DENNIS BRUTUS'S MOUSEY TONGUE

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The "China Poems" of Dennis Brutus were inspired by his visit to mainland China late in the summer of 1973. During a six-week tour which took him to Peking, Hangchow, Shanghai and Canton, he decided to attempt to simulate in English the style of certain forms of Chinese poetic expression. He had composed short, simple lyrics previously, but never had he systematically reduced his verse to such spare, succinct utterances, never had he been so tight-fisted with words. In this parsimonious new idiom he sought to achieve an economy so extreme that the reader or hearer would have to supply most of the reverberations himself.

His model for this kind of verse was the poetry of Mao Tse-tung, which he had read in a new translation by Willis Barnstone and Ko Ching-Po shortly before going to China. Mao, he had learned, was "a major poet, an original master" in the classical tradition who did not place much value on his poetry, even though, like Brutus himself, he "had written poems obsessively, during years of wandering . . . , writing all night, evening after evening, and then throwing away his 'scribbles.'"[1] Captivated by the concentrated power of Mao's "scribbles," Brutus tried to discipline and refine his own lucid verse still further, paring it down to the barest essentials. In a note to his _China Poems_ he explained, "Even before my trip I had begun to work towards more economical verse. My exposure to _haikus_ and their even tighter Chinese ancestors, the _chueh chu_, impelled me further."[2]

The Chinese verse form Brutus cites, the _chueh chu_, is described by Barnstone as:

> a four-line poem with five or seven characters in each line. It is the shortest poem in Chinese, and if the lines have only five characters each, the poem contains only twenty syllables. Like the Japanese _haiku_, it is the most compressed Chinese verse form, and from it came the _haiku_, which is three syllables shorter.[3]

Since Chinese characters are always monosyllabic and Chinese words are sometimes polysyllabic, "a four-character line might contain four, three, two words, or conceivably only one complete compound word."[4] In the rigorous _chueh chu_, as in all classical Chinese poetry, line length is determined by a fixed number of characters (i.e., syllables) per line, not a fixed number of words.

In experimenting with shorter and fewer lines in his own poetry, Brutus appears to have striven for a reduction in the total number of words per line and lines per poem without forcing the words and lines into a fixed metrical or

syllabic pattern. He did not attempt to limit each line to a certain number of syllables but rather sought to achieve the more economical use of word, image and idea in tight, abbreviated lines. In other words, he was not seeking to render the chueh chu into English but only to emulate its verbal austerity. He has commented on the strategy behind such stringency:

> The trick is to say little (the nearer to nothing, the better) and to suggest much--as much as possible. The weight of meaning hovers around the words (which should be as flat as possible) or is brought by the reader/hearer. Non-emotive, near-neutral sounds should generate unlimited resonances in the mind; the delight is in the tight-rope balance between nothing and everything possible; between saying very little and implying a great deal. Here are examples, from other sources, of this form.
>
> Goose-grey
> clouds
> lour
>
> There is an enormous gap to be traversed in the mind between the softness (silliness is also suggested) of "goose-grey" and the thunderous menace of "lour" presaging a storm.
>
> Exile:
> schizophrenia:
> suicide
>
> Consider the terror of the journey to be made in the mind from exile to the declension of suicide.[5]

The two three-word poems cited here are not translations from ancient or modern Chinese verse but examples of the kind of extreme compression Brutus was hoping to achieve in English. Not even Mao himself (who apparently seldom used the chueh chu form)[6] had risked saying to little in his poems.

Brutus's China Poems are therefore not truly Chinese in structure or pattern. They are too free-flowing, too irregular and sometimes too condensed or too expanded to be considered English equivalents of rigidly orthodox forms of classical Chinese verse. Brutus was evidently not interested in working within the strict formal constraints of the chueh chu or other oriental types of "regulated verse."[7] He sought merely to reduce his poems to flat, "non-emotive, near-neutral sounds" arranged as economically as possible on the page. Most of his "China Poems" are only three lines long, the exceptions being a few four- and seven-line lyrics. There are seldom more than four or five words to a line and sometimes only one or two. Moreover, the number of syllables per line is not fixed but varies considerably and appears to be governed by no immutable poetic laws. Rhyme and regular meter are consistently eschewed. In short, Brutus was writing truncated free verse, not English facsimilles of Chinese poetic forms.

This is not to say his "China Poems" lack a Chinese orientation or flavor. Many of them contain references to specific places in China (e.g., the Long Wall, the Peoples' Palace of Leisure, the new stadium in Shanghai) or to general features

of the Chinese landscape (mountain ranges, earthworks, cornfields) which help to place the reader/hearer in the right geographical locale. Tributes to Chinese workers, to Mao and his first wife, and allusions to the "ruined palaces of Emperors" add appropriate political dimensions to lyrics in praise of Communist Chinese achievements. Such poems communicate exactly what Brutus hoped they would communicate: his "admiration for the Chinese people and their great leader, Mao Tse-tung."[8] They are Chinese in sympathy as well as subject matter.

Their brevity also gives them a deceptive oriental appearance, especially to the average Western reader whose acquaintance with oriental traditions of verse may be limited to English translations of Japanese haiku, short Chinese lyrics, and possibly the poems of Mao Tse-tung. Such readers may not be aware that Brutus's verse deviates radically from standard Chinese poetic forms. To the untrained eye, a paper tiger made with the wrong materials might easily be mistaken for the real thing.

Of course, even counterfeit paper tigers may create genuine aesthetic excitement. Some of Brutus's "China Poems" are appealing not because they are successfully pseudo-Chinese but because they can stand on their own as poetic utterances. Several, for instance, are deftly economical, achieving a terse eloquence which is pleasingly epigrammatic. Consider the following examples:

It is to preserve
beauty
that we destroy.

The Chinese carver
building a new world:
chips of ivory in his hair.

At the Long Wall:
a soldier
holding a flower.

These poems operate on the principle of paradox, of unexpected and seemingly illogical leaps of thought or image which give the impression of being self-contradictory: we destroy in order to preserve; chips of an ancient art substance (ivory) play a part in building a new world; a soldier holds a flower. The tight-rope balance here appears to be between sense and nonsense, between premises at variance with conclusions. The initial images briefly build up expectations and the final image knocks them down. The imagination sets out on its journey and gets ambushed at the end. It is the ability of these poems to astonish and betray us that makes them successful.

There are also several vignettes among the China poems which gain their strength from irony, the cousin of paradox.

On the roofs
of the ruined palaces of Emperors
imperial lions snarl
at the empty air.

The tree in the Emperor's Garden
will not accept
the discipline of marble.

It is easy to read political messages in these ironies, but different readers might be inclined to interpret them in different ways. For instance, the undisciplined tree in the Emperor's Garden could mean one thing to a Chinese Mainlander and something else to a Taiwanese. Explication of the image would depend entirely on one's point of view. Here is where extreme economy backfires on the economist. Or does it? Perhaps part of the strategy of generating "unlimited resonances in the mind" is to create ironies, ambiguities and contradictions which can never be completely resolved. A few well-chosen words could conceivably produce myriad tensions in the imagination. The poet would thus get maximum mental mileage with a minimum of gas. What he might lose in precision by such economy he would certainly regain in amplitude.

Not all of Brutus's "China Poems" achieve such heady inflation, however. Several fall so utterly flat that they cannot be resuscitated. A banal observation such as

Peasants, workers
they are the strength
of the land.

never gets off the ground poetically, but it is no worse than

Miles of corn:
it is simple:
life is simple.

which is simply too simple for words. My favorite verbal void, however, is Brutus's toast at a sixty-course banquet in the Great Hall of the People, the Chinese Parliament. It consists of but six words, one of which is repeated three times:

Good food
good wine
good friendship.

To which one is tempted to add, somewhat rudely, "but not good poetry." However, this isn't the only minipoem which is too prosaic to function as effective poetry.

No task
is impossible:
Mao freed China.

reads more like a panegyrical platitude than a lyrical praise-poem. A longer effort such as:

I have commuted between the world's capitals:
travel is no longer an achievement;
I must begin to do meaningful things.

lacks any kind of imaginative afflatus or poetic spirit. It merely sits on the page as a series of mundane ruminations. In such poems Brutus loses the lyrical momentum he has built up elsewhere in the collection by stringing together a series of resonant images.

In Chinese poetry, Barnstone tells us,

> it is an eye that sees an image, in present time . . . The eye sees with candor and reveals only what it sees. A simple yet complex lens. For in this poetry of observation are many depths of focus and a complexity of allusions. It is the reader who sees beyond the clear picture.[9]

In Brutus's flattest poems it is difficult for us to see beyond the clear picture. Indeed, at times it is difficult to see any picture at all because there are no concrete images on which we can fasten the energies of our imagination.

In Brutus's better poems this is not so. The opening sequence in "China Poems" offers the kind of "simple yet complex lens" with "many depths of focus" which allows us to see well beyond the images presented. The first poem in the sequence is an initial impression of China, a revealing snapshot taken on the road from Peking Airport.

> Avenues of trees
> for miles:
> cicadas singing.

We experience this scene by seeing and hearing it. The trees appear to be geometrically arranged over immense distances; there is no anarchy of nature here. Man has conquered the environment, reorganized it agriculturally so it is more productive, and made efficient use of all available space. It is a well-cultivated landscape, man working in harmony with nature and rationally exploiting its resources. There is order and stability in such a world, the neat precision in the "avenues of trees for miles" suggesting that forces of disruption, inequity and imbalance have been subdued. Moreover, nature itself rejoices in the profound ecological change that has taken place; the cicadas sing because there is nothing for them to fear in this brave, new environment. They thrive and exult in their peaceful green universe. Thus, in addition to providing a graphic picture of a particular spot, the seven words of the poem imply that all's right in this Communist world. That may seem like quite a large message for a few words to carry but such is the power of the poem's suggestive imagery in the mind of at least one reader.

The next poem in the sequence has similar expansive power.

> Beyond the trees
> the limitless
> horizon.

This suggests not only an endless landscape, a vast and immeasurable panorama, but also an ever-receding horizon. One can see beyond the near and immediate to distant and future prospects. Everything is within the scope of one's ken. There are no obstacles or impediments to a vision which can embrace the entire world.

