

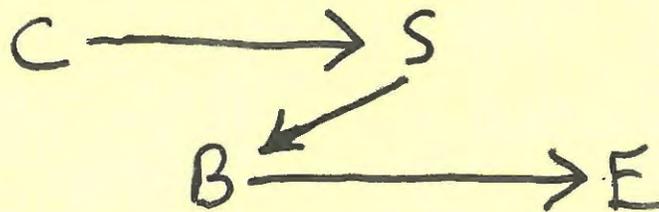
DIALECTICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE POETRY OF DENNIS BRUTUS

Bernth Lindfors

There have been four distinct phases in Dennis Brutus's poetic development, each marked by formal and thematic shifts which tend not only to reflect his changing preoccupations and professional concerns but also to document profound transformations in his conception of the nature and function of poetry. Each new phase has grown out of a personal experience which has made him question his previous attitudes toward verbal ~~art~~ and seek a more satisfying outlet for his energies of ~~art~~ articulation. As a consequence, his progress as a poet cannot be charted as a straight line moving up, down or forever forward on a monotonous horizontal plane; rather, it must be visualized as a series of reversals or turnabouts, each fresh impulse moving in a direction counter to its antecedent until an entirely new lyrical idiom is achieved. ^{To put it in ontogenetic terms,} [^]

Brutus's evolution as a poet has been not linear but dialectical. Instead of growing by extending himself further and further along a single axis, he has zigzagged.

The four ^{poles} ~~poles~~ around which Brutus's art has turned may be termed Complexity, Simplicity, Balance and Economy, the latter being an extreme form of ~~Simplicity~~ Simplicity. These poles roughly correspond to the Hegelian triad -- Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis -- with Synthesis, a balance between Thesis and Antithesis, becoming a new Thesis and generating its own ~~Antithesis~~ Antithesis. To translate these abstractions into an appropriate geometrical configuration, one could represent Brutus's career as ~~follows~~ follows:



Having postulated this theorem of dialectical development, let us now go on to examine the ~~proof~~ proof upon which it rests.

2

Brutus's first book of poems, Sirens Knuckles Boots (1963), contained a variety of lyric forms invested with many of the standard poetic conventions. There were neatly demarcated stanzas, end-rhymes, assonance, alliteration, bookish allusions, carefully balanced contrasts, paradoxes, skilful reiterations and refrains that enlarged rather than merely repeated an idea, well-reasoned arguments couched in logically connected images, and utterances so rich in symbolic suggestiveness that they spoke at several levels of significance simultaneously. There were no loose ends in this poetry, no wasted words, no compromises with the reader's dull-wittedness. This was highbrow poetry -- tight, mannered, formal and sometimes formidably difficult. Schooled in Shakespeare, Donne, Browning, Hopkins, Eliot, and other classic English poets of exceptional intellect, Brutus attempted to write poems which would challenge the mind, poems sufficiently subtle and intricate to interest any well-educated lover of poetry. It was during this period that he wrote nearly all of his most complex verse.

Brutus's greatest imaginative achievement in Sirens Knuckles Boots was the creation of an ambiguous idiom which allowed him to make both a political and an erotic statement in the same breath. Some of his poems can be read superficially as straightforward love lyrics but lurking just beneath the surface is a political undercurrent which turns the passion into militant protest. The loved one is not only a particular woman but also the poet-speaker's homeland, and the torments he experiences when contemplating her spectacular beauty, ~~tender~~ tenderness and ability to endure great suffering spur him on to bolder efforts in her behalf, efforts by which he can express the intensity of his love for her. A good example of this kind of double-breasted love lyric is "Erosion: Transkei," where the word "Eros" embedded in "Erosion" is a deliberate pun.

Under green drapes the scars scream,
red wounds wail soundlessly,
beg for assuaging, satiation;
warm life dribbles seawards with the streams.

Stanza Break >

Dear my land, open for my possessing,
 ravaged and ~~it~~ dumbly submissive to ~~it~~ our will,
 in curves and uplands my sensual delight
 mounts, and mixed with fury is amassing
 torrents tumescent with love and pain.
 Deep-dark and rich, with deceptive calmness
 time and landscape flow to new horizons --
 in anguished impatience await the quickening rains. ¹

In addition to the double-entendre that informs this entire poem, it is worth noting the formal structure the poetic statement takes. Three four-line stanzas slant-rhyming ABCA (scream/streams; possessing/amassing; pain/rains) are peppered with assonance and alliteration (e.g., "scars scream," "wounds wail," "assuaging, satiation," and the deft intermingling of long a and short i sounds in the last rhythmic line: "in anguished impatience await the quickening rains"). The poem opens with a description of tormented deprivation as old and new injuries (scars, red wounds) cry out for comfort and fulfilment. The cries of the ravaged loved one are soundless so there is a "deceptive calmness" to her plea. The poet-speaker responds with his own plea, asking her to submit to his painful and furiously mounting love. Their union promises to bring relief by producing new life, but immediate consummation of their desires is not achieved. The poem ends as it began, with the loved one, the land, waiting in agony and impatience for satisfying change. As in ~~it~~ many other poems in Sirens Knuckles Boots, the poetic argument is rounded off by a reassertion of the initial idea.

The political thrust of this poem is made more explicit by the title which identifies the despoiled landscape as the Transkei, the area of the Republic of South Africa which was designated as the first Bantustan, or Bantu homeland. The erosion of the Transkei is not only a geological reality but also clear evidence of social injustice and political oppression. But such erosion,

4

such pain, such impatience for revolutionary change is not confined to only ~~one~~ one area of Southern Africa. The Transkei also functions as a metaphor for all Bantustans and ghettos created by apartheid and other institutionalized forms of racial discrimination. The message thus has universal as well as local reverberations.

"Erosion: Transkei" is a fairly uncomplicated multi-leveled lyric compared with such poems as "A troubadour, I ~~traverse~~ traverse all my land" and "So for the moment, Sweet, is peace," upon which Brutus has commented extensively.² In the troubadour poem, for instance, there are lines in which he attempted to make a single image yield at least three different meanings simultaneously. The ~~word~~ word "Sweet" in "So, for the moment, Sweet, is peace" also had numerous special connotations for him. Indeed, ~~it~~ it would be very difficult for even the most astute student of literary ambiguity to decipher the full range of significance that such words and images were meant to carry without consulting the gloss that Brutus has provided in discussions of these poems. Some of the symbolism is private, cryptic and therefore impenetrable to anyone but the poet himself. Such poetry ~~requires~~ requires translation for the average reader.

It was while Dennis Brutus was in prison between 1964 and 1965 that he decided to stop writing this kind of super-cerebral poetry. The five months he spent in solitary confinement caused him to reexamine his verse and his attitudes toward creative self-expression. The more he looked at his poetry during this period of forced isolation, the more "horrified" he became, until finally he decided that if he ~~were~~ were ever to write again, he would write very differently:

The first thing I decided about my future poetry was that there must be no ornament, absolutely none. And the second thing I decided was you oughtn't to write for poets; you oughtn't even to write for people who read poetry, not even ~~even~~ students. You ought to write for the ordinary person: for the man who drives a bus, or the man who carries the baggage at the airport, and the woman who ~~cleans~~ cleans the

ashtrays in the restaurant. If you can write poetry which makes sense to those people, then there is some justification for writing poetry. Otherwise you have no business writing.

And therefore, there should be no ornament because ornament gets in the way. It becomes too fancy-schmancy; it becomes overelaborate. It is, in a way, a kind of pride, a self-display, a glorying in the intellect for its own sake, which is contemptible....

So I said, "You will have to set the thing down. You will 'tell it like it is,' but you will let the word do its work in the mind of the reader. And you will write poetry that a man who drives a ~~but~~ bus along the street can quote, if he feels like quoting." Very ambitious indeed.

