

Ways of Being a Poet : Chris Mann

Review by Chris Miller, published in the January 2013 issue of PN Review, Britain.

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The plight of a poet in a developing country might seem precarious, more especially that of a white Anglophone poet in South Africa. The Anglophone writes one of the colonists' languages; a Christian white Anglophone poet might seem ill-equipped to draw from the wells of alien belief-systems or propound the merits of poetry in a country where the non-Anglophone often lack economic essentials. Where the economy and social justice flourish, poetry is sometimes society's grace note. Where people are undernourished, poetry is often a remote luxury. And the history of Christianity in South Africa is not altogether edifying. Such at least is the conventional view. You might say that the white South African, Christian, Anglophone poet Chris Mann is set on bucking the trend.

Trends have, on the other hand, played little part in his life. His commitment to his country has been strikingly practical. After a degree in English and philosophy from Wits University (Johannesburg), he spent the first fifteen years of his professional life working in rural development and poverty alleviation with the Valley Trust near Durban. He has also worked as an English teacher in a rural black school. His further education included studying Italian and Zulu at SOAS; he speaks both Xhosa and Zulu, though he is modest about his attainments in these languages: 'a couple of years of Zulu and Italian at university, Xhosa absorbed and spoken ineptly'. It is difficult to know how modest he is being. He is, after all, a member of a cross-cultural band called Zabalaza that performs in English and Zulu—and did so while such mixed-raced bands were still illegal. He speaks of reading Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* with 'Zulu-speaking matriculants' in a village school and translating phrases from the English in order to bring out their meaning; he has a strong interest in Zulu praise poems (*izibongo*) and his play *Thuthula* (2004) dramatises a significant episode in Xhosa history, is studded with Xhosa words and proverbs and includes parts of Ntsikana's *Great Hymn* performed in Xhosa. He also speaks Afrikaans.

His poetry is rooted in his South African context. *South Africans: A Set of Portrait-Poems* (1996), is blisteringly alive to the many strands of African life, from 'Down-Down Lurie'

...belching out the john's the owner. Widower.

One hell of a chuckling, bustling, cursing bliksem that one.

Lonely old gasbag, scooping his belly back into his shorts

to the Liaison Officer ‘Dumisana Shadrack Gasa, whose eyes are shuttered by sun-glasses
‘silvered like mirrors’:

A friend, a bottle store owner, was necklaced by comrades.

An uncle, a shop steward, was knifed in a minibus queue.

No one knew better than Shadrack which eggs to dance on.

Younger colleagues, by innuendo, disparaged his cool,

an anti-hero, who joined no party, trade-union or church,

who banked his cheque on payday, drank only modestly

and lived to die of old age. ‘Nonkululeko Goba and Ed Dinkel’ offers a disabused description of a headmistress with the cheque-bearing representative of a sponsoring American firm:

the event’s too formal for ethical debate;

the company's journalist points his camera,

a cheque swaps hands with a click and smile.

Enthused for the day, Ma Goba resumes.

Ed Dinkel jets home, depressed.

Heartlands (2002) does something similar for South African places. ‘Seymour’ is particularly vivid:

Its single street was much the same

a scratch on shale where little stirred

except, this time, for listless goats

chewing a shrub in someone’s yard,

plastic bags spiked on thorn bushes

and stock that grazed a rubbish dump.

I parked and walked across the dust.
 The co-op's door had been torn off,
 its rows of window panes smashed in.

