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ISSUES:THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NATURE OF THE POETRY OF DENNIS BRUTUS*

by

Bede M. Ssensalo

The Nigerian poet, J.P. Clark once criticized Dennis Brutus for writing such lines as "obscene albinos" - a reference to white South Africans. But what we have to understand is that Nigerians are not murdered or imprisoned because of the color of their skin. To quote Paul Theroux, "Nigerians are not the stinking lubrication that helps the huge cogs of the economy run smoothly."¹ Brutus has been whipped, put under house arrest jailed in the notorious Robben Island and even shot. So when he lashes back, he does so furiously. Although it is true that sometimes his punches are wild, that sometimes he misses, it is my hope that during the course of this article we shall see him swing enough times to see what he is aiming at.

All art is autobiographical in that it is inspired by the artist's own personal life. Yet we find that in varying degrees, the western artist can and indeed has succeeded in pursuing the reflections and images that are dear to him as a private individual. As of today, the black artist, because of the constant pressures put on him on account of his race, cannot as yet afford this luxury. Perhaps no living black poet illustrates this phenomenon better than Dennis Brutus. His art is so much a part of his life that to understand his poetry is to understand the man and vice versa. There is a tendency among the critics of the bourgeoisie notion of art for art's sake to dismiss this kind of creativity as mere social documentation of parochial limitations. Dennis Brutus has the difficulty of being misunderstood even by some of his own fellow Africans.

Born in 1924 in Salisbury, Southern Zimbabwe (otherwise known as Rhodesia), Dennis Brutus and his family moved to South Africa where he grew up. Racially, he is described by the South African government as colored. He took his B.A. in English in 1946 at Fort Hare University College, one of the two South African universities that admit a handful of colored people. For fourteen years, he taught English in the South African high schools in and around Cape Town.

* An address delivered to the 9th Annual Conference for the African and African-American Studies at Atlanta University, Georgia, Dec. 4th, 1976.

At an early age, Brutus discovered that he was an athlete, and has always cherished this part of himself. But in South Africa, as in all other things, sports are not integrated. There are separate facilities for blacks - almost always of poor quality, and separate facilities for whites - almost always of superior quality. To try and redress this wrong, in 1959 Dennis Brutus founded the South African Sports Association. He used this organization to agitate for change and argue for the inclusion of blacks in the apartheid segregated sports of South Africa. The South African government soon found out he was too loud for their liking, and in 1961 banned him from any South African sports association and dismissed him from his government teaching position. For two years, 1962-1963, he tried to study law at the University of Witswatersrand but was again banned from attending any university or ever practicing as a lawyer.²

In 1961, an act was passed by the South African government defining what constituted sabotage. When blacks mobilized and marched on Johannesburg City Hall in protest against this racist measure, they were attacked by a mob of white people with the fury and savagery of the Ku Klux Klan. Dennis Brutus was in the midst of all this and he recorded the day's experience in a poem he called "The Mob." In it he brings home to the reader the full brutality of that incident by referring to the whites as:

*. . .the faceless horrors
that people my nightmares
from whom I turn to wakefulness
for comforting³*

Another measure of the South African government, the Suppression of Communism Act, saw Communists under every challenge to the racist regime, just as every move, every act of Martin Luther King in Georgia and in neighboring Alabama was interpreted by the CIA and FBI as communist inspired. Under these two measures Dennis Brutus was found guilty of sabotage.