But this is based on the idea that all people are poets. Some are just ashamed to let it be known, and some are shy to try, and some write but don't have the guts to show it to others. But we all ~~are~~ are poets because we all have the same kind of response to beauty. We may define beauty ~~in different ways~~ differently, but we all do respond to it.

So this was the assumption: don't dress it ~~up~~ up; you will just hand it over, and it will do its own work.³

The first poems he wrote after making this resolution were collected in Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison (1968). The change in idiom was immediately apparant. The diction was far simpler; rigid poetic devices such as end-rhyme, metrical regularity and symmetrical stanza structure had been all but ~~abandoned~~; conceits, ~~tortuously~~ tortuously logical ~~paradoxes~~ paradoxes, and tantalizingly ~~ambigo~~ ambiguous image-clusters could no longer be found; ornament -- ornament of virtually every kind -- had vanished almost entirely. The result was a flat, conversational mode of poetry which surprised and in some cases ~~all~~ alarmed readers who had ~~the~~ admired the technical complexity of the poems in his first volume and had expected more of the same in his second. Now,

instead of saying three things at once, Brutus was saying one thing at a time and saying it very directly. He was creating a poetry of plain statement, a poetry which bus drivers, porters and cleaning women could understand and presumably appreciate.

One example of this new idiom may suffice; describing life in prison, he wrote in the tenth "letter" to his sister-in-law Martha:

It is not all terror
and deprivation,
you know;

one comes to welcome the closer contact
and understanding one achieves
with one's fellow-men
fellows, compeers;

align



and the discipline does much to force
a shape and pattern on one's daily life
as well as on the days

and honest toil
offers some redeeming hours
for the wasted years;

so there are times
when the mind is bright and restful
though alive:

rather like the full calm morning sea. 4

Until the last line, there is not even an image in this poem. Moreover, when "the full calm morning sea" is introduced, it enters the poem as a ~~simile~~ simile, not as a metaphor or symbol with wider connotative value. Like all the other

ideas in the poem, it is there for a specific purpose and it has only one meaning. ~~This~~ This is Brutus as his simplest.

Not every poem in Letters to Martha is this stark, of course. There are some, such as "Longing" (dated August 1960) and "Abolish laughter first, I say" (dated "Mid-fifties"), which actually derive from the earlier Sirens period and manifest ~~man~~ many of the complexities characteristic of Brutus's early work. Also, there are several which are not quite as simple as they seem -- the "Colesberg" poem, for example, the subtleties of which Brutus has explicated ~~as~~ at some length. ⁵ Moreover, one finds certain of the older tendencies -- the well-rounded ~~sta statement~~ statement, the learned allusion or quotation, the harmonious imagery -- resurfacing in several poems and giving an orderly appearance even to the freest-flowing lines. In other words, there is evidence of continuity as well as change as Brutus shifts from complex to simple registers of poetic expression. The transformation is sudden and obvious but not absolute.

In July 1966, a year after ~~bing~~ being released from prison, Brutus left South Africa on an "exit permit," a permit which did not allow him to reenter his homeland. His life in exile began with four years of anti-apartheid work in London and has continued since September 1970 in the United States, where he has been teaching as Professor of English at Northwestern University and, in the 1974-75 academic year, as Visiting Professor of English and Ethnic Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. During these years his poetry has ~~u~~ undergone two modifications, first a minor modulation to a position earlier described as Balance, then a major shift to what could be called extreme Economy. Again, though these two successive changes are observable in much of what he has written ~~4~~ since going into exile, one occasionally finds new poems which could be placed in the earlier categories of Complexity or Simplicity. In other words, Brutus retains the capacity to express himself in his earlier poetic modes even while consciously attempting to define a new style. Whereas certain of the poems

8

he has composed in exile can be viewed as throwbacks or lapses into a former habit of articulation, the fresh impulses, the newer tendencies are dominant in most of what he has written since July 1966.

The two major thematic preoccupations in Brutus's early exile poetry are (1) his awareness of the personal freedom and mobility he has gained while others remain confined and suffering in South Africa, and (2) his recognition of what he has lost in leaving the homeland he dearly loves ~~to~~ ^{to and traveling} restlessly about the world in quest of compelling but sometimes elusive goals. Much of this poetry could be characterized as both nostalgic and plaintive -- the unhappy recollections and reflections of a homesick poet. Examples can be taken from Poems from Algiers (1970) which was written while Brutus was attending the First Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers in 1969, Thoughts Abroad (1970) which was written piecemeal in various cities throughout the world and published under a pseudonym so it could be sold and circulated in South Africa, and Part III of A Simple Lust (1973) which includes some American and English poems as well as the verse published in the two preceding collections.

Perhaps a good place to begin would be with one of the first London poems in A Simple Lust:

I walk in the English quicksilver dusk
and spread my hands to the soft spring rain
and see the streetlights gild the flowering trees
and the ~~At~~ late light breaking through patches of broken cloud
and I think of the ~~At~~ Island's desolate dusks
and the swish of the Island's haunting rain
and the desperate frenzy straining our prisoned breasts:
and the men who are still there crouching now
in the grey cells, on the grey floors, stubborn and bowed. 5

The painful recollection of Robben Island, the contrast between freedom and

confinement, the manifold sensory perceptions -- all these are typical of Brutus's poetry in exile, but even more noteworthy is the full-bodied texture of the poem. ~~In~~ Brutus is no longer writing unornamented verse. The diction is simple, the form irregular, the line length flexible instead of fixed, but there are also traces of alliteration, slanted end-rhymes (dusk/dusks/breasts; rain/rains; cloud/now/bowed), and deliberate parallelism in the seven lines beginning with the word "and." Moreover, the rhetorical structure of the poetic statement is carefully balanced to make an effective contrast. The silver and gold ambience of an English dusk is offset by the desolate greyness of South African prison cells. England's "soft spring rain" is placed in opposition to Robben Island's "haunting rain." The poet-speaker ~~is~~ walks freely and ~~spreads~~ spreads his hands expansively ~~while~~ while the prisoners crouch "stubborn and bowed." The poem is not a bald string of abstract nouns and verbs stretched out into a prosaic statement but rather a succession of graphic, sentient perceptions which turn poignant when juxtaposed. Because of its rich texture, because it is obviously well-wrought without being highly mannered or ambiguous, this poem must be placed somewhere between the ~~pl~~ polar extremes of Complexity ~~and~~ and ~~A~~ Simplicity toward which ~~Brutu~~ Brutus had gravitated previously. It is a middle-of-the-road poem, neither excessively ~~he~~ plain nor unusually fancy. It belongs to the period of Balance (or Synthesis) in Brutus's poetry.

Perhaps another example will be helpful here, this time a poem ~~about~~ about poetry itself:

Sometimes a mesh of ideas
 webs the entraced mind,
 the assenting delighted mental eye;
 and sometimes the thrust and ~~clash~~ clash
 of forged and metallled words
 makes musical clangour in the brain;
 and sometimes a nude and simple word

no stanza break

standing unlit or unadorned
 may plead mutely in cold or dark
 for an answering warmth, an enlightening sympathy;
 state the bare fact and let it sing. 7

The poetic statement, trisected into meticulously ~~con~~ counterpoised clauses which onomatopoeically render three of the stylistic options available to any user of language, is artful without being enigmatic. Though the poem yields its meaning easily and with seemingly effortless grace, it is actually more complicated than it appears, depending for its effect on a calculated orchestration of syntax, image and sound toward the trim finality of the last line: "state the bare fact and let it sing." Such singing is not done effectively without a good score. In the best of Brutus's balanced poetry, his compositional scoring is surreptitious, his art almost invisible.

