

Add to entry on DENNIS BRUTUS:

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Dennis Brutus

(28 November / 1924) <sup>g</sup> <sup>g</sup> )

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BOOKS

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Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison

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Thoughts Abroad (Del Valle, <sup>TX</sup> ~~Texas~~: Troubadour Press, 1970),

published under the pseudonym of John Bruin;

A Simple Lust (New York: Hill and Wang; ~~1972~~ London: Heinemann Educational

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1973. This collection incorporates all previous collections of Brutus's poems.);

Strains (Austin, <sup>TX:</sup>~~Texas~~ Troubadour Press, 1975; reissued,

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One of the foremost South African poets, Dennis Brutus is a prime example of Third World writers whose work is particularly striking because they are able to combine to great effect Western literary forms and traditions with indigenous forms and experiences. Brutus's poetry evinces a remarkable range of poetic influences: from William Shakespeare and, particularly,

John Donne to Pablo Neruda and some Japanese Haiku masters.

Nevertheless, his outstanding achievement consists in the crafting of exquisite "political lyrics:" that is, intensely personal poems that focus on fundamental political topics.

Dennis Brutus was born in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) on November 28, 1924 of South African parents. He returned to South Africa with them shortly after his birth and lived there until he ~~was forced~~ <sup>went</sup> into exile in 1966. He received his B.A. from Fort Hare University College in 1947, and for the next 14 years he taught in various high schools <sup>in</sup> Port Elizabeth and (illegally) in Johannesburg. After a short time in Britain he has spent most of his exile in the United States and has taught at various universities. Currently he is chairman of the Department of Black Community Education Research and Development at the University of Pittsburgh.

Such a skeletal biographical background, however, is not sufficient for an appreciation for Brutus's poetry. While technically proficient and aesthetically masterful, his verse is

deeply political in that it is uncompromisingly opposed to the apartheid regime of South Africa and committed to articulating the feelings of his countrymen. In order to understand the political dimension of his poetry, we must explore more closely his encounter with the apartheid government.

The manner in which racism permeates every facet of life in South Africa and how it affected Brutus's education is evidenced in his early poetry. However, Brutus's major encounter with the politics of racism and apartheid came through his interest in sports, an activity that is supposed to be entirely free from political considerations. Attracted to field and track events at an early age, Brutus was frustrated by the racial segregation of sports, which allocated the better facilities and opportunities to whites. Brutus founded the South African Sports Association in 1959 in an attempt to overcome this discrimination. The government ignored his activities for a while; however, when Brutus attempted to organize a "Coloured National Convention" in 1961, the government banned him and dismissed him from his

teaching position. Barred from his academic career, Brutus attempted to study law at the University of <sup>the</sup> Witswatersrand, but was once again banned from attending the university or ever practicing as a lawyer. This confrontation was part of a larger conflict at a time when the government was legislating increasingly repressive measures, annulling the few civil liberties that remained, and consolidating its own totalitarian power. A series of laws enacted at this time legalized the government's power to arrest and imprison without charges or trials.

Refusing to be intimidated, Brutus attended a meeting of the South African <sup>Non-Racial</sup> Olympic Committee in Johannesburg in 1963. He was promptly arrested for violating his banning order. Released on bail, he attempted to flee South Africa through Mozambique, for he realized that life would be too restricted for him in South Africa. However, when the Portuguese colonial authorities who then controlled Mozambique captured and returned him to the apartheid police, Brutus now found himself faced with a complex

dilemma. Since his recapture was never announced and his friends and relatives believed him to be safely out of the country, the South African Bureau of State Security (BOSS) could do with him whatever it wanted without anyone knowing about it: he could only announce his presence in the country by attempting to escape once again, hoping either to get away or to create an altercation in the streets of Johannesburg that would publicize his return. While attempting to dash from his captors in the streets of the city, ~~(an attempt "encouraged" by the police)~~, Brutus was shot in the back, the bullet piercing the intestine and exiting through his chest. Fortunately, he was not killed, and he did manage to attract international support and publicity for his predicament. After his partial recovery, he was sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment on the notorious Robben Island, in 1964-65. In the ~~midst of the shooting and the~~ <sup>events leading to his</sup> imprisonment, Mbari Press in Nigeria published his first book of poems, Sirens, Knuckles, Boots--which, as one would expect, was severely critical of the apartheid regime. The manuscript had been sent out secretly

since Brutus had been "banned," that is, he was prohibited from writing (except for personal correspondence), from publishing, from being quoted by a journalist, and from meeting more than three people at a time. Though the ban continued upon his release from prison, Brutus was ingeniously able to take advantage of the clause that permitted personal correspondence: he wrote a series of verse letters about his prison experience to his sister-in-law Martha. (In 1968, during his exile, these were published in a collection entitled Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison.)

