In the mirror, I see him see  
My face in the mirror,  
I see the fingertips of his free hand  
Bunch together, as if to make  
An object the size of a badge  
Which travels up to his forehead  
The place of an imaginary cap.  

(This means: _A warder._)  

Two fingers are extended in a vee  
And wiggle like two antennae.  

(He’s being watched.)  

A finger of his free hand makes a watch-hand’s arc  
On the wrist of his polishing arm without  
Disrupting the slow-slow rhythm of his work.  

(Later. Maybe, later we can speak.)  

Hey! _Wat maak jy daar?_  
—a voice from around the corner.  

No. _Just polishing baas._  
He turns his back to me, now watch  
His free hand, the talkative one,  
Slips quietly behind.  

—Strenght, brother, it says,  

In my mirror,  

A black fist. (Cronin 27)
It may be illuminating to begin by comparing this poem with "Spoils." Take the function of the mirror. In "Spoils," as we have seen, the writing itself is the mirror, set up in the first paragraph to trap the reader as narcissist into a repellent confrontation with her/his underlying bestiality. In this way, despite her dabbling in semiotics and the structure of the subject, Gordimer betrays a conception of the function of literature which is fundamentally nineteenth-century. It is almost as though she has adopted as a principle of her own literary practice Oscar Wilde's epigram: "The nineteenth-century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass" (Wilde 17). A variation on which could of course serve as a measure of defence: "The white South African dislike of Nadine Gordimer . . . ." Except that in South Africa, Caliban has come to be perceived not as a savage brute or a fantastical grotesque but rather as a key figure in a parable of colonial/imperialist revolt.

The first reading that I know of in South Africa to overturn the magical in favour of a political interpretation of The Tempest took place, significantly enough, in prison. In Bandiet, his memoir of prison life, Hugh Lewin, an anti-apartheid activist of the decade before Cronin, recounts an attempt by white political prisoners to stage a production of Shakespeare on Christmas day, 1968.

Taking scenes from The Tempest, we traced what amounted to the Caliban story. No women were allowed to be represented, so out went Miranda, and we were left with interesting potential: the slave Caliban’s revolt, using the drunken Stephano and Trinculo, against Prospero, the benevolent tyrant, watched over and guarded by his noisome security man, Ariel. (Lewin 200)

One can read "benevolent" here not only in tension with "tyrant," but also in terms of the obvious irony of the contrast with the audience of warders, stalwarts of the brutally oppressive South African government, petty tyrants who banned the performance before it could take place, anyway.

It is curious how the restrictions imposed on the actors led directly to what they discovered in the play: "the slave Caliban’s revolt." Repression has an ironic logic of its own, which is to make what it would prohibit unavoidable to the alert mind.

But if Caliban really can be viewed as the crookbacked hero, the grossly knotted but herculean victim, stunted but in a curious sense undefeated, since he is never forced into a dumb acquiescence, but remains locked in an unequal struggle with a culture technologically so advanced as to seem
magical to him, then what I have called Gordimer’s “predicament” might best be described as a white rage at not seeing Caliban’s face in the glass.

It could be argued that the mirror in “Motho ke Motho . . .” is equally to be found in the writing, of course. The mirror is the poem itself in Cronin’s hands. For by means of the poem (any of the poems) he projects an image of himself to the black audience, eliciting a powerful political response. Granted. For Cronin, the mirror/poem is always a channel of possible communication, not an opportunity for a spellbound static narcissism. In this consists his “essential gesture.” He holds out the mirror/poem, using it to cut across the human divide apartheid has enforced. The same divide is regarded by Gordimer and Lazarus as absolute and final, both the fait accompli and the destructive heritage of apartheid, to be denounced but not in any effective way crossed. To this extent, Gordimer and Lazarus accept the status quo, while Cronin discovers a contradiction that cracks the foundations of the system itself. For it is beyond the power of apartheid to divide those whom it unites in resistance.