Brutus might have remained a well-balanced poet longer had he not been invited to the Peoples' Republic of China in the summer of 1973 to represent the South African Table Tennis Board and the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee at a Friendship ~~Inviatio~~ Invitational Table Tennis Tournament in which eighty-six countries from Africa, Asia and Latin America participated. Shortly before taking the trip he ~~deisco~~ discovered Mao Tse-tung's ~~poetyr~~ poetry in a new translation by Willis Barnstone and Ko Ching-Po. Extremely impressed with Mao's classic economy as a poet, he began to experiment with Chinese modes of poetic expression, attempting to capture in his own verse in English the Spartan laconism of what he ~~he~~ had read. In a note to his China Poems (1975) Brutus explains his intention:

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. The trick is to say little (the nearer to ~~nothe~~ 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 ~~how~~ is ~~how~~ brought by the r^eader/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.

Indent
→
Continue indentation begun on the previous page

Goose-grey
clouds
lour

There is an enormous gap to be traversed in the mind between the softness (silliness is also suggested) ~~between~~ of "goose-grey" and the thunderous menace of "lour" presaging a storm.

Exile:
schizophrenia:
suicide

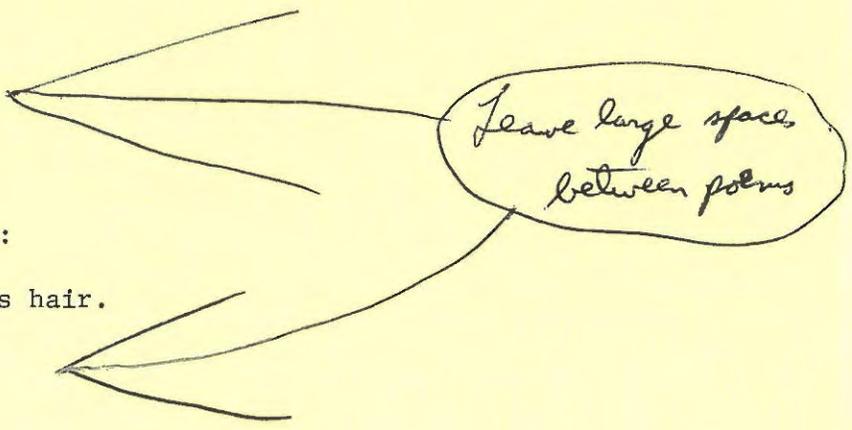
Consider the ~~terror~~ terror of the journey to be made in the mind from exile to the declension of suicide. 8

The verse in Brutus's China Poems is economical to the point of being epigrammatic. ~~Take~~ Take, for example, the following ~~three~~ *mini poems*.

It is to preserve
beauty
that we destroy.

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

The Long Wall:
a soldier
holding a flower. 9



These poems operate on the principle of paradox, of unexpected and seemingly illogical leaps of thought or image which give the impression of ~~the~~ being self-contradictory: we destroy in order to preserve; chips of ^{an ancient art material} (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~~ 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. 10

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 ~~na~~ 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 ~~is~~ strategy of generating "unlimited resonances in the mind" is to create ironies, ambiguities and contradictions which ~~can~~ can never be completely ~~rel~~ resolved. A few well-chosen words could conceivably produce ~~tensions~~ myriad tensions in the imagination. The

poet would thus get maximum mental mileage with a ~~minu~~ 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 ~~bangu~~ 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."

During his year in Austin, Brutus has continued to experiment with economical poetic forms, adapting the Chinese idiom he admires to suit new subject matter and new emotions. I am not at liberty to discuss certain of these unpublished works but Brutus has consented to allow me to quote a few examples of recent tendencies in his terse verse. One of these was dashed off, I recall, shortly after we had been discussing the care and preservation of his manuscripts.

Bach's wife, they say
made curlpapers
from his manuscripts. 12

He has written many other ~~mini~~ minipoems equally flippant in tone, including ~~an entire sequence wjocj os a bai bawdu empi~~ an entire sequence which is bawdy enough to make strong men blush. These "one-liners" in two or three lines represent the lighter side of his present poetic disposition.

A more serious side is visible in poems concerned with his relationship to South Africa. He still writes homesick verse occasionally, focusing on the disquieting reminders of South Africa which intrude upon his awareness at odd moments, forcing him to contemplate his existence in exile. His six-poem "South African Sequence" in South African Voices sounds a familiar plaintive note, but the individual poems now tend to be shorter, pithier, more Chinese:

Golden oaks and jacarandas
flowering:
exquisite images
to ~~wrec~~ wrench the heart.

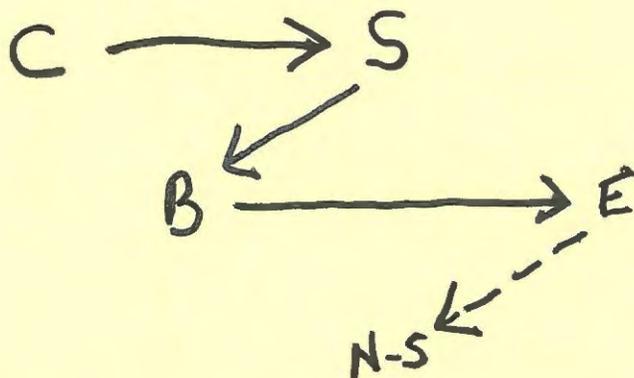
Another sample:

At night
to put myself to sleep
I play alphabet games
but something reminds me of you
and I cry out
and am wakened. 13

Economy remains the defining principle of these poems.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that Brutus has given up writing longer poems entirely and has never returned to former habits of composition since visiting China. At times it is necessary for him to make an extended statement, especially when he wants to ~~make a~~ underscore a ~~pa~~ specific political point or get a personal message across to a particular individual. But even in these instances the longer poems he writes today tend to be a bit simpler and

freer than those ~~he~~ he wrote a few years ago in his balanced phase. If he periodically swings away from austere economy, he does so in ~~h~~ the direction of extended simplicity rather than of increased complexity. To put it in Hegelian terms again, the Synthesis of his Balanced ~~and~~ phase and his Economical phase is a new form of Simplicity -- Neo-Simplicity, if you like. On the graph it could be represented thus:



may not yet have
Though Brutus has ~~not yet~~ swung in the direction of Neo-Simplicity emphatically enough for us to delineate it as a major tendency in his current development, it seems reasonable to assume that it may ^{still} offer him the only acceptable alternative to the taciturn Chinese modes of expression he has been favoring since the summer of 1973. If the pendulum ever swings ~~away~~ completely away from extreme Economy, it is unlikely that it will swing all the way back to Balance or Complexity.

If we follow this dialectical progression to its logical conclusion, the next step after Neo-Simplicity -- indeed the only Antithesis that would take Brutus beyond extreme Economy -- would be Silence, ~~and~~ an absolute cessation of poetic articulation. Curiously enough, Brutus appears to have anticipated moving ultimately in this direction. In a four-line poem written this February, he said:

Double space

Music, at its highest strains towards silence: verse, when most expressive, seeks to be wordless. 14

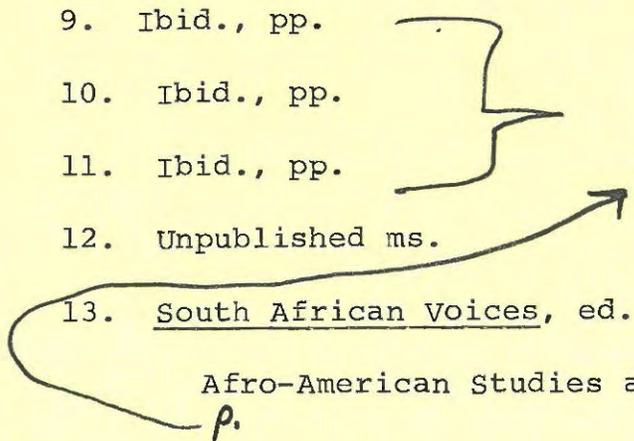
Double space
this poem, as you did the others.

At this point criticism must become wordless too.