The public phone hissed on its hook.
 A drunk snored in the empty bar,
 face down among a slew of quarts.

though the book is no less concerned with landscapes of hope and remembrance—and the languages in which they are spoken and remembered. The common or garden thorn bush is all of the following:

*umunga, soetdoring, hanyane,
 mimosa, acacia karroo.*

The roots of this poetry lie not only in social activism and faith, as Mann made clear in a remarkable extended interview with Ileana Dimitriu (*Current Writing* 19.1, 'Creation and Translation') from which almost all the quotes in this article are drawn. As Mann puts it, 'the root of my interest in African languages... is a political commitment to undo where I can the separation imposed by apartheid, and a faith life which requires me to love my neighbour'. But Dimitriu's question, 'how to go—as poet and citizen—beyond monoculturalism?' meets an answer that begins with cosmogenesis and the complexity of life: 'Think only of an ant, whose chemistry is much more complex than that of the largest star in the universe,' Mann says: 'The language of each living creature is part of what I would call the organic semiotics of the earth.' 'The signs, the visual texts are there for us to register and to interpret. Who can evade such admonishing texts as the satiny sheen of pampered cattle, the orange-tinted hair of a kwashiorkor child, the furrowed sub-soils of an eroded hillside, and the hole in the protective canopy of ozone around the earth?' He takes the natural world's increasing complexity as indicative of the direction of time toward consciousness, adding 'If language is rooted in the biosphere, then so is poetry'. Comparing poetry to the predisposition to religious belief, he takes it to be part of our quest for meaning. In his case, that meaning is given by Christianity but in a far from exclusive spirit (he spells 'God' with an omega in place of the central 'o' to signify the banishment of any exclusivity).

This is a resolutely scientific Christianity, as the quotes above suggest. Science is present in Mann's poems too, most of all in the inaugural lecture that he gave as Professor of Poetry at Rhodes University, Grahamstown (inaugural in every sense: he is the first such Professor). Much revised and extended, it has become a kind of prose poem, 'Seeing the Cosmos in a Grain of Sand', published in two parts in the journal *Current Writing* (2008) and *Scrutiny*2 (2009):

It's amazing! you thought, how a modest sponge is born anew in a chemist's mind, becoming in a flow of perceptions, an instant transfiguration of billions of cells, a lattice-work of calcium, carbon and oxygen, with scattered anaglyphs of iron, no lattice in itself alive, each locked to the next by force-fields bracing the gaps, by gradients of nano-energies which consciousness can gesture at but never see.

Its cumulative force is considerable and it serves several functions at once. By reintroducing the language of science into poetry, it stakes poetry's claims to the language of science. And by rehearsing the answer to Dimitriu's question about monoculturalism (cited above) at exuberant length, it gives an account of poetry's right to be the language by which the order and structure of the world are given a meaning in other terms, terms that revise or replicate when they do not assimilate the language of religion. Mann quotes the socio-biologist E.O. Wilson: 'The predisposition to religious belief is the most complex and powerful force in the human mind and in all probability an ineradicable part of human nature'. 'Could this predisposition be extended to the arts, to poetry as well?' Mann asks and provides his own answer, that 'language sweated into shape by an imagination' can answer the inbred human quest for meaning.

Allowing that this is far from exclusive Christianity, how does he come to terms with phenomena within the cultures with which he has become familiar, phenomena such as ancestor worship that led colonialists to despair of the 'superstitions' by which the 'native' explained the 'native world'? I like the answer. 'I normally ask those of my boom-gated, computer-headed peers who are curious to close their eyes and bring to mind a couple of people who are physically absent and yet influence them profoundly in one way or another.' This is, he admits, extending the original Nguni concept, since the shades are generally

‘limited to the ancestors of a particular lineage’. But the influence of teachers, friends and parents living and dead, these, he says, are our shades. The ‘inner life of ...urbanised, post-industrial people’ is thus shown to be ‘alive with the presences of other [absent] human beings’. And Mann then turns to Dante to show how historical and mythical figures haunt that exemplary work of the Renaissance. To say that one’s dead parents are present within one is clearly physically as well as metaphorically true. And, I might add, it is not only the figures of teachers and inspirations, most of them physically absent, who inhabit us. Like Dante, we are haunted by the creations of literature. What was Vergil for Dante unless his works? We are hardly able to think of man as a quintessence of dust or sack a slew of workers ‘to encourage the others’ without literary precedents animating our thoughts and decisions, though we refer rather to tradition than superstition at such moments.