What Cronin ultimately sees in the mirror is not his own face but “a black fist,” affirming his identity with black resistance. What Gordimer sees is the bourgeois self into which she/you/I sink, trapped. Gordimer’s “situation,” that of the colonial (or pre-independent post-colonial, as certain South Africans now put it [Lenta 133], although in reality the more elaborate label seems to me to make precious little difference) has perhaps never been more decisively defined in all its circularity than by Frantz Fanon in his brilliant anti-colonial treatise, The Wretched of the Earth: “You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich” (Fanon 40). The protagonist in “Spoils,” condemned to live with his implacable conscience, is in this sense far worse off than Cronin in his concrete cell.

“Particularly if one has a sense of solidarity with a struggling world outside those four walls,” Cronin points out in the Gardner interview, “particularly if one understands that one’s arrival in those four walls is connected to that struggle, then the situation becomes a lot more human and a lot more bearable” (Gardner 23-24). Thus Cronin in fact discovered not a way out of but, more importantly, a way into the South African situation. I like to think that a T-shirt slogan I used to see quite often in Johannesburg in 1986 indicated a shift in self-perception among young white people, amounting to a paradigmatic choice between Gordimer and Cronin. It boasted:
WE’RE NOT ON TOP
WE’RE INSIDE

Let us look at “Motho ke Motho . . .” piece by piece, line by line, sometimes word by word. The writing of the poem is exact and balanced, replicating the sense of looking into a mirror, particularly in the placement of “clear” at the beginning of the second line. “There’s a person down there,” indicates that what is discovered in the mirror is both a matter of distance (“down there”) and of immediate reassurance, a “person.” “Person” is a distinct and deliberate word choice, occurring twice before and almost like a refrain in the translation of the title. Although certainly significant in itself, “person” also suppresses other equally specific choices which would make sense in the context, like “man” or “black man.” Gender and race are dismissed, supplanted, then. It is far more important to be a “person.” At the same time, the more inclusive term is not merely a sign of ideological preference. To use a mirror in order to look down a corridor is a lonely act. To see the other at the end of the corridor as a “person” and not just a vague “someone” is to reveal a positive need for people which amounts under the circumstances to a disclosure of your own vulnerability.

In the next line, it would appear that the mirror conveys a simple fact: “A prisoner polishing a doorhandle.” Interest in the prisoner is almost enough for us to overlook his inane activity, but that would be a mistake. Why should a prisoner polish a doorhandle? To polish a doorhandle in prison is to rub into yourself what you lack, the ability to take hold of that handle (or any other in the place), open that door and walk out. In addition, you are polishing a doorhandle because you have been told to. And you have been told to because you are black. The doorhandle must shine because the prison must be kept in ship-shape condition at all times. You are right to recognise in your polishing an exercise in powerlessness. You are here to learn your place in the power structure, to obey your warder as you would your master. Prison is a paradigm of South Africa at large. (The basic metaphor of Inside is not original, of course. It has been used time and again, notably in the work of Alex la Guma, Lewis Nkosi, Dennis Brutus, Breyten Breytenbach, Ruth First, Albie Sachs and Indres Naidoo. No doubt, the list could be extended. If necessary, authentication of the metaphor’s applicability could be found in everyday speech: for instance, when the trade unionist leader, Moses Mayekiso, was released with others in April 1989 after three years of detention without trial, he said: “Though we are no longer in Sun City [Johannesburg Prison] we are in a much bigger jail now” [Zondi 13]).

In the next couple of lines, contact is established:
In the mirror I see him see
My face in the mirror . . . .

The focus is again on the significant action, the instant of seeing. In the plane of the mirror, the moment of contact amounts already to an exchange: specifically of “my face” for “him” and, implicitly, vice versa.

It is important to keep in mind that this is an apartheid prison, likely to be housing many more white racist criminals (like the convict in an earlier poem who sang out, “You bleddy cocksucking, kaffir loving/Communis jew . . . ” [Cronin 24]) than white lefties, as well as an even larger number of black prisoners. Most white convicts would never even think of engaging a “kaffir” in casual conversation, and would regard it as a “bleddy cheek” if a “kaffir” did not immediately show subservience to them if he did happen to be addressed. Racism rules. The handful of white radicals and revolutionaries imprisoned at any one time in a separate wing of the prison makes up a very different kettle of fish, however, and the black prisoner knows where his excursion as a polisher of doorhandles has landed him. The hand-signals to which he immediately resorts on catching sight of the mirror spring from a definite need to communicate with the prisoner who has reached out.