FOOTNOTES

- 1. Dennis Brutus, A Simple Lust (New York: Hill and Wang, 1973), p. 16.
Two errors which appeared in this poem when originally published in Sirens Knuckles Boots (Ibadan: Mbari Publications, 1963) have been corrected in this collection of Brutus's poetry.
- 2. "Interview with Dennis Brutus," Palaver: Interviews with Five African Writers in Texas, ed. Bernth Lindfors et al. (Austin: African and Afro-American Research Institute, University of Texas, 1972), ~~pp. 26-28, 34-36.~~
pp. 26-28, 34-36.
- 3. Ibid., p. 29.
- 4. A Simple Lust, pp. 60-61. The poem originally appeared in Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison (London: Heinemann, 1968), p. 11.
- 5. Palaver, pp. 29-31.
- 6. A Simple Lust, p. 102.
- 7. Ibid., p. 136.
- 8. Dennis Brutus, China Poems (Austin: African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center, University of Texas, 1975), p. 35.
- 9. Ibid., pp.
- 10. Ibid., pp.
- 11. Ibid., pp.
- 12. Unpublished ms.
- 13. South African Voices, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Austin: African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center, University of Texas, 1975),
p.
- 14. Unpublished ms.

I'll insert these page numbers later.



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Feb. 20, 75

Bob — Dialectical Dev. (etc)

Though I say it a little smugly, a most impressive performance.

And, in examining formal dev. (instead of usual thematic exam) an important inquiry.

Two poems wd support some of yr concluding remarks portion, both in HRE collection:

Sunset flush & I will not forgive — letter goes right back to SA (This Sun; Common hate, etc).

A sentence on p. 14 needs to be re-cast: too revealing at present time.

Sunday, you might look at my ideas about my work as I now view it: among others that

① my exploration of the accidents of exile is more searching (with the possible exception of Noyes) than any other South African (perhaps African?) poet!

② my examination of male-female relations — Andromed & erotic — is among the most extensive of African poets. Yes &.

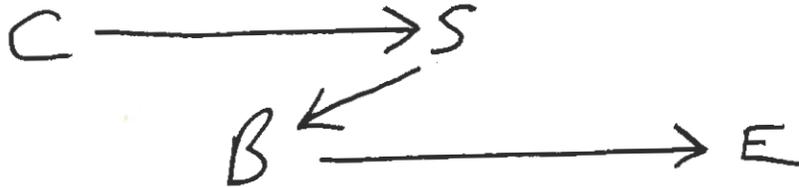
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Bernth Lindfors

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with Synthesis, a balance between Thesis and Antithesis, becoming a new Thesis and generating its own Antithesis. To translate these abstractions into an appropriate geometrical configuration, one could represent Brutus's career as follows:



Having postulated this theorem of dialectical development, let us now go on to examine the proof upon which it rests.

Brutus's first book of poems, Sirens Knuckles Boots (1963), contained a variety of lyric forms invested with many of the standard poetic conventions. There were neatly demarcated stanzas, end-rhymes, assonance, alliteration, bookish allusions, carefully balanced contrasts, paradoxes, skilful reiterations and refrains that enlarged rather than merely repeated an idea, well-reasoned arguments couched in logically connected images, and utterances so rich in symbolic suggestiveness that they spoke at several levels of significance simultaneously. There were no loose ends in this poetry, no wasted words, no compromises with the reader's dull-wittedness. This was highbrow poetry -- tight, mannered, formal and sometimes formidably difficult. Schooled in Shakespeare, Donne, Browning, Hopkins, Eliot and other classic English poets of exceptional intellect, Brutus attempted to write poems which would challenge the mind, poems sufficiently subtle and intricate to interest any well-educated lover of poetry. It was during this period that he wrote nearly all of his most complex verse.

Brutus's greatest imaginative achievement in Sirens Knuckles Boots was the creation of an ambiguous idiom which allowed him to make both a political and an erotic statement in the same breath. Some of his poems can be read superficially as straightforward love lyrics but lurking just beneath the surface is a political undercurrent which turns the passion into militant protest. The loved one is not only a particular woman but also the poet-speaker's homeland, and the torments he experiences when contemplating her spectacular beauty, tenderness and ability to endure great suffering spur him on to bolder efforts in her behalf, efforts by which he can express the intensity of his love for her. A good example of this kind of double-breasted love lyric is "Erosion: Transkei," where the word "Eros" embedded in "Erosion" is a deliberate pun.

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 red wounds wail soundlessly,
 beg for assuaging, satiation;
 warm life dribbles seawards with the streams.

Dear my land, open for my possessing,
 ravaged and dumbly submissive to our will,
 in curves and uplands my sensual delight
 mounts, and mixed with fury is amassing

torrents tumescent with love and pain.

Deep-dark and rich, with deceptive calmness
 time and landscape flow to new horizons --

in anguished impatience await the quickening rains.¹

In addition to the double-entendre that informs this entire poem, it is worth noting the formal structure the poetic statement takes. Three four-line stanzas slant-rhyming ABCA (scream-streams; possessing/amassing; pain/rains) are peppered with assonance and alliteration (e.g., "scars scream," "wounds wail," "assuaging, satiation," and the deft intermingling of long a and short i sounds in the last rhythmic line: "in anguished impatience await the quickening rains"). The poem opens with a description of tormented deprivation as old and new injuries (scars, red wounds) cry out for comfort and fulfilment. The cries of the ravaged loved one are soundless so there is a "deceptive calmness" to her plea. The poet-speaker responds with his own plea, asking her to submit to his painful and furiously mounting love. Their union promises to bring relief by producing new life, but immediate consummation of their desires is not achieved. The poem ends as it began, with the loved one, the land, waiting in agony and impatience for satisfying change. As in many other poems in Sirens Knuckles Boots, the poetic argument is rounded off by a reassertion of the initial idea.

The political thrust of this poem is made more explicit by the title which identifies the despoiled landscape as the Transkei, the area of the Republic of South Africa which was designated as the first Bantustan, or Bantu homeland. The erosion of the Transkei is not only a geological reality but also clear evidence of social injustice and political oppression. But such

erosion, such pain, such impatience for revolutionary change is not confined to only one area of Southern Africa. The Transkei also functions as a metaphor for all Bantustans and ghettos created by apartheid and other institutionalized forms of racial discrimination. The message thus has universal as well as local reverberations.

"Erosion: Transkei" is a fairly uncomplicated multi-leveled lyric compared with such poems as "A troubadour, I tr averse all my land" and "So for the moment, Sweet, is peace," upon which Brutus has commented extensively.² In the troubadour poem, for instance, there are lines in which he attempted to make a single image yield at least three different meanings simultaneously. The word "Sweet" in "So, for the moment, Sweet, is peace" also had numerous special connotations for him. Indeed, it would be very difficult for even the most astute student of literary ambiguity to decipher the full range of significance that such words and images were meant to carry without consulting the gloss that Brutus has provided in discussions of these poems. Some of the symbolism is private, cryptic and therefore impenetrable to anyone but the poet himself. Such poetry requires translation for the average reader.

It was while Dennis Brutus was in prison between 1964 and 1965 that he decided to stop writing this kind of super-cerebral poetry. The five months he spent in solitary confinement caused him to reexamine his verse and his attitudes toward creative self-expression. The more he looked at his poetry during this

period of forced isolation, the more "horrified" he became, until finally he decided that if he were ever to write again, he would write very differently:

The first thing I decided about my future poetry was that there must be no ornament, absolutely none. And the second thing I decided was you oughtn't to write for people who read poetry, not even students. You ought to write for the ordinary person: for the man who drives a bus, or the man who carries the baggage at the airport, and the woman who cleans the ashtrays in the restaurant. If you can write poetry which makes sense to those people, then there is some justification for writing poetry. Otherwise you have no business writing.

And therefore, there should be no ornament because ornament gets in the way. It becomes too fancy-schmancy; it becomes overelaborate. It is, in a way, a kind of pride, a self-display, a glorying in the intellect for its own sake, which is contemptible . . .