The long cosmic span in which Mann sees his work as a poet tends to eliminate any factionalising perspective. Does it, by now, go without saying that his Christianity, like his science, is ecological in tendency? The miracle of Creation, is, in his eyes, no less a miracle for being seen down the long perspective with which science has endowed us, the kaleidoscopic whirling outburst of the unexpected that leads back out of the Big Bang into our own too often noxious interactions with the brimming world about us. One should exercise caution in interacting with a proliferating miracle; it might be easy to make things worse. Of course, development itself sometimes stands at odds with this very injunction—and development and its necessary interaction with politics has taken much of Mann’s lifetime. But here again the sense of Mann’s integration of many different strands into each of his preoccupations is notable.

The ‘heath-centred’ Valley Trust of which he was a founder was a remarkable attempt to bring a holistic approach to development: it consisted of ‘an agriculturalist, an ecologist, a nurse, a doctor, an accountant, a teacher and an engineer’ and it had, he says, ‘a profound impact on my outlook’. ‘Translation and writing were important parts of my job: the translation of the energy of the felt needs of impoverished people for food, water, education, healthcare and employment into long-term practicable projects that could be innovated elsewhere by means of training programmes; the writing of project proposals, budgets, job descriptions, plans, evaluations, reports, training manuals, technical booklets and constitutions for newly-formed civil society organisations that are intrinsic to such work.’

‘I saw the latter literature as part of a continuum, with poetry and poetic drama at another end of the scale. Such literature was also a way of avoiding the trap I fell into from time to time, particularly during the sternest days of the struggle against apartheid, the trap of using literature as a soft option, as a moralising surrogate for direct socio-political action.’ Poetry for Chris Mann has been a great many different disciplines at once, from the production of lyrics for musical performance to the lyric poem written for the page and embracing a multitude of theatrical and religious functions, each of which has required its own prosodic adaptation.

This sense of the continuum of writing, combined with a life in which different linguistic cultures are constantly interacting, has informed Mann’s critical outlook and given him firm views about the topic of translation, which lies at the heart of Dimitriu’s interview. He is particularly hostile to such ‘ultimate texts’ as Marx, Lenin and Mao, and in this there are strange echoes of one of Czesław Miłosz’s finer poems, ‘Bypassing Rue Descartes’. Mann says: ‘It seems inequitable that someone like Pol Pot, for example, should be demonised for crimes against humanity while the lecturers in Paris who inculcated it in him and others from Cambodia the textbook definitions of classist thinking and proletarian revolution have yet to account for the consequences of what they taught’. Miłosz says:

We were many, from Jassy and Koloshvar, Wilno and Bucharest, Saigon and Marrakesh,

Ashamed to remember the customs of our homes,
About which nobody here should ever be told...

I had left the cloudy provinces behind,
I entered the universal, dazzled and desiring.

Soon enough, many from Jassy and Koloshvar, or Saigon and Marrakesh,
Would be killed because they wanted to abolish the customs of their homes.

Soon enough, their peers were seizing power
In order to kill in the name of the universal, beautiful, ideas.

Meanwhile, the city behaved in accordance with its nature,
Rustling with throaty laughter in the dark,
Baking long breads and pouring wine into clay pitchers...

While recognising the extraordinary widespread hypocrisy of the Left in France, its perverse commitment to a notion of communism whose discrediting by the genocidal-scale of killings in the USSR it long refused to acknowledge, I would be loath to bring teachers to book for expounding texts anyway widely available (nor would I recommend censorship of those texts). Perhaps it would be better to seek to create an environment in which intellectual fashions were less predominant, one therefore open to acknowledging a wider range of political opinions. In France, expressing non-Leftist opinions at times in the 60s and 70s required a personal courage akin to that of the Soviet dissident and had the inevitable effect of associating one with a strain of virulent, anti-Semitic nationalism that was both repugnant in itself and stained with its WW-II history. It is possible to preach Marxism in good faith. When Mann compares the effect of the ‘sudden encroachment of monetarist economies on the peasant cultures of the so-called underdeveloped world’, I again sympathize without wishing to muzzle economic debate, and wonder if we should hear more of socialism.

