

Interview

MONGANE WALLY SEROTE,
INTERVIEWED BY ROLF SOLBERG

This exchange is abstracted from an interview recorded in Cape Town on 9 May 1995. It was edited by Malcolm Hacksley and published by the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown, South Africa, in a collection of interviews with black South African writers entitled *Reflections: Perspectives on Writing in Post-Apartheid South Africa (1996)*.

RS Would you fill me in briefly about your personal background, some of the factors that formed the writer and politician Wally Serote as he appears today?

MWS I was born in Alexandra, a highly politicized community. For one reason or another, I thought I wanted to write and I started writing at quite an early age. The two, politics and writing, have played a key role in my formation as a person: the two feed on each other. My political involvement, being an active member of the ANC, MK, and the underground structures of the African National Congress, has helped me to understand the dynamics of people. That in itself has fed into what I write.

RS You served time in detention. Was that in the early seventies?

MWS I was detained in 1969.

RS Were you subjected to harsh treatment?

MWS First of all I was detained under what they called the Terrorism Act, Section 6, which means that you were kept in solitary confinement, incommunicado. You were entirely in the hands of the security police. I was harshly tortured, physically. There are two things we should talk about here. The first is the spiritual, psychological torture. I was in solitary confinement for nine months. That in itself is extreme torture for a human being, but we were also physically brutalized. However, in circumstances of that nature one discovers, if one has convictions, a human treasure: resilience. That contributes towards continuously rebelling against what is unjust. Rather than having been subdued, many of us came out feeling very strongly that something had to be done to overcome the evil of the apartheid system.

RS If I may turn in the direction of literature now: Albie Sachs suggested putting a ban on the Struggle as a theme for writers. In one of your essays in *On the Horizon* you compare the effects of protest and resistance poetry with soap: it cleanses. You go on to say: 'Like soap, that poetry is finished. It's gone. It's done its job. Screaming poetry has rendered the poet hoarse. And those who wrote swearing poetry must only be a bit embarrassed by it now.' Would you like to comment on that?

MWS One must recognize that I was speaking about a spirit and a consciousness of defiance. I don't want to call anything protest poetry. It is a very unfortunate category and name. I do recognize that there are phases that a writer moves through. Writers are the most unfortunate artists because they grow through speaking loudly in public and everybody remembers what they say. Lots of other people also do that, but then people forget what they have said. That's why I don't like to call it protest poetry. There is a growing process where one is outraged, where one wants to say that in one's clearest voice and one uses all sorts of mechanisms to do that. Some of this in our time was the swearing poetry, the sloganeering poetry. It served its purpose at that time. We should not discard it. It is part of ourselves.

I am calling writers to realize that even when we were doing that we were addressing a key issue which is going to remain with the human race forever, and that is human nature and human relations. The crisis before us is about this, but so is the ecstasy of being alive. This is what we writers must fine-tune and sharpen our skills to deal with and understand and write about.

RS You come from a socialist background. Would you define yourself today as a socialist, a communist?

MWS I have learnt a lot by having been a communist. One basic thing I learnt was the value one places on life, human nature, human relations, and people. I think this is the basic principle of communism. It always tries to address those issues. I think I have developed and become a broad-minded person through having been a communist. I still want to be a communist. I realize that certain things happened in the Eastern Block which challenged some of the fundamental principles and issues raised by communism.

But I want to say this: there is nothing which communism did – talking about the history of the Eastern Bloc – which capitalism did not do. Nothing! Human suffering, totalitarianism, harsh reality for people, all of those things are happening today as well. The fact that capitalism at

present still maintains power and control in the world is a different issue. I do not accept capitalism as an alternative for anything.

We now have to address the question of what we can actually do to change relationships in the world, so that more and more people have access to quality of life. South Africa was one of the capitalist countries that articulated how human values and human rights can be absolutely violated. I have still to see one country in the world which has not done that.

RS In a paper at a UNESCO seminar in Dakar in 1989 on 'Cultural Resistance, Mobilization and People's Freedom' you talk about three films on South Africa. You say that the film *A World Apart* 'expresses strength by basing every detail of its story on the organized masses', while André Brink's *A Dry White Season*, on the other hand, 'lacks this important element, is weakened by using individuals as the basis of history'. Would you like to enlarge on these statements?

MWS I come from a culture of struggle. My childhood, my youth, my adulthood were spent in struggle. I have come to understand very clearly that the condition of the world is not changed by fate. Nor is it changed accidentally or by individuals. Changes take place when people are informed, when people are conscious, when people identify common goals and common objectives, and in certain circumstances are prepared to make sacrifices for that. When masses of people do that the world can be changed. It is a very important phenomenon of change and it is my point of reference for charting what happens in the world. That is what we mean by democracy, rule by the majority, and the majority must consist of increasingly greater numbers of people.