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But this is based on the idea that all people are poets. Some are just ashamed to let it be known, and some are shy to try, and some write but don't have the guts to show it to others. But we all are poets because we all have the same kind

response to beauty. We may define beauty differently, but we all do respond to it.

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The first poems he wrote after making this resolution were collected in Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison (1968). The change in idiom was immediately apparent. The diction was far simpler; rigid poetic devices such as end-rhyme, metrical regularity and symmetrical stanza structure had been all but abandoned; conceits, tortuously logical paradoxes, and tantalizing ambiguous image-clusters could no longer be found; ornament -- ornament of virtually every kind -- had vanished almost entirely. The result was a flat, conversational mode of poetry which surprised and in some cases alarmed readers who had admired the technical complexity of the poems in his first volume and had expected more of the same in his second. Now, instead of saying three things at once, Brutus was saying one thing at a time and saying it very directly. He was creating a poetry of plain statement, a poetry which bus drivers, porters and cleaning women could understand and presumably appreciate.

One example of this new idiom may suffice; describing life in prison, he wrote in the tenth "letter" to his sister-in-law Martha:

It is not all terror
and deprivation,
you know;

one comes to welcome the closer contact
and understanding one achieves
with one's fellow-men
fellows, compeers;

and the discipline does much to force
a shape and pattern on one's daily life
as well as on the days

and honest toil
offers some redeeming hours
for the wasted years;

so there are times
when the mind is bright and restful
though alive:

rather like the full calm morning sea.⁴

Until the last line, there is not even an image in this poem. Moreover, when "the full calm morning sea" is introduced, it enters the poem as a simile, not as a metaphor or symbol with wider connotative value. Like all the other ideas in the poem, it is there for a specific purpose and it has only one meaning. This is Brutus at his simplest.

Not every poem in Letters to Martha is this stark, of course. There are some, such as "Longing" (dated August 1960) and "Abolish laughter first, I say" (dated "Mid-fifties"), which actually derive from the earlier Sirens period and manifest many of the complexities characteristic of Brutus's early work. Also, there are several which are not quite as simple as they seem -- the "Colesberg" poem, for example, the subtleties of which Brutus has explicated at some length.⁵ Moreover, one finds certain of the older tendencies -- the well-rounded statement, the learned allusion or quotation, the harmonious imagery -- resurfacing in several poems and giving an orderly appearance to even the freest-flowing lines. In other words, there is evidence of continuity as well as change as Brutus shifts from complex to simple registers of poetic expression. The transformation is sudden and obvious but not absolute.

In July 1966, a year after being released from prison, Brutus left South Africa on an "exit permit," a permit which did not allow him to reenter his homeland. His life in exile began with four years of anti-apartheid work in London and has continued since September 1970 in the United States, where he has been teaching as Professor of English at Northwestern University and, in the 1974-75 academic year, as Visiting Professor of English and Ethnic Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. During these years his poetry has undergone two modifications, first a minor modulation to a position earlier described as Balance, then a major shift to what could be called extreme Economy. Again

though these two successive changes are observable in much of what he has written since going into exile, one occasionally finds new poems which could be placed in the earlier categories of Complexity or Simplicity. In other words, Brutus retains the capacity to express himself in his earlier poetic modes even while consciously attempting to define a new style. Whereas certain of the poems he has composed in exile can be viewed as throwbacks or lapses into a former habit of articulation, the fresh impulses, the newer tendencies are dominant in most of what he has written since July 1966.

The two major thematic preoccupations in Brutus's early exile poetry are (1) his awareness of the personal freedom and mobility he has gained while others remain confined and suffering in South Africa, and (2) his recognition of what he has lost in leaving the homeland he dearly loves and traveling restlessly about the world in quest of compelling but sometimes elusive goals. Much of this poetry could be characterized as both nostalgic and plaintive -- the unhappy recollections and reflections of a homesick poet. Examples can be taken from Poems from Algiers (1970) which was written while Brutus was attending the First Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers in 1969, Thoughts Abroad (1970) which was written piecemeal in various cities throughout the world and published under a pseudonym so it could be sold and circulated in South Africa, and Part III of A Simple Lust (1973) which includes some American and English poems as well as the verse published in the two preceding collections.

Perhaps a good place to begin would be with one of the first London poems in A Simple Lust:

I walk in the English quicksilver dusk
 and spread my hands to the soft spring rain
 and see the streetlights gild the flowering trees
 and the late light breaking through patches of broken cloud
 and I think of the Island's desolate dusks
 and the swish of the Island's haunting rain
 and the desperate frenzy straining our prisoned breasts:
 and the men who are still there crouching now
 in the grey cells, on the grey floors, stubborn and bowed.⁶

The painful recollection of Robben Island, the contrast between freedom and confinement, the manifold sensory perceptions -- all these are typical of Brutus's poetry in exile, but even more noteworthy is the full-bodied texture of the poem. Brutus is no longer writing unornamented verse. The diction is simple, the form irregular, the line length flexible instead of fixed, but there are also traces of alliteration, slanted end-rhymes (dusk/dusks/breasts; rain/rains; cloud/now/bowed), and deliberate parallelism in the seven lines beginning with the word "and." Moreover, the rhetorical structure of the poetic statement is carefully balanced to make an effective contrast. The silver and gold ambience of an English dusk is offset by the desolate greyness of South African prison cells. England's "soft spring rain" is placed in opposition to Robben Island's "haunting rain." The poet-speaker walks freely and spreads his hands expansively while the prisoners crouch "stubborn and bowed." The poem is not a bald string of abstract nouns and verbs stretched out

into a prosaic statement but rather a succession of graphic, sentient perceptions which turn poignant when juxtaposed. Because of its rich texture, because it is obviously well-wrought without being highly mannered or ambiguous, this poem must be placed somewhere between the polar extremes of Complexity and Simplicity toward which Brutus had gravitated previously. It is a middle-of-the-road poem, neither excessively plain nor unusually fancy. It belongs to the period of Balance (or Synthesis) in Brutus's poetry.

Perhaps another example will be helpful here, this time a poem about poetry itself:

Sometimes a mesh of ideas
 webs the entranced mind,
 the assenting delighted mental eye;
 and sometimes the thrust and clash
 of forged and metalled words
 makes musical clangour in the brain;
 and sometimes a nude and simple word
 standing unlit or unadorned
 may plead mutely in cold or dark
 for an answering warmth, an enlightening sympathy;
 state the bare fact and let it sing.⁷

The poetic statement, trisected into meticulously counterpoised clauses which onomatopoetically render three of the stylistic options available to any user of language, is artful without being enigmatic. Though the poem yields its meaning easily and with seemingly effortless grace, it is actually more complicated

than it appears, depending for its effect on a calculated orchestration of syntax, image and sound toward the trim finality of the last line: "state the bare fact and let it sing." Such singing is not done effectively without a good score. In the best of Brutus's balanced poetry, his compositional scoring is surreptitious, his art almost invisible.

Brutus might have remained a well-balanced poet longer had he not been invited to the Peoples' Republic of China in the summer of 1973 to represent the South African Table Tennis Board and the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee at a Friendship Invitational Table Tennis Tournament in which eighty-six countries from Africa, Asia and Latin America participated. Shortly before taking the trip he discovered Mao Tse-tung's poetry in a new translation by Willis Barnstone and Ko Ching-Po. Extremely impressed with Mao's classic economy as a poet, he began to experiment with Chinese modes of poetic expression, attempting to capture in his own verse in English the Spartan laconism of what he had read. In a note to his China Poems (1975) Brutus explains his intention:

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. 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 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.⁸

The verse in Brutus's China Poems is economical to the point of being epigrammatic. Take, for example, the following three mini-poems.

It is to preserve

beauty

that we destroy.

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

*sent +
align*

~~At~~ The Long Wall:
 a soldier
 holding a flower.⁹

These poems operates 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 material (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.¹⁰

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

Peasant, 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.¹¹

To which one is tempted to add, somewhat rudely, "but not good poetry."