But for a committed Christian, what difference between revolution and revelation? ‘Treating texts as ultimate entities can be that dangerous’, Mann says, ‘...when those who define language as a literal and complete description of reality, and not a figurative and illusion-making activity of the imagination, attempt to control the minds of the public and empower themselves and their cause’. Surely this accurately describes some of the uses to which religious texts have been put?

Some part of his answer is linguistic: ‘Take the New Testament as example. The source-texts are written in Greek and valued as such, though the Greek is itself a translation of the originating oral testimonies provided by predominantly Aramaic and Hebrew speakers. Even individual gospels show different principles of selection and translation at work, from the factual narrative of Luke to the mythopoetic style of John.’ He goes on to say: ‘I’m reading St Matthew's Gospel in Zulu at present: the Zulu version has a down to earth diction, a rural vocabulary, and is perhaps closer to the language spoken by the people in the Gospel than

that found in the English versions with which I am acquainted.’ It might be thought even by the believer that the four parallel but not identical accounts of the life of Christ that constitute a central corpus of Christianity marked some kind of advance over a single text of revelation, acknowledging even formally the possibility of multiple perspectives on a single event. Moreover that sudden, unexpected diversion into Zulu seems to me admirable and it is surely important to point out that over-literal readings of the necessarily figurative classics of religion is simply an error, whereas it was precisely the function of texts such as those of Marx, Lenin and Mao to give a literal and complete account of reality. But this point would be disputed by the very many literalist readers of the Bible and the Koran, who are perhaps even now a majority. Not for nothing do we hear of Islamic revolution.

One area of translation that had a determining effect on Mann’s life was his father's captivity in Italy. Fighting in North Africa during the Second World War, Mann senior was captured at Tobruk and taken to a prisoner of war camp in northern Italy from which he escaped. There, in the Veneto, he was helped and hidden by Italian peasants, with whom his father and subsequently himself and his children have been in touch ever since. This is the subject of the poem ‘A Field in Italy’ from the volume *Heartlands* (2002). His father's diary survived the war and could be used to reconstruct his Italian survival after he fell ill with cancer while touring with the Springbok cricket team in the UK and died shortly after, when Chris Mann was only four. Mann records not only his own purpose in making the visit

I’ve come to this field in Italy
 In search of this presence.
 This shade. My father’s
 The soldier, cricketer, hero
 Who died when I was four.

but much else; the poem is an exercise not in narrowing focus to a presumed essential but broadening it to include the multiple realities of his life—children who know the story but have had enough of the historical by now and want to play, the Zulu proverb that crops up as he talks to the Signora Ferro who hid his father at the risk of her life, and the forty million dead of WWII. His father’s diary informs the dialogue:

He writes of food and rain.
 Of prisoners found on a farm
 Instructed to watch
 The family who hid them
 Shot in front of their barn.

But there is no seamless history, just the usual mess of human knowledge: intense feeling, incomplete understanding and the importance of those symbolic arches on which we construct not just our art but the meanings of our lives:

I shut my eyes and see him.

My father. Standing in the reeds.
 Hands in armpits, waiting.
 I sense he is with me, of me
 Much more than before.
 I am ready. To see him home.

The conclusion defines the way in which we make our own meanings. Can a dead man be more ready than before to go home from the Italy that he had anyway physically left? As one of his son's shades, clearly he can.