RS But wouldn't you say that, for the viewer to become emotionally involved in a film, the individual is important? Wouldn't the masses be much too general for the film audience to achieve a sense of personal involvement and identification with them? It is that element of identification which, in my view, the Brink film does have.

MWS It is very important that the masses are involved in everything. Within the context of the masses of course there will be individuals who excel, who do outstanding things, but when that happens it happens precisely because one also has the backing of the masses. I don't subscribe to the manner in which films are made in Hollywood where individuals can change the whole world, nor do I subscribe to the simplistic approach of some European novels where one person is a hero or a heroine. There is nothing like that, it's fiction. I come from a culture and a struggle which

has created millions of heroes and heroines in the context of the masses. People excel in different ways.

RS What kind of themes do you see on the horizon for the young guard of black South African writers?

MWS At a certain point we were really charged with compassion and idealism. Now we are living a real reality. For a long time the two opposites, the ideal world and the real world, are going to form the basis of a very strong articulation on the part of the writers. I am in the fortunate position that I understand how the state machinery, the so-called bureaucratic machinery, works. I can see the gulf between that machinery and the perceptions of need and the reality of ordinary people outside all that. There is a very big gulf. Our challenge is to narrow this gap.

Government has to start with the process of legislation. I look at the process itself – it's a very long-drawn-out thing – and I am hit by reality. It is important that the process should take the route that it takes, that it is debated in the manner that it is, but the worst part is that there is no mechanism that explains these processes to the ordinary people.

I hope that writers will enter this area and objectively assess it. On one hand I am saying that there should be high expectations, it's correct for people to have high expectations. On the other, I also expect there to be debate about legislation. There is a contradiction in what I am saying. We have to look at this contradiction and say: What do we do? What is the humanly possible thing to do in these circumstances? There is a challenge here, looking us straight in the face.

RS Turning to language, you say in your poem *Come and Hope With Me* (1994), 'we must delight in the orchestra of our many languages', and you have stated very clearly that you support the idea of having eleven official South African languages of equal status.

MWS When it comes to the cultural aspect, I would say it is wrong for any country to suppress people's cultures. I associate the question of multilingualism with the multicultural nature of our country. It is very important for South Africa to stimulate and to promote multiculturalism to its full blossoming, as we should also do with its languages. By doing so, we are empowering the nation itself and the individuals and collectives within the nation. This is very important. I don't think it is correct, as happened in the past, that 'literate' means you can speak English. There are many people in this country who are literate but don't speak English, and there are many who are literate but can't speak Afrikaans. These people must come to the front and be recognized for what they are.

The other important thing is that having been dominated by European culture in this country, we have almost completely sacrificed the wisdoms, gems, and treasures of African culture. It is high time that those are articulated through the African languages in this country.

RS May I bring up another issue, a major issue also in South Africa – that of women’s liberation? Your poetry breathes love and respect for woman – both mother and lover. I am thinking especially of a poem like ‘No Baby Must Weep’, but one finds this attitude all through your work. Clearly a lot of South African men do not share this attitude. Is this an issue that ought to be addressed with a view to changing male chauvinist attitudes throughout the ‘Rainbow’ spectrum?

MWS Yes, I think so. Let me state two points. Firstly, it is correct that there was inequality between the sexes in our traditional cultures. We must make sure that we protect equality between men and women in South Africa. I draw a distinction and say that I don’t think it is correct to say that men and women are the same. It can never mean that, it must not mean that! If we say that, we are going to violate human nature itself. It is important that women are women and that men are men, but we are all equal. We must find out what our role is as men and as women in that equation. Equal but not the same.

The second point is this: the liberation of women should not be championed by women only. I want to participate in the liberation of women because by so doing I will be educated about women, but they will also be educated about me, as a man. It is important, now in the nineties, that all of us, men and women, stand together in addressing this issue.

RS Did I detect a rather harsh criticism of the youth generation in *Come and Hope with Me*? I am thinking of the way they have taken a course of extreme violence, necklacing and so on.

MWS There are certain issues related to the Struggle which hit me, for one, very hard as a human being. One of these things was necklacing. I remember when I first saw that on the television screen. I asked myself, in all honesty: what has gone wrong with our people? How is it possible that these young people, conscious and able as they are, could do what they are doing? It is not in our culture. It is inhuman. Intellectually I understood perfectly well where it came from. I understand the results that it achieved, but still I do not accept it. I will not accept it in the future either, but we are capable of that as human beings. When I saw that on TV it was for me one of the saddest moments of the Struggle. I was deeply saddened by it, but I cannot entirely place the responsibility for that on the

youths. It is the responsibility of the South African people as a nation. We created conditions that could result in that state of affairs and we must now take full responsibility as a nation.