During his year in Austin, Brutus has continued to experiment with economical poetic forms, adapting the Chinese idiom he admires to suit new subject matter and new emotions. I am not at liberty to discuss certain of these unpublished works but Brutus has consented to allow me to quote a few examples of recent tendencies in his terse verse. One of these was dashed off, I recall, shortly after we had been discussing the care and preservation of his manuscripts.

Bach's wife, they say
 made curlpapers
 from his manuscripts.¹²

He has written many other minipoems equally flippant in tone,

including an entire sequence which is bawdy enough to make strong men blush. These "one-liners" in two or three lines represent the lighter side of his present poetic disposition.

A more serious side is visible in poems concerned with his relationship to South Africa. He still writes homesick verse occasionally, focusing on the disquieting reminders of South Africa which intrude upon his awareness at odd moments, forcing him to contemplate his existence in exile. His six-poem "South African Sequence" in South African Voice sounds a familiar plaintive note, but the individual poems now tend to be shorter, pithier, more Chinese:

Golden oaks and jacarandas
 flowering:
 exquisite images
 to wrench the heart.

Another sample:

At night
 to put myself to sleep
 I play alphabet games
 but something reminds me of you
 and I cry out
 and am wakened.¹³

Economy remains the defining principle of these poems.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that Brutus has given up writing longer poems entirely and has never returned

enough, Brutus appears to have anticipated moving ultimately in this direction. In a four-line poem written this February, he said:

Music, at its highest
strains toward silence:
verse, when most expressive,
seeks to be wordless.¹⁴

At this point criticism must become wordless too.

FOOTNOTES

1. Dennis Brutus, A Simple Lust (New York: Hill and Wang, 1973), p. 16. Two errors which appeared in this poem when originally published in Sirens Knuckles Boots (Ibadan: Mbari Publications, 1963) have been corrected in this collection of Brutus's poetry.
2. "Interview with Dennis Brutus," Palaver: Interviews with Five African Writers in Texas, ed. Bernth Lindfors et al. (Austin: African and Afro-American Research Institute, University of Texas, 1972), pp. 26-28, 34-36.
3. Ibid., p. 29.
4. A Simple Lust, pp. 60-61. The poem originally appeared in Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison (London: Heinemann, 1968), p. 11.
5. Palaver, pp. 29-31.
6. A Simple Lust, p. 102.
7. Ibid., ~~pp.~~ p. 136.
8. Dennis Brutus, China Poems (Austin: African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center, University of Texas, 1975), p. 35
9. Ibid., pp. 18, 24, 17.
10. Ibid., pp. ~~10~~, 9.
11. Ibid., pp. 20, 21, 12.
12. Unpublished ms.
13. South African Voices, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Austin: African Afro-American Studies and Research Center, University of Texas, 1975), p. 33
14. ~~Unpublished ms.~~ Dennis Brutus, Sfrains (Austin: Troubadour Press, 1975), p. 36.



DIALECTICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE POETRY OF DENNIS BRUTUS

Bernth Lindfors

There have been four distinct phases in Dennis Brutus's poetic development, each marked by formal and thematic shifts which tend not only to reflect his changing preoccupations and professional concerns but also to document profound transformations in his conception of the nature and function of poetry. Each new phase has grown out of a personal experience which has made him question his previous attitudes toward verbal ~~art~~ art and seek a more satisfying outlet for his energies of ~~art~~ articulation. As a consequence, his progress as a poet cannot be charted as a straight line moving up, down or forever forward on a monotonous horizontal plane; rather, it must be visualized as a series of reversals or turnabouts, each fresh impulse moving in a direction counter to its antecedent until an entirely new lyrical idiom is achieved. Brutus's evolution as a poet has been not linear but dialectical. Instead of growing by extending himself further and further along a single axis, he has zigzagged.

The four poles around which Brutus's art has turned may be termed Complexity, Simplicity, Balance and Economy, the latter being an extreme form of ~~Simplicity~~ Simplicity. These poles roughly correspond to the Hegelian triad -- Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis -- with Synthesis, a balance between Thesis and Antithesis, becoming a new Thesis and generating its own ~~Antithesis~~ Antithesis. To translate these abstractions into an appropriate geometrical configuration, one could represent Brutus's career as follows:

Having postulated this theorem of dialectical development, let us now go on to examine the proof upon which it rests.

2

Brutus's first book of poems, Sirens Knuckles Boots (1963), contained a variety of lyric forms invested with many of the standard poetic conventions. There were neatly demarcated stanzas, end-rhymes, assonance, alliteration, bookish allusions, carefully balanced contrasts, paradoxes, and skilful reiterations and refrains that enlarged rather than merely repeated an idea, well-reasoned arguments couched in logically connected images, and utterances so rich in symbolic suggestiveness that they spoke at several levels of significance simultaneously. There were no loose ends in this poetry, no wasted words, no compromises with the reader's dull-wittedness. This was highbrow poetry -- tight, mannered, formal and sometimes formidably difficult. Schooled in Shakespeare, Donne, Browning, Hopkins, Eliot, and other classic English poets of exceptional intellect, Brutus attempted to write poems which would challenge the mind, poems sufficiently subtle and intricate to interest any well-educated lover of poetry. It was during this period that he wrote nearly all of his most complex verse.

Brutus's greatest imaginative achievement in Sirens Knuckles Boots was the creation of an ambiguous idiom which allowed him to make both a political and an erotic statement in the same breath. Some of his poems can be read superficially as straightforward love lyrics but lurking just beneath the surface is a political undercurrent which turns the passion into militant protest. The loved one is not only a particular woman but also the poet-speaker's homeland, and the torments he experiences when contemplating her spectacular beauty, ~~tender~~ tenderness and ability to endure great suffering spur him on to bolder efforts in her behalf, efforts by which he can express the intensity of his love for her. A good example of this kind of double-barreled love lyric is "Erosion: Transkei," where the word "Eros" embedded in "Erosion" is a deliberate pun.

Under green drapes the scars scream,
red wounds wail soundlessly,
beg for assuaging, satiation;
warm life dribbles seawards with the streams.

2

Dear my land, open for my possessing,
ravaged and dumbly submissive to our will,
in curves and uplands my sensual delight
mounts, and mixed with fury is amassing

torrents tumescent with love and pain.
Deep-dark and rich, with deceptive calmness
time and landscape flow to new horizons --
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In addition to the double-entendre that informs this entire poem, it is worth noting the formal structure the poetic statement takes. Three four-line stanzas slant-rhyming ABCA (scream/streams; possessing/amassing; pain/rains) are peppered with assonance and alliterations (e.g., "scars scream," "wounds wail," "assuaging, satiation," and the deft intermingling of a long a and short i sounds in the last rhythmic line "in anguished impatience await the quickening rains"). The poem opens with a description of tormented deprivation as old and new injuries (scars, red wounds) cry out for comfort and fulfilment. The cries of the ravaged loved one are soundless so there is a "deceptive calmness" to her plea. The poet-speaker responds with his own plea, asking her to submit to his painful and furiously mounting love. Their union promises to bring relief by producing new life, but immediate consummation of their desires is not achieved. The poem ends as it began, with the loved one, the land, waiting in agony and impatience for satisfying change. As in ~~many~~ many other poems in Sirens Knuckles Boots, the poetic argument is rounded off by a reassertion of the initial idea.

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8

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The two major thematic preoccupations in Brutus's early exile poetry are (1) his awareness of the personal freedom and mobility he has gained while others remain confined and suffering in South Africa, and (2) his recognition of what he has lost in leaving the homeland he dearly loves and traveling restlessly about the world in quest of compelling but sometimes elusive goals. Much of this poetry could be characterized as both nostalgic and plaintive -- the unhappy recollections and reflections of a homesick poet. Examples can be taken from Poems from Algiers (1970) which was written while Brutus was attending the First Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers in 1969, Thoughts Abroad (1970) which was written piecemeal in various cities throughout the world and published under a pseudonym so it could be sold and circulated in South Africa, and Part III of A Simple Lust (1973) which includes some American and English poems as well as the verse published in the two preceding collections.