Cronin continues:

I see the fingertips of his free hand
Bunch together, as if to make
An object, the size of a badge
Which travels up to his forehead
The place of an imaginary cap.
(This means: A warder.)

The image of the fingertips bunching together conveys a gesture almost as delicate as it is distinct. The sensitivity of perception evident in “person” is being sustained, and the attention to detail shows again how intently and with what care every movement of the other is being followed. The mime recalls the ironic antics of Johannes Stephanus Februarie in the preceding poem (Cronin 25), the fourth of the “Pollsmoor Sketches,” where Februarie’s exaggeratedly punctilious obedience to orders constitutes in itself a critical style, a pose which seems to Cronin reminiscent of the actor’s detachment from the action in Brecht’s epic theatre, one formulation of which he quotes as an epigraph: “in this epic theatre the actor does everything to make himself perceived standing between the audience and the event he portrays . . . .”

All the same, the most striking phrase in this section as well perhaps as in the poem as a whole is “free hand.” Is it literal or ironical? Colloquially, “to
"have a free hand" is to be free of any and all outside control, but that must be the ironical level, for the prisoner here is in almost total bondage. He has literally only one hand free. With that hand he takes the opportunity to "talk." Political repression is ultimately about as effective as psychological repression, it would seem. One recalls Freud's remark about how impossible it is for the person in analysis to keep a secret. How, even if s/he fell silent, the body would speak: hands and feet would shift in a telltale way, fingers would chatter. Here, the "secret" is that resistance is irrepressible.

Two fingers are extended in a vee
And wiggle like two antennae.
(He's being watched.)

The situation is comic because it all takes place under the nose of the boer. The black prisoner is indeed "being watched"—in two opposing ways, one hostile, one friendly. He tries to embody conflicting messages: on and/or with the one hand, he must show himself as the docile menial, devoted to getting a gleam on the doorhandle; on and/or with the other, he would like warily to confirm his readiness to communicate.

A finger of his free hand makes a watch-hand's arc
On the wrist of his polishing arm without
Disrupting the slow-slow rhythm of his work.
(Later. Maybe, later we can speak.)

Hey! Wat maak jy daar?
—A voice from around the corner.

No. Just polishing baas.
He turns his back to me . . . .

Economy of movement on the prisoner's part is matched by economy of language in the poem. Words and phrases are deliberate, precise, concise: "A finger of his free hand makes a watch-hand's arc/On the wrist of his polishing arm . . . ." Again, the speaker of the poem concentrates on every movement because every movement is meaningful. The "slow-slow rhythm of his work" contains the prisoner's passive, as the "free hand" exhibits his active resistance. In the context of the apartheid prison, perhaps even in the context of the apartheid system, the promise contained in brackets amounts to no more than wishful thinking, though. But the line in question can also be read as the point in the poem where we are compelled to look beyond the literal surface of the incident. "Later" may therefore be taken more symbolically to mean: "Only once the liberation struggle is over." In the meantime, of course, the
most rudimentary of signals are proving more than adequate. In clear contradiction of received racist lore, (and in this country, of law as such) simple human curiosity and the impulse to bond would seem to be stronger than the arbitrary forces which try to keep people apart.

When the warder breaks in sharply in Afrikaans, the prisoner replies in South African English. It is possible that the use of the alternative white language, although obviously not the content of what he says, may be another gesture towards the man with the mirror. English tends traditionally to be regarded in an oppositional role to Afrikaans, and it is true that many white radicals are English-speaking. Cronin himself is not anti-Afrikaans, however. In the poem which in the absence of a title we may as well call “Voices of the Land,” he says:

To trace with the tongue wagon-trails
Saying the suffix of their aches in -kuil, -pan, -fontein,
In watery names that confirm
The dryness of their ways. (Cronin 64)

There is empathy in “aches,” an inside sense of the real pain and yearning that went into the Great Trek. “Confirm,” however, is in the present tense. The same dry principles which dominated at the time still dominate now, it seems. Yet Cronin’s tone is compassionate, not denunciatory. It is as though the Afrikaners have spread a desert they brought with them, and the “watery names” that sprang up in their tracks—like Bloemfontein, Randfontein, Doornfontein, Brakpan, Roodekuil and so on, (the suffixes mean “fountain” and “pool”)—are evidence of their compensatory need to discover oases or at least mirages everywhere. Yet Afrikaans has hewn into the historical landscape, and to speak it is to reclaim and understand part of what has gone into the country as it now exists. To speak Afrikaans is therefore also to speak South African.