Out of prison, Brutus was still confined under house-arrest and unable to work. His desire to escape from this confinement coincided with a strategy chosen by the government to get rid of politically undesirable people. The government offered to issue a "cancelled" exit permit to Brutus; if he accepted this illegal permit, as he did, he would be automatically imprisoned if he returned to South Africa because he had used it. Under the pressure of this mad logic, Brutus went into exile in 1966.

What must be emphasized about this history is that the apartheid government's response to those who will not bow before its fascist will is relatively simple and monolithic. It will try to kill them in one of two ways: it will either imprison, torture, and murder its victims, or it will try to stifle them into silence and oblivion. Brutus has experienced both strategies. Preventing him from teaching or becoming a lawyer and thus from earning a living; holding him under house-arrest and barring him from attending any gatherings; placing him under constant surveillance; and, finally, forbidding him to write and others to publish his statements--all these constitute an attempt to deny the very existence of the man: it is, in fact, an attempt to murder his spirit after his body had survived their guns and prisons. If a government thus tries to murder the spirit of a poet because he will not accept the distribution and justification of political and economic power based on skin color; if a government prevents him from writing poems ultimately because the color of his skin is not white; how then can we

expect his poetry to divorce and compartmentalize the questions of race, politics, and imprisonment from aesthetic and lyric considerations? The division between literature and politics is perhaps viable in cultures that have constitutional guarantees safeguarding the civil liberties of individuals. But even in such societies we would have to consider how issues of race and politics are relevant to the literature of those minority groups that are disfranchised because of race, class, or gender. In examining the poetry of Dennis Brutus, then, not only must we avoid such compartmentalization, but on the contrary we must appreciate that the South Africa society--where the public cannot be separated from the private, the political from the aesthetic, the prisoner ~~from~~ the poet--is precisely the appropriate ground for the growth of the political lyric.

Dennis Brutus's poetry is varied and evolving, the changes and varieties ~~are~~ produced by internal, personal shifts in the poet's sensibility and preoccupations as well as by his response

to the forms and attitudes of other poets. As John Povey has

pointed out, (~~"I Am the Voice," World Literature Written in~~

~~English, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 263-82~~),<sup>2</sup> the poems written prior to

Brutus's imprisonment are significantly different from those

written during his incarceration and different, again, from those

composed in exile, which also can be grouped according to various

phases and preoccupations. However, this kind of categorization

can be modified by an alternative organization of Brutus's work

into complex, simple, and balanced poems, as suggested by Bernth

Lindfors, (~~"Dialectical Development in the Poetry of Dennis~~

~~Brutus," in The Commonwealth Writer Overseas, Brussels: Didier,~~

~~1975~~). The kind of analysis that would be necessary in order to

appreciate the entire range of his verse, including the internal

shifts and the external influences, cannot be undertaken here.

However, I would like to suggest and illustrate rather briefly

the point that the political lyric is at the center of the

diverse experiences that find appropriately varied forms in

Brutus's canon. The genesis as well as the tone and structure of

his political lyric are clearly visible in those poems that thematize the fusion of politics and the lyric voice. The subconscious awareness of this theme and form floats to the surface in these poems and then returns underground to nurture other poems.

We can best begin an exploration of such poems by looking at the potential opposition of political oppression and aesthetic experience as it is presented in poem 18 of the "Letters to Martha" sequence: (~~A Simple Lust~~, 67). The imprisoned persona of the poem, overwhelmed by an urge to see the stars clearly through his prison window, dares to turn off the light in the corridor which interferes with his view. This immediately arouses the wrath of the guards who descend upon him with threats. The poem concludes:

And it is the brusque inquiry

and threat

that I remember of that night

rather than the stars

This poem, which emblemizes the incarceration of the entire "non-white" population of South Africa, implies that the brutality of the apartheid regime can permanently occlude all potentiality of aesthetic or sublime experience. Yet the poet does not succumb. Another poem begins: "Somehow we survive/ and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither"; then goes on to catalogue and characterize various kinds of oppressions unleashed by apartheid, and concludes with a variation of the opening line: "but somehow tenderness survives." (~~A Simple Lust, 4~~)

"Tenderness," an emotion that recurs in Brutus's poetry, symbolizes the emotional quality essential to lyric poetry, and unlike the previous poem, here tenderness survives all brutality. The stoic calm, the mild surprise, and the sense of gratitude expressed in the last line of this poem characterizes the typical attitude in Brutus's poetry toward the survival of a human voice in South Africa: the parallelism between the first and last lines

suggests that individuals and community survive because tenderness survives. Usually, in keeping with the subconscious nature of this theme, brutality and tenderness are "somehow" yoked together. Occasionally, however, the relation, becomes explicit.