Perhaps a good place to begin would be with one of the first London poems in A Simple Lust:

I walk in the English quicksilver dusk
and spread my hands to the soft spring rain
and see the streetlights gild the flowering trees
and the late light breaking through patches of broken cloud
and I think of the Island's desolate dusks
and the swish of the Island's haunting rain
and the desperate frenzy straining our prisoned breasts:
and the men who are still there crouching now
in the grey cells, on the grey floors, stubborn and bowed.

The painful recollection of Robben Island, the contrast between freedom and

9

confinement, the manifold sensory perceptions -- all these are typical of Brutus's poetry in exile, but even more noteworthy is the full-bodied texture of the poem. ~~In~~ Brutus is no longer writing unornamented verse. The diction is simple, the form irregular, the line length flexible instead of fixed, but there are also traces of alliteration, slanted end-rhymes (dusk/dusks/breasts; rain/rains; cloud/now/bowed), and deliberate parallelism in the seven lines beginning with the word "and." Moreover, the rhetorical structure of the poetic statement is carefully balanced to make an effective contrast. The silver and gold ambience of an English dusk is offset by the desolate greyness of South African prison cells. England's "soft spring rain" is placed in opposition to Robben Island's "haunting rain." The poet-speaker ~~from~~ walks freely and ~~spreads~~ spreads his hands expansively ~~while~~ while the prisoners crouch "stubborn and bowed." The poem is not a bald string of abstract nouns and verbs stretched out into a prosaic statement but rather a succession of graphic, sentient perceptions which turn poignant when juxtaposed. Because of its rich texture, because it is obviously well-wrought without being highly mannered or ambiguous, this poem must be placed somewhere between the ~~the~~ polar extremes of Complexity and Simplicity toward which ~~Brutus~~ Brutus had gravitated previously. It is a middle-of-the-road poem, neither excessively ~~the~~ plain nor unusually fancy. It belongs to the period of Balance (or Synthesis) in Brutus's poetry.

Perhaps another example will be helpful here, this time a poem ~~about~~ about poetry itself;

Sometimes a mesh of ideas
webs the entranced mind,
the assenting delighted mental eye;
and sometimes the thrust and ~~of~~ clash
of forged and metallised words
makes musical clangour in the brain;
and sometimes a nude and simple word

standing unlit or unadorned
 may plead mutely in cold or dark
 for an answering warmth, an enlightening sympathy,
 state the bare fact and let it sing.

The poetic statement, trisected into meticulously ~~and~~ counterpoised clauses which onomatopoeetically render three of the stylistic options available to any user of language, is artful without being enigmatic. Though the poem yields its meaning easily and with seemingly effortless grace, it is actually more complicated than it appears, depending for its effect on a calculated orchestration of syntax, image and sound toward the trim finality of the last line: "state the bare fact and let it sing." Such singing is not done effectively without a good score. In the best of Brutus's balanced poetry, his compositional scoring is surreptitious, his art almost invisible.

Brutus might have remained a well-balanced poet longer had he not been invited to the Peoples' Republic of China in the summer of 1973 to represent the South African Table Tennis Board and the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee at a Friendship ~~Invitation~~ Invitational Table Tennis Tournament in which eighty-six countries from Africa, Asia and Latin American participated. Shortly before taking the trip he ~~discovered~~ discovered Mao Tse-tung's ~~poetry~~ poetry in a new translation by Willis Barnstone and Ko Ching-Po. Extremely impressed with Mao's classic economy as a poet, he began to experiment with Chinese modes of poetic ~~expression~~ expression, attempting to capture in his own verse in English the Spartan laconism of what he ~~he~~ had read. In a note to his China Poems (1975) Brutus explains his intention.

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. The trick is to say little (the nearer to ~~nothing~~ nothing, the better) and to suggest much -- as much as possible. The weight of meaning hovers around the words (which should be as flat

11
as possible) or which is ~~then~~ 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) ~~between~~ of "goose-grey" and the thunderous menace of "lour" presaging a storm.

Exile:
schizophrenia.
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Consider the ~~return~~ terror of the journey to be made in the mind from exile to the declension of suicide.

The verse in Brutus's China Poems is economical to the point of being epigrammatic. ~~Take~~ Take, for example, the following three poems:

It is to preserve
beauty
that we destroy.

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

The Long Wall:
a soldier
holding a flower.

He has written many other ~~many~~ minipoems equally flippant in tone, including ~~an entire sequence wjoej as a bar bawdy end~~ an entire sequence which is bawdy enough to make strong men blush. These "one-liners" in two or three lines represent the lighter side of his present poetic disposition.

A more serious side is visible in poems concerned with his relationship to South Africa. He still writes homesick verse occasionally, focussing on the disquieting reminders of South Africa which intrude upon his awareness at odd moments, forcing him to contemplate his existence in exile. His six-poem 'South African Sequence' in South African Voices sounds a familiar plaintive note, but the individual poems now tend to be shorter, pithier, more Chinese:

Golden oaks and jacarandas
 flowering:
 exquisite images
 ito ~~were~~ wrench the heart.

Another sample:

At night
 to put myself to sleep
 I play alphabet games
 but something reminds me of you
 and I cry out
 and am wakened.

Economy remains the defining principle of these poems.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that Brutus has given up writing longer poems entirely and has never returned to former habits of composition since visiting China. At times it is necessary for him to make an extended statement, especially when he wants to ~~make it~~ underscore a ~~an~~ specific political point or get a personal message across to a particular individual. But even in these instances the longer poems he writes today tend to be a bit simpler and

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freer than those w he wrote a few years ago in his balanced phase. If he periodically swaings away from austere economy, he does so in ~~h~~ the direction of extended simplicity rather than of increased complexity. To put it in Hegelian terms again, the Synthesis of his Balanced ~~and~~ phase and his Economical phase is a new form of Simplicity -- Neo-Simplicity, if you like. On the graph it could be represented thus:

may not yet have
Though Brutus ~~has not yet~~ swung in the direction of Neo-Simplicity emphatically enough for us to delineate it as a major tendency in his current development, it seems reasonable to assume that it may offer him the only acceptable alternative to the taciturn Chinese modes of ~~expression~~ he has been favoring since the summer of 1973. If the pendulum ever swings ~~away~~ completely away from extreme Economy, it is unlikely that it will swing all the way back to Balance or Complexity.

If we follow this dialectical progression to its logical conclusion, the next step after Neo-Simplicity -- indeed the only Antithesis that would take Brutus beyond extreme Economy -- would be Silence, ~~and~~ an absolute cessation of poetic articulation. Curiously enough, Brutus appears to have anticipated moving ultimately in this direction. In a four-line poem written this February, he said:

Music, at its highest
strains towards silence.
verse, when most expressive,
seeks to be wordless.

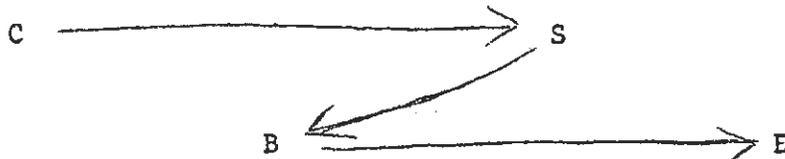
At this point criticism must become wordless too.

DIALECTICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE POETRY OF DENNIS BRUTUS

Bernth Lindfors

There have been four distinct phases in Dennis Brutus's poetic development, each marked by formal and thematic shifts which tend not only to reflect his changing preoccupations and professional concerns but also to document profound transformations in his conception of the nature and function of poetry. Each new phase has grown out of a personal experience which has made him question his previous attitudes toward verbal art and seek a more satisfying outlet for his energies of articulation. As a consequence, his progress as a poet cannot be charted as a straight line moving up, down or forever forward on a monotonous horizontal plane; rather, it must be visualized as a series of reversals or turnabouts, each fresh impulse moving in a direction counter to its antecedent until an entirely new lyrical idiom is achieved. To put it in ontogenetic terms, Brutus's evolution as a poet has been not linear but dialectical. Instead of growing by extending himself further and further along a single axis, he has zigzagged.