RS I enjoyed very much reading *Come and Hope with Me*. There is a series of recurrent motifs: the return, the tentative motif of hope in humanity that runs like a red thread through the poem. Do you have a particular strategy when you set out to write a long poem like this one? Do you consciously use technical devices or do you go where your creative impulses take you?

MWS It is very funny that you should ask me that question because just this morning when I woke up and switched on the television, I saw what the world was doing about the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of peace. I thought there was something very beautiful, warm, and compassionate in this, when people got together and said ‘This far, no farther’ to the Nazis, made the intervention that they did, and created the solutions that they came up with. Not perfect solutions, because we still have some of those problems, but on that 8th of May 1945 you saw a moment of high and dramatic creativity by human beings to claim life.

Now, I take that – and I also take the fact that we ourselves as a nation during these last four years have been engaged in negotiations – as a high drama of compassion, of seeking a solution to make life worth living.

The two things this morning have sparked my life. I have been walking around knowing that I must find a format that I must catch them in. This is what is important to me as a writer, more important than the mechanics. I know that one day I will sit down and say: ‘This is how I will articulate that compassion – the two compassions, that which happened fifty years ago, and this that happened four years ago in our country.’ These were very important moments in history, but not in history as a technical thing.

I am very attracted when I see human compassion taking control, choosing the direction of things. I always ask myself: ‘What must we do to nurture this so that it becomes the main issue of our lives? What is it that we must do?’ I don’t know if I’ll write a poem about it, or a novel, or an essay, but it is something that has captured my mind, and at present I am conserving it. It wants to come out and soon it will.

RS One of the key words of *Come and Hope with Me* is ‘return’. In addition to the obvious return of South Africans from exile, were you also thinking of a return to the African values that you cherish?

MWS In one sense all South Africans were in a kind of exile. If you look

at South Africa as a country, you will find that the whites pretended to be Europeans, and just by having committed such grievous crimes against humanity, they were in exile from humanity. Of course, there was also the literal exile that some of us were in. Because of strife, war – which breeds mistrust, anxieties, insecurity, defensiveness, alienation from other people, discrimination – we sacrificed what was essential to human nature, to human relations.

To come out of that, one has to search for the basics in human life. We must return to that to try and resolve the problems facing us. This country is still torn between whites who are defending their interests, and blacks who are saying ‘We are tired. We don’t want this any more.’ This country was saved largely by black people. In a sense, white South Africans must learn humility and modesty. Despite the whites’ lack of these things, there is enormous good will among blacks. While I am talking of good will, I do not want to see a stage where that good will changes into anger among the people who are oppressed, underprivileged, and marginalized. We must not risk that.

Inside out: Jeremy Cronin’s lyrical politics

BRIAN MACASKILL

Jeremy Cronin’s poems collected in the single and singular volume *Inside*, the interviews he has granted in conjunction with the publication of this volume, and his critical essays on literary culture, mostly concerned with ideological configurations in black South African poetry of the 1970s, all in one way or another address the relation between public and private, rearticulating a tension common to recent South African literatures: the disparity, perhaps only an ostensible disparity, of demands for revolutionary struggle on the one hand and aspirations for a more private aesthetic on the other.¹ Amid the poems in *Inside*, I shall argue, Cronin commonly achieves a surprisingly secure viewpoint for ideological critique. And no small part of the surprise in which this viewpoint is secured is that it should be secured here, inside a volume of poetry, rather than ‘outside’; rather, that is to say, than in the critical essays where Cronin directly addresses the issue of ideology, or rather than in what for him must be the political domain of that public performance for which some of the poems are expressly composed. Cronin’s ideological critique, I shall further argue, derives its security from a less predictable event than the ruin of hegemonic order that the order and ordering of his poems frequently seek; the force of his critique will instead be linked in the end to the collapse of order in which these poems themselves come to participate.

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Charged in 1976 under the Terrorism and the Internal Security Acts for his participation in the then-banned African National Congress, Jeremy Cronin was sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment, part of which term he served with death-row inmates at a maximum security prison in Pretoria. Detained at Pollsmoor and other prisons in Cape Town during

1. Occasional sentences in this chapter are based on my brief account of Cronin in the sixth edition of *Contemporary Poets*. A longer version of the essay refers for further substantiation to several more of Cronin’s poems.