In "A Common Hate Enriched Our Love and Us" (~~A Simple Lust~~,

22) the poet rejects the easy and comfortable life because

In draughty angles of concrete stairs  
 or seared by salt winds under brittle stars  
 we found a poignant edge to tenderness

The implication that deprivation somehow nourishes the lyric sensibility is spelled out by the last two lines of the poem: "hate gouged out deeper levels of our passion--/a common hate enriched our love and us." The political brutality that had threatened to occlude aesthetic experience is gradually subordinated to the latter so that it is enriched. This process

of internalizing and sublimating not only a personal but a communal ("a common hate") experience of social, economic, and political oppression and transforming it into a lyric expression is best exemplified in the title poem of Sirens, Knuckles, Boots:

The sounds begin again;  
 the siren in the night  
 the thunder at the door  
 the shriek of nerves in pain.

Then the keening crescendo  
 of faces split <sup>by</sup> ~~in~~ pain  
 the wordless, endless wail  
 only the unfree know.

Importunate as rain  
 the wraiths exhale their woe  
 over the sirens, knuckles, boots;

my sounds begin again. (~~A Simple Lust, 19~~)

In this poem the internalization of socio-political oppression is perfectly mirrored by a metonymic association of a chain of sounds that move fairly rapidly from the periphery to the center of the self: the sirens become the thunder at the door, which suddenly becomes the entire self in that the "shriek" of nerves in pain excludes, at that moment, all other experience. The poem's focus on sounds--for instance, the manner in which it represents a powerful physical blow as a crescendo, a final explosion of sounds--stresses the very transformation of physical torture into a lyric cry that is being articulated by the poem. Finally, the minor but significant variation between the first and the last line, characteristic of many of Brutus's poems, completes the transformation: "The sounds" become, after the internalization, "my sounds." This process whereby objective political conditions are appropriated through personal, physical suffering and eventually turned into a lyric poem defines the

fundamental strategy and structure of Brutus's political lyric.

The lyrical appropriation of the political world is designed not only to sublimate apartheid brutality but also to recreate the community that the Afrikaner government attempts to destroy. The poetic self consistently articulates the unspoken experience of others, thereby defining the efficacy of the self as being inherently dependent on its integration with others. Again, the entire range of the dialectical relation between the self and others cannot be traced here. Suffice it to discuss briefly the title poem of A Simple Lust.

A simple lust is all my woe:

the thin thread of agony

that runs through the reins

after the flesh is overspent

in over-taxing acts of love:

Only I speak the other's woe:

those congealed in concrete  
 or rotting in rusted ghetto-shacks;  
 only I speak their wordless woe,  
 their unarticulated simple lust. (~~A Simple Lust, 176~~)

Such a movement of incorporation fuses sexual love with patriotism, turns the lyric cry of the self into that of the community, transforms pain into sexual/political desire, and presents a complex, contradictory transformation as the oxymoronic tension of a "simple lust." In its desire to counteract the disintegration produced by apartheid, to weld a community back together again, the sentiment of the political lyric is even capable of compassion for the oppressors. As R.N. Egudu has pointed out, in the poem entitled "The Mob" (~~A Simple~~

~~Lust, 48~~) Brutus's appropriation even includes a brutal white mob that attacked a group of black protesters and subsequently peopled the nightmares of the poet. It is the poet's desire to bind his community by transforming hate and brutality into

passion and tenderness that leads him repeatedly to characterize himself as a roving troubadour who disdains political dangers in order to sing about his people and his land. The irony involved in this characterization of the self as a troubadour who sings love songs to his country rather than to his mistress contains and acknowledges the paradox of the political lyric. The last two lines of a troubadour poem (~~A Simple Lust, 2~~) run as follows: "--no mistress favour has adorned my breast/only the shadow of an arrow-brand." The troubadour's songs have not set in motion a cupid's arrow but have instead earned him the prisoner's arrow-brand; the poet is a captive of his country and its captors. Brutus's political lyrics are as resonant as a metaphysical conceit.