The four poles around which Brutus's art has turned may be termed Complexity, Simplicity, Balance and Economy, the latter being an extreme form of Simplicity. These poles roughly correspond to the Hegelian triad--Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis--with Synthesis, a balance between Thesis and Antithesis, becoming a new Thesis and generating its own Antithesis. To translate these abstractions into an appropriate geometrical configuration, one could represent Brutus's career as follows:



Having postulated this theorem of dialectical development, let us now go on to examine the proof upon which it rests.

Brutus's first book of poems, Sirens Knuckles Boots (1963), contained a variety of lyric forms invested with many of the standard poetic conventions. There were neatly demarcated stanzas, end-rhymes, assonance, alliteration, bookish allusions, carefully balanced contrasts, paradoxes, skillful reiterations and refrains that enlarged rather than merely repeated an idea, well-reasoned arguments couched in logically connected images, and utterances so rich in symbolic suggestiveness that they spoke at several levels of significance simultaneously. There were no loose ends in this poetry, no wasted words, no compromises with the reader's dull-wittedness. This was highbrow poetry--tight, mannered, formal and sometimes formidably difficult. Schooled in Shakespeare, Donne, Browning, Hopkins, Eliot and other classic English poets of exceptional intellect, Brutus attempted to write poems which would challenge the mind, poems sufficiently subtle and intricate to interest any well-educated lover of poetry. It was during this period that he wrote nearly all of his most complex verse.

created by apartheid and other institutionalized forms of racial discrimination. The message thus has universal as well as local reverberations.

"Erosion: Transkei" is a fairly uncomplicated multileveled lyric compared with such poems as "A troubadour, I tráverse all my land" and "So for the moment, Sweet, is peace," upon which Brutus has commented extensively.² In the troubadour poem, for instance, there are lines in which he attempted to make a single image yield at least three different meanings simultaneously. The word "Sweet" in "So, for the moment, Sweet, is peace" also had numerous special connotations for him. Indeed, it would be very difficult for even the most astute student of literary ambiguity to decipher the full range of significance that such words and images were meant to carry without consulting the gloss that Brutus has provided in discussions of these poems. Some of the symbolism is private, cryptic and therefore impenetrable to anyone but the poet himself. Such poetry requires translation for the average reader.

It was while Dennis Brutus was in prison between 1964 and 1965 that he decided to stop writing this kind of super-cerebral poetry. The five months he spent in solitary confinement caused him to reexamine his verse and his attitudes toward creative self-expression. The more he looked at his poetry during this period of forced isolation, the more "horrified" he became, until finally he decided that if he were ever to write again, he would write very differently:

The first thing I decided about my future poetry was that there must be no ornament, absolutely none. And the second thing I decided was you oughtn't to write for people who read poetry, not even students. You ought to write for the ordinary person: for the man who drives a bus, or the man who carries the baggage at the airport, and the woman who cleans the ashtrays in the restaurant. If you can write poetry which makes sense to those people, then there is some justification for writing poetry. Otherwise you have no business writing.

And therefore, there should be no ornament because ornament gets in the way. It becomes too fancy-schmancy; it becomes overelaborate. It is, in a way, a kind of pride, a self-display, a glorying in the intellect for its own sake, which is contemptible . . .

So I said, "You will have to set the thing down. You will 'tell it like it is,' but you will let the word do its work in the mind of the reader. And you will write poetry that a man who drives a bus along the street can quote, if he feels like quoting." Very ambitious indeed.

But this is based on the idea that all people are poets. Some are just ashamed to let it be known, and some are shy to try, and some write but don't have the guts to show it to others. But we all are poets because we all have the same kind of response to beauty. We may define beauty differently, but we all do respond to it.

So this was the assumption: don't dress it up; you will just hand it over, and it will do its own work.³

one finds certain of the older tendencies--the well-rounded statement, the learned allusion or quotation, the harmonious imagery--resurfacing in several poems and giving an orderly appearance to even the freest-flowing lines. In other words, there is evidence of continuity as well as change as Brutus shifts from complex to simple registers of poetic expression. The transformation is sudden and obvious but not absolute.

In July 1966, a year after being released from prison, Brutus left South Africa on an "exit permit," a permit which did not allow him to reenter his homeland. His life in exile began with four years of anti-apartheid work in London and has continued since September 1970 in the United States, where he has been teaching as Professor of English at Northwestern University and, in the 1974-75 academic year, as Visiting Professor of English and Ethnic Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. During these years his poetry has undergone two modifications, first a minor modulation to a position earlier described as Balance, then a major shift to what could be called extreme Economy. Again, though these two successive changes are observable in much of what he has written since going into exile, one occasionally finds new poems which could be placed in the earlier categories of Complexity or Simplicity. In other words, Brutus retains the capacity to express himself in his earlier poetic modes even while consciously attempting to define a new style. Whereas certain of the poems he has composed in exile can be viewed as throwbacks or lapses into a former habit of articulation, the fresh impulses, the newer tendencies are dominant in most of what he has written since July 1966.

The two major thematic preoccupations in Brutus's early exile poetry are (1) his awareness of the personal freedom and mobility he has gained while others remain confined and suffering in South Africa, and (2) his recognition of what he has lost in leaving the homeland he dearly loves and traveling restlessly about the world in quest of compelling but sometimes elusive goals. Much of this poetry could be characterized as both nostalgic and plaintive--the unhappy recollections and reflections of a homesick poet. Examples can be taken from Poems from Algiers (1970) which was written while Brutus was attending the First Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers in 1969, Thoughts Abroad (1970) which was written piecemeal in various cities throughout the world and published under a pseudonym so it could be sold and circulated in South Africa, and Part III of A Simple Lust (1973) which includes some American and English poems as well as the verse published in the two preceding collections.

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Consider the terror of the journey to be made in the mind from exile to the declension of suicide.⁸

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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.⁹

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 material (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

To which one is tempted to add, somewhat rudely, "but not good poetry."

During his year in Austin, Brutus has continued to experiment with economical poetic forms, adapting the Chinese idiom he admires to suit new subject matter and new emotions. I am not at liberty to discuss certain of these unpublished works but Brutus has consented to allow me to quote a few examples of recent tendencies in his terse verse. One of these was dashed off, I recall, shortly after we had been discussing the care and preservation of his manuscripts.

Bach's wife, they say
made curlpapers¹²
from his manuscripts.

He has written many other minipoems equally flippant in tone, including some that are ~~very serious and thoughtful~~. These "one-liners" in two or three lines represent the lighter side of his present poetic disposition.

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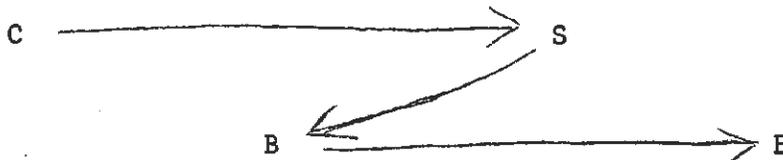
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3. Ibid., p. 29.
4. A Simple Lust, pp. 60-61. The poem originally appeared in Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison (London: Heinemann, 1968), p. 11.
5. Palaver, pp. 29-31.
6. A Simple Lust, p. 102.
7. Ibid., p. 136.
8. Dennis Brutus, China Poems (Austin: African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center, University of Texas, 1975), p. 35.
9. Ibid., pp. 18, 24, 17.
10. Ibid., pp. 10, 9.
11. Ibid., pp. 20, 21, 12.
12. Unpublished ms.
13. South African Voices, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Austin: African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center, University of Texas, 1975), p. 33.
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