To return: “No. Just polishing baas.” Political as it may be, the black prisoner’s reply is not a protest so much as a deft disclaimer to placate the warder and evade punishment. In a videotape I have seen of Cronin reading his poetry, he makes a Johannes Stephanus Februarie-like show of polishing at this point, drawing laughter from the audience.

Then comes the climax of the poem:

He turns his back to me, now watch
His free hand, the talkative one,
Slides quietly behind.

—Strength, brother, it says,
In my mirror,  
A black fist.

A preposition can make all the difference. To turn his back to me is not to turn it on me. Communication continues, it is not being abruptly blocked out. In fact, the boldest signal of all is about to take place. "Now watch" is an imperative, a calling of attention to something which must not be missed, an admiring exclamation addressed by the poet to himself—and thus by extension to the reader or listener as well. In "talkative" as an adjective for the black prisoner’s hand, a highly active image is produced. "Slips" is quick but unobtrusive, and "quietly" reminds us of the silence in which all this is being carried out. "Strength, brother" is the core message, creating a bond of inclusion of the white prisoner as an equal. "In my mirror" is given a line to itself with a stress on "my" that was simply not there at the opening, indicating a depth of personal acceptance by the speaker of what his mirror contains.

It is perhaps at this stage not too much to claim that Cronin’s mirror shows a way out of that repellent white self which Gordimer finds so impossible to escape. To Cronin, identity is not immutable. "Motho ke motho ka batho babang." A person is a person because of other people. The proverb is quoted as a tribute to the communal wisdom of indigenous African culture. It is through relating to others that we find our true selves, not by incessant introspection.

NOTES

1. Robert Pinsky used the term in an informal discussion I had with him at Boston University in September, 1988, on the Poem, "A Child Who Survived the Soldiers" by a young black writer, Shadrack Pooe (Pooe 4), who was killed during the second State of Emergency. Perhaps as a South African I am edgy about a word like "primitive." American academics assure me that it need not be pejorative.

2. But not the last. Possibly the most recent is a paper by Neil Viljoen of the Johannesburg College of Education (Viljoen 116).

3. Cronin’s Inside supports a tradition whose most outstanding member to my mind was the late leader of the Communist Party in South Africa, Bram Fischer. As long ago as 1965, just before his own imprisonment for life, Fischer maintained: "It must be demonstrated that people can fight apartheid from within the country even though it may be dangerous" [my emphasis] (Benson 201).
BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTES

Aarons, Michelle. _Prison Experience in the Work of Some South African Writers from Lessing to Cronin_. Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand: June, 1988. Ms Aarons argues that the unnaturalness of prison life is rendered tolerable to prisoners only by their creation of a number of diversionary activities, among which are literary practices like the telling of stories (or the composing of poetry). Her thesis contains an interesting chapter on Cronin. Ms Aarons kindly made available to me a good deal of valuable research material on Cronin.


WORKS CITED


———. "Jeremy Cronin reads his own poetry at the 1985 History Workshop." Videotape stored in the Media Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.


A new publication from
the National English Literary Museum:

ES’KIA MPH AHLELE
A Bibliography

(No. 2 in the NELM Bibliographic Series)

Published in honour of one of South Africa’s foremost writers and academics on the occasion of his 70th birthday, Es’kia Mphahlele: A Bibliography offers a comprehensive bibliographic account of the production and reception of his work. It addresses the reference needs of scholars and general readers alike, with full documentation of both Mphahlele’s extensive creative and critical oeuvre, and critical response to his writings over thirty years. Es’kia Mphahlele: A Bibliography reflects the life of this veteran man of letters, his response to the changing face of Africa and the challenges of his own country, and his influence on writers and critics of African literature.

Compiled by Catherine Woeber and John Read
Introduced by Peter N. Thuynsma


Available from the National English Literary Museum, P/Bag 1019, Grahamstown 6140. (Ph. 0461 - 27042)