A significant subset of this genre is formed by those poems that transform the implied conjunction between sexual love and patriotism into a bold metaphysical conceit. The poems in this category, varying from light and humorous to serious, and from the explicitly political to those that gradually fade into the

purely erotic, are too numerous to be examined here in great detail. A brief example will have to suffice:

I might be a better lover I believe

my own, if you could truly be my own;

trafficked and raddled as you are by gross

undiscerning, occupying feet,

how can I, the dispossessed, achieve

the absolute possession that we seek?

How can we speak of infidelity

when, forced apart, we guess each other's woe?

My land, my love, be generous to forgive

my nomad roving~~s~~ down the vagrant streets:

return to me, sometime be wholly my own

so you secure me entire, entirely your own. (~~A Simple Lust,~~

no stan  
break

Here the conceit, turning on the idea of sexual/military possession, invokes the foreign occupation of the country and the resultant separateness or apart(heid), the poet's passionate surrender to his land, and the reciprocal absorption of the poet by/in the country. However, the structure of the appropriating relationship is essentially the same as in "The Sounds Begin Again." The self is again defined by an experience that obliterates the "normal" boundaries of the self, and the intimacy of the political engagement is indicated by its equation with the intimacy of sexual and emotional love.

While this subset is characterized by ornate conceits and relatively complex imagery and diction, the other poems that together form the core of the political lyric tend to be exquisitely simple and austere in diction, syntax, and imagery. Brutus defensively describes them as prosaic, but it seems to me that their strategy is more accurately described by poem fourteen in the "Letters to Martha" sequence:

How fortunate we were  
not to have been exposed  
to rhetoric

--it would have falsified  
a simple experience;  
living grimly,

grimly enduring

Oh there was occasional heroic posturing

mainly from the immature

--and a dash of demagogic blood thirstiness

But generally

we were simply prisoners

of a system we had fought

and still opposed. (~~A Simple Lust, 63-64~~)

# stanza break

The unadorned language, the rhythm, and the virtual lack of imagery in all the "Letters to Martha" and other such poems, match perfectly the meditative, stoic, reflexive voice of the poet, thereby revealing in all its nakedness the process of the political lyric. These poems derive their power ~~from~~ the lack of artifice, the honesty that the style imparts to the experience of political struggle and to the endurance necessitated by a stubborn hope. And the quiet, honest, intensely lyric voice better communicates a commitment to political liberation than would a vitriolic characterization of the oppressor or a rhetoric full of heroic bravado. These poems, in my opinion, constitute the best part of Brutus's poetry.

Brutus's poetry has changed and evolved enormously over the span of almost three decades. While firmly centered around the political lyric, his poetry radiates out to other forms and at times shows a marked influence of and a dialogue with other poets from Western and non-Western traditions. A great deal of his early poetry, what Brutus has characterized as his pre-prison

poetry, is deeply influenced by the Metaphysical poets, particularly John Donne, as can be seen clearly in "I might be a better lover I believe" quoted above. The controlling conceit of these lyric poems, a conceit that becomes the structural metaphor of so many poems in Sirens, Knuckles, Boots, is the equation of the love between a man and a woman to that between a man and his country. The influence of Tennyson can be seen in the language and imagery of chivalry, particularly in the persona of the troubadour, which not only underlies many of Brutus's poems, both early <sup>and</sup> late ones, but also furnishes the name for the publishing firm founded by Brutus, Troubadour Press. The presence of a Keatsian "negative capability" can be seen in the relentless quest to experience and to understand fully the oppressed condition of black South Africans as well as the perverted mentality of <sup>the</sup> ~~A~~ apartheid regime--to digest thoroughly the "status of the prisoner," "savouring to the full its bitterness\and seeking to escape nothing." Strains of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" can be heard in poems such as "I

could be dead" and ~~his general influence~~ in Brutus's free verse.

Interaction with non-Western literary forms are evident in the formal patterns of the Chinese <sup>chueh</sup>~~chuh~~ chu after which Brutus's China Poems are patterned. Finally, in his latest poems in Salutes and Censures, Brutus has returned to the African oral tradition of blame and praise poetry, which seems to have experienced a curious and ingenious revival in South Africa, where, in response to the Government ban of most literature by black South Africans, oral poetry conveniently circumvents censorship and prohibition. I do not wish to imply that these "influences" in any way render Brutus's poetry derivative; rather, they are a short hand invocation of richness and variety of his verse, which needs to be examined in the intertextual context of world literature rather than being dismissively confined to the ill-defined critical category of "protest literature" that so often prevents an adequate appreciation of black South African literature.

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