In 1963, while inside the building of the Olympic Sports Association in Johannesburg, he was arrested and charged with attending a sports meeting.⁴ Released on bail, he escaped into neighboring Mozambique which was, at the time under Portuguese colonial rule. The Portuguese police captured him and handed him back to the waiting South African authorities for "illegal entry." For a second time, Dennis Brutus tried to dash for freedom. This time he was shot, the bullet entering the lower left side of his back and passing through his intestine.⁵ Many people, on whose behalf he had dared to oppose the untouchable South African government were moved to pity and tears by this incident. One of his friends, David Gill, wrote a poem in which he said of Dennis Brutus that

*He spoke when other voices trailed away
Migrating in the dusk, and laid his mines
On the open page, igniting the itching fuse
Of fizzing syllables, each stick of verse
An act of singing sabotage. . .*

*Policemen don't love poets who in general are
Disorderly and stir men up. So he
On instinct fled their uncongenial company.
He could not melt into the crowd: the crowd
Shrank back to let him and his hunters
And the hurting bullet through.
And only then Johannesburg threw up its blinds
To hear his strangled voice.⁶*

A group of black writers all over the world including the famous Caribbean Andrew Salkey, C.R.L. James and V.S. Naipul drafted, signed and sent to the South African government a document protesting its treatment of Dennis Brutus. Among other things, the document said that the shooting of Dennis Brutus "follows an all too familiar pattern of action by repressive governments against political prisoners." It added that "the incident has shocked all who value intellectual liberty and has again shown how ready South African officialdom is to risk human lives in its efforts to terrorize and silence those opposed to its policies. Mr. Brutus is the first South African writer of reputation to suffer physically for his beliefs; we fear that he may not be the last."⁷

By this time it was beyond reasonable doubt that Dennis Brutus had become a political menace to the South African government. To silence him, he was banned from any kind of writing and, immediately after his recovery from the bullet wound, was sentenced to the notorious maximum security prison of Robben Island. The condition of the political prisoner in this place is hard to imagine. Each inmate is fed on nothing but rice, allowed one thirty-minute visit and one letter once in 6 months

In talking about the "fizzing syllables, each stick of verse/An act of singing sabotage," in his poem, David Gill was referring to the earliest and first collection of poetry by Dennis Brutus, *Sirens, Knuckles, Boots*. This collection was a major contribution to his arrest because in them he had bitterly criticized the South African government calling it "the iron monster of the world/More terrible than any beast/that can be tamed or bribed."⁹ Because of these poems, which were published in 1963 by the Mbari Press at Ibadan while Dennis Brutus was still in prison, after his release he was banned from writing anything that could be published in general and poetry in particular. Speaking of these two sets of bans, one before and the other after prison, Brutus said:

I was banned from writing and I was banned from publishing anything. These two bans were not directly served upon me. As the result of an Act of round about 1961, which was designed to punish people who committed sabotage, and as a result of the interpretation of this Act, I was banned from writing. In a strictly legal sense, even to write was construed as sabotage. Therefore, I was, in that sense, banned from writing. . .

I think one may say in all seriousness that to write at all once you are banned from writing - and it doesn't matter whether you write well or badly - constitutes a form of protest against apartheid in South Africa.¹⁰

During the period right after his release, Brutus' brother was arrested, sentenced and sent to Robben Island. Since Brutus had not been forbidden to write letters, he wrote a series of letters, in the form of verse, to his sister-in-law, Martha, to try and give her some insights into life on Robben Island. The result is that collection of poetry known as *Letter to Martha*. In them Dennis Brutus relived and described his prison experiences very vividly. The first of these was the sexual assault by the inmates and the whole homosexual phenomenon. He says that the older inmates developed a psychological urge to dominate under the pretext of protection while the newer inmates filled by a sense of fear and insecurity were led to submission. What is so frightening and humiliating is the realization on the part of the prisoner that after some time, what started as something forced becomes attractive and even desirable. Writing of this fear to become a homosexual, Brutus wrote:

*To what desperate limits are they driven
and what fierce agonies they have endured
that this, which they have resisted,
should seem to them preferable,
even desirable.*

*It is regarded as the depths
of absolute and ludicrous submission
And so perhaps it is.*

*But it has seemed to me
one of the most terrible
most rendingly pathetic
of all a prisoner's predicaments.*

And in the following poem:

"Blue Champagne" they called him
 - the most popular "girl" in the place;
 so exciting perhaps, or satisfying:
 young certainly, with youthful curves
 - this was most highly prized.