I met Chris Mann at one of the lectures given by the Oxford Professor of Poetry, Geoffrey Hill. He was obviously rather dismayed by the lecture that he had heard, which, in keeping with the practice to which Hill so ardently and publicly subscribes, afforded little in the matter of thematic guidance; difficulty was the order of the day. It moved from Grosseteste to Wordsworth's *Convention of Cintra*, with passing references to Langland and Pound; there was a condemnation of the politics of our major poets that risked sounding like *la trahison des clercs*; there was, indeed, a great deal, delivered, as usual, with that astoundingly dry drollery that many in the audience, much moved by the question 'what is he talking about?', give no indication of noticing. Hill's gravelly delivery and occasional vehemence combined with almost invariable solemnity is undoubtedly charismatic and an experience not to be missed. But even on paper his criticism often seems somewhat paratactic, suggesting,

reversing and revising an opinion in the space of a sentence, as Donald Davie, reviewing *The Lords of Limit*, observed; Davie pitied the audience that first heard that one of Hill's lectures and had to face such curveballs as they were thrown.

There are two schools of thought about such difficulty. One is that it fails to observe the elementary courtesies of presentation: making clear the drift of each argument before it is made and generally allowing the presentation of overwhelming erudition only through a framework that makes the relevance of each allusion moderately perspicuous. The other, held by Hill in some form that I shall surely misstate, is that facility is the ally of demagogues and tyranny and that which can be easily understood and absorbed is probably not worth the minimal effort it requires. And such arguments are of course similarly raised in relation to Hill's poetry, of which Allott's 'I understand "Annunciations" only in the sense that cats and dogs may be said to human conversations' is only the most bathetic example.

It will be seen from what I have already said that Chris Mann's perspective on poetry is rather different—more flexible, one might say. In 'The Roman Centurion's Good Friday', he uses prosodic forms from Anglo Saxon and Middle English and does so for a particular purpose. He says of it: 'The poem is meant to be recited during a service of meditation, when people have moved themselves with the help of hymn and prayer out of ordinary, urbanised time and into significant or mythopoetic time'. And in the play 'Walking on Gravity', he combines Latin and Italian passages and their translations with digital images from the Hubble telescope. These are combined with images of neural networks by Mann's wife, the artist Julia Skeen. In performance, these images are 'projected onto a huge screen hung from the rafters of the cathedral'. His own poems are implanted among the images and he tentatively describes the genre as 'graphic poetry'. This is also his term for his book-form collaborations with his wife, *The Horn of Plenty* (1995), a colour book of painting-poems about fruit, vegetables and cereals and *Lifelines* (2006), in which a combination of Julia Skeen's images, the zoologist Adrian Craig's prose and Mann's poems introduces animals from the aardvark (naturally) to the zebra (of course). These books draw consciously on a tradition of illuminated books and declare the roots that they share with the illuminated works of Blake.

As Mann says, ‘These innovations express what has become over the years a central activity—to restore poetry to the public domain’. He has also instigated the installation of WordBeacons, lightboxes displaying poster-sized graphic poems in different languages for public places. He is the organiser of Wordfest, a national festival of South African languages and literatures, which takes place during the South African National Arts Festival. *Lifelines* is also produced as a roadshow, with a number of songs. “Dragonfly”, for example, is a poem that evokes the moment when, while white-water rafting on the Zambezi, I was thrown into the enormously powerful river and came to my senses staring at a dragonfly on a rock, intensely aware for a moment of the brevity and frailty of life. To convey this, the song changes to duple time and minor chords in the second half of the stanza. I mentioned these types of formal techniques because, if handled appropriately, they make poetry accessible to audiences in the public domain, audiences that have sometimes given up on contemporary poetry altogether.’