A political message is contained in this image, of course. Beyond this grove, beyond this well-ordered domain, beyond the People's Republic of China, lies the rest of the world, a horizon which offers unlimited opportunities for the extension of the Communist vision. The prospect is bright and hopeful because, from this vantage point, one can see no deterrents to the inevitable expansion of such an enlightened system. The future holds untold possibilities for spreading the Chinese outlook. Not even the sky is the limit!

The next poem reaffirms this notion by putting the subject in a new light:

> The sun is gone;
> only
> behind the near range.

In explaining this image to Ko Ching-Po, the translator of his poems, Brutus said:

> I am thinking of a mountain range--[the sun] is hidden but, in fact, one has no cause for despair because it is only because of the nearness of the mountain range [that is hidden]; in fact, the sun is still shining beyond that. . . . I guess what is implicit there . . . is a sense of hope. One may be superficially and temporarily despondent but in fact one ought to be optimistic because the sun is shining. It's just that you can't see it for a while.[10]

In other words, though things may look dark and gloomy at times, one should take comfort in the knowledge that such moments are transitory. Sunshine, illumination, enlightenment continues somewhere in the world and will return soon. Despite the near range of mountains which obscures the realities of one's true situation from time to time, the horizon is still limitless, the vistas still clear and conquerable, the Communist vision of a better world still possible. Indeed, the sun is already shining elsewhere to the west. Any temporary setback should therefore be viewed in its proper perspective. A brief eclipse of the sun does not mean the world is coming to an end. The sun may have set momentarily, but the sun also rises.

There is, of course, a South African dimension to this sequence of poems, as there tends to be in most of Brutus's poetry. Mainland China has undergone its revolution; South Africa has not yet done so. In talking about limitless horizons and transitory setbacks, Brutus is suggesting that the revolutionary struggle that was won in China can also be won elsewhere. If there are moments of despair or doubt, one should remember that the dawn is soon coming, that the cicadas will someday be singing in other radically-transformed gardens of the world.

There may be additional ways to interpret these poems that would amplify their range of semantic significance still further. Other readers will doubtless find other meanings embedded in the same lines. "The trick," as Brutus put it, "is to say little . . . and to suggest much--as much as possible." In this opening sequence of poems the trick works splendidly.

But it does not always work--at least not for every reader. Certain of Brutus's China poems, even though filled with graphic images, do not stimulate the imagination adequately. Here is one describing "A People's Commune":

Earthworks covered with moss,
an empty goldfish bowl,
a piglet, a melon.

This sequence of four images may have been intended to stir up a vision of rustic innocence but the images are too disparate, too unconnected, to form a coherent picture. The poem becomes a meaningless inventory of phenomena with no clear message to communicate. It could as easily be construed as a criticism of communal inactivity (mossy earthworks, empty goldfish bowl, a piglet the only sign of animate life in an otherwise stagnant and sterile environment) as a commendation of peasant simplicity.

Brutus actually hoped the poem would convey a very favorable image of a typical Chinese commune. He told his translator he had deliberately chosen to make the poem very simple because

> it's really trying to talk about the calm, the placidness, the contentment and joy that you can find in the commune. Everything is tranquil and there's no conflict or tension, and I'm trying to communicate this feeling with just observing what is there . . . One may have something for recreation like a goldfish bowl but if you no longer had the goldfish in the bowl, it wouldn't matter. You don't have a thirst for display or for possession.[11]

This romantic view of a utopian communal existence is not successfully evoked by the images Brutus selects. The poem says far less than the poet wants it to say.

All of Brutus's China poems are experiments in economical communication. Sometimes they succeed, sometimes they fail, but even the most dismal failures are interesting as attempts to make a few neutral words yield a great deal of meaning. Any poet who tries to achieve such resonant compression runs the risk of squeezing all vitality out of his verse and being left with only a handful of dry banalities. It is to Brutus's credit that he occasionally succeeds in making an exceedingly short string of words sing. His China poems may not be his best verse but they are far from his worst, and they reveal that he is still actively seeking new ways to express his lyrical impulse.

FOOTNOTES

1. Willis Barnstone and Ko Ching-Po, eds. and trs. The Poems of Mao Tse-tung. (Toronto, New York, London: Bantam Books, 1972), pp. 21-22.

2. Dennis Brutus, China Poems (Austin: African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center, 1975), p. 35. All poems quoted are from this edition.

3. Barnstone, p. 159.

4. Ibid., p. 157. For a more technical discussion of the chueh chu, see Harold Shadick and Ch'iao Chien, A First Course in Literary Chinese, Vol. III (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1968), pp. 571-72; and Burton Watson, Chinese Lyricism (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1971), pp. 111-12, 145-47.

5. Brutus, p. 35.

6. Not one of the poems included in Barnstone's collection appears to assume this form.

7. For a brief discussion of the main types, see Barnstone, pp. 157-59.

8. Brutus, p. 5.

9. Barnstone, p. 3.

10. Tape recording of a telephone conversation between Dennis Brutus and Ko Ching-Po, January 30, 1975.

11. Ibid.