And so he would sleep with several
 each night
 and the song once popular on the hit-parade
 became his nickname.

By the time I saw him he was older
 (George saw the evil in his face, he said)
 and he had become that most perverse among
 the perverted:
 a "man" in the homosexual embrace
 who once had been the "woman".¹¹

This experience is so horrible that when it is combined with
 the other horrors of prison life at Robben Island, it drives
 the prisoner's mind to a desperate search for some way or means
 of physical or mental escape. To some the refuge is death:

*One wishes for death
 with a kind of defiant defeatism*

*wishing that the worst may befall
 since the nearly-worst has so often befallen:*

*it is not a wish for oblivion
 but a pugnacious assertion of discontent*

*a disgust at the boundless opprobrium of life
 a desperation; despair.¹²*

To others, it is insanity:

*Two men I knew specifically
 among many cases:
 their reactions were enormously different
 but a tense thought lay at the bottom of each
 and for both there was danger and fear and pain --
 drama.*

*One simply gave up smoking
 knowing he could be bribed
 and hedged his mind with romantic fantasies
 of beautiful marriageable daughters:*

*the other sought escape
in fainting fits and asthmas
and finally fled into insanity:*

And in another poem:

*A studious highschoolboy he looked
-as in fact I later found he was-
bespectacled, with soft-curved face
and withdrawn protected air:
and I marvelled, envied him
so untouched he seemed to be
in that hammering brutal atmosphere.*

*But his safety had a different base
and his safely private world was fantasy;
from the battering importunities
of fists and genitals of sodomites
he fled: in a maniac world he was safe.¹⁴*

Equally disturbing is the ever menacing and horrifying possibility of never getting out of prison. And so Brutus writes:

*Quite early one reaches a stage
where one resolves to embrace
the status of prisoner
with all it entails,
savouring to the full its bitterness
and seeking to escape nothing:*

*"Mister,
this is prison;
just get used to the idea"*

"You're a convict now."

*Later one changes,
tries the dodges,
seeks the easy outs.*

*But the acceptance
once made
deep down
remains.¹⁵*

It is not, therefore hard to imagine that, under such a horrifying and humiliating experience, many of the things that we take for granted, assume an extraordinary measure of importance. While he was in prison for example, nature fascinated

Dennis Brutus in a way that it had never done before. In one of his prison poems, the reader is shocked into an awareness of the sharp contrast between the stifling confinement of the prison world from where the poet writes to the matchless freedom of the nature world. In this free world, the poet likens the "unimpeded motion of the clouds" to "a kind of music, poetry, dance" which "sends delicate rhythms tremoring through the flesh" and "sends fantasies" through the mind: "where are they going/where will they dissolve/will they be seen by those at home/and whom will they delight?"¹⁶

Thoughts such as these are soothing and sometimes they can help in providing temporary relief from the loneliness of prison life. But even this is not always possible. At night for example, the only way to see the stars is to switch off the cell light. To do this is against the law and the one time Dennis Brutus was foolhardy enough to do it, he paid for the consequences.¹⁷ Years later, while in New Zealand, Dennis Brutus wrote a poem called "The Island"¹⁸ in which he compared and contrasted the freedom he had then to enjoy nature to the confinement he had been subjected to on Robben Island.

In 1965 Dennis Brutus was released from prison as a result of the pressure put on the South African government from within South Africa. This organized pressure to free Dennis Brutus and other political prisoners can only be compared to that which freed Angela Davis from the California State prison. It is always a good feeling for any prisoner to know that, no matter how bad the situation may be, out there, there are people who believe in you sufficiently to fight for your freedom. So out of a spirit of gratitude, ever since he got out of prison, Dennis Brutus has played a leading role in an organization known as the World Campaign for the Release of South African Prisoners.

After his release from prison, Dennis Brutus was put under house arrest, another one of the many measures the South African police uses to harrass persons *they* think potentially subversive. Soon after, with amazing irony as Professor Povey points out,¹⁹ the government policy toward political agitators changed. In order to get rid of them, those who would accept a one-way exit permit were allowed and, indeed, encouraged to go into exile. So Dennis Brutus found himself being encouraged to take the same move for which he had been previously almost killed. He was served with a one-way passport out of South Africa. Since then he has been in exile separated from the country he loves so much.

Out of this separation has emerged a sense of nostalgia so strong that it can only be understood by those who have ever been separated from their homes for a long period of time without either the option or any definite hope to return. It can

be likened to the same nostalgia with which Camara Laye of Guinea wrote his autobiography *African Child*. Both works are inspired by that painful yearning to return to a previously known state of unified being and of non-separation which one finds in a large number of African and Afro-American literature.

When asked by a reporter why he loves South Africa, Dennis Brutus answered: "I wish I could find something to say that would help you, but I don't really know. . . .it's a suffering people and a suffering land, assaulted, violated, raped, whatever you will, tremendously beautiful and I feel a great tenderness for it."²⁰ The words "assaulted, violated, raped" are normally associated with woman. Dennis Brutus sees his relationship to South Africa as that between a man and his lover. Just as a man would like to visit his loved one, Dennis Brutus wishes he was home, free to travel across his beautiful mother country unimpeded and unmolested. But he can no longer do so except in his mind. However, in an earlier poem which he wrote before he left South Africa, he describes his travels across the country in the same romantic terms that a man would describe his visit to a girlfriend:

*A troubadour, I traverse all my land
exploring all her wide-flung parts with zest
probing in motion sweeter far than rest
her secret thickets with an amorous hand:21*

There is no doubt that we are dealing here with a sexual passion. The point is underscored in the title of his collection about South Africa, *A Simple Lust*. This love has created in Dennis Brutus an intense devotion which has sharpened his antagonisms against the regime that torments his beloved. It is an antagonism characterized by the rage and fury of an offended man, a man whose loved one has been subjected to the most violent rape "most cruel" Brutus cries out,

*most cruel, all our land is scarred with terror,
rendered unlovely and unlovable;22*

Ever since Dennis Brutus went into exile he has devoted all his energies to avenging his country. Day and night he has worked towards political change in South Africa. Trying to convince the minority regime that apartheid should be stopped because it is morally wrong sounds nice. But we all know too well that it wouldn't work. And as every fighter knows, the first thing to do is choose your weapons. They must be weapons that one feels comfortable with and competent to use. But they must also be weapons that are effective against your adversary, capable of inflicting heavy casualties in the ranks of your enemy. To Dennis Brutus the only weapon that meets all these conditions is sports. At first glance, one might find the idea of using

sports as a medium for fighting racial discrimination amusing and even ridiculous. But when one studies the social structure of South Africa one finds that sports are as sensitive a spot as the dollar is to the American society. "South Africa is a sports-mad country," Brutus says.²³

South Africa is a very repressive government. Most forms of cultural expression including art, drama, poetry are heavily censored. The only cultural thing that is still relatively free is sports. I guess that this is so because sports can be more easily isolated from politics than art. Our own example here should be sufficient to clarify this point. Integration in sports has always been far ahead of integration in other areas of American life. And today, just watching the way blacks dominate football, baseball, basketball, track, etc., who would ever imagine that there is still racial discrimination in this country?

Of all South African sports, Rugby is the most important. It is more important to the South Africans than football and baseball combined are to the Americans. Brutus once wrote in *African Agenda* that "Rugby is South Africa's national obsession. So he uses sports, generally, and rugby in particular, as a moral and political vehicle to try and effect political change in South Africa. His objective is to isolate South Africa from the world of sports in the hope that this will force them to re-think their policies of apartheid. This is the philosophy behind SAN-ROC, the South African Non-Racial Open Committee for Olympic Sports, formed in 1961. SAN-ROC's first major victory was scored in