For Hill, it may be, access thus mediated is not worth the candle. I incline to believe with Leavis that ‘Without a public poetry can hardly continue’. Leavis added ‘and the ordinary cultivated reader is ceasing to read poetry at all’; that was in 1932 and the figures for the readership of contemporary poetry today are not altogether reassuring. Still less so in South Africa, I assume. Hill is not, I think, an untrammelled elitist; he would, I think, say that his difficulty is necessary (one might add that few allusions are obscure to a search engine) and the more who are able come to terms with it the better. I don’t know that this answers the question about courtesy.

Meeting Chris Mann at the lecture, I remembered his name from the *Oxford Poetry Magazine* of Winter 1974, a copy of which I have kept as presenting the first texts by Bruno Tolentino to have come my way. Other contributors included Sally Purcell, John Wain, Peter Levi, Elizabeth Jennings, Andrew Harvey, Chris Reid, George Pavlopoulos (tr. Peter Levi). I e-mailed Mann copies of the three fine poems that he published in that number: a meditation on a Greek poet whom I take to be Seferis in South Africa (there are SA Seferis diaries), out of touch with the local shades and at odds with the local vegetation; a description of the unanimity of a fish shoal; and a tribute to the ‘dissident’ English settler Thomas Pringle, who ‘exposed the oppressive governor, Somerset’, was expelled from South Africa and returned to England, where he joined the anti-slavery movement. The continuity of his work is clear.

When we met for lunch, I was struck by the modesty of this man, here back in one of his several *almae matres* and researching at Rhodes House. We talked about the threat to human rights in Africa posed by the wave of Chinese investment, made, unlike Western aid, without ‘linkage’ to human rights or transparency. But his reaction to Hill’s lecture was put into more perspective by what I subsequently learnt about his activities promoting poetry in South Africa. I was therefore the more struck when, researching this article (mainly with information that he generously supplied), I found a web article about the contenders for the Oxford Poetry Professorship in the contest in which Hill was elected. Among them were candidates who had, oddly enough, featured in the little magazine, *Oxford Poetry Now*, funded by Tolentino and edited by James Lindesay, that succeeded *Oxford Poetry Magazine*. The election had indeed been triggered by the resignation of one such figure, that excellent poet and populariser of poetry, Ruth Padel. Among the eleven registered candidates was Chris Mann.

Hill’s candidature was put forward by the Warden of Keble College. She called him ‘one of the finest poets writing in the English language’ and ‘a voice of compelling individuality and distinctiveness’, points on which I would agree. She noted that ‘Hill’s erudition is matched by his adventurousness...this makes comparison with other great poet-critics, such as Dryden and Eliot themselves, entirely legitimate’. I suppose the comparison is inevitable though I do not feel there is much in Hill’s criticism to rival Eliot’s—that would be a very tall order. Cameron also described Hill as ‘a lecturer of unrivalled power’, a notion to which I more cautiously subscribe; ‘unrivalled charisma’, certainly. A formidable establishment candidate then. By contrast, Christopher Michael Mann wished ‘to contribute to the global character of Oxford’s literary life by offering lectures and a poetry rooted in English prosody which draw on my experience of north and south’, adding ‘I am passionate about taking poetry into the public domain. With each new book I go on tour with a show comprising poems, music and images.’ A very different kind of candidature—and one that leaves me in two minds. I wouldn’t have missed the lectures by Hill that I have heard (i.e., that I haven’t, in fact, missed) but I sympathise with Mann’s dismay. I don’t wish poetry to compromise, nor I do want it to be regarded as strictly for intellectuals, and therefore welcome the way in which poets such as Hughes and Heaney have conquered a wide audience, and point again to the examples of Eliot and Yeats, whose difficulty has never prevented anyone from being

fascinated by their music. And I generally prefer my poetry served without instrumental accompaniment. But Mann's notion of different kinds of poetry applied to different occasions seems to eminently practical. In short, I'm unwilling to conclude that Mann's candidacy was, at least on this occasion, a missed opportunity. But there will not be such formidable candidates every year. And I certainly do salute what seems to me, in its way, an exemplary (poet's) life: Chris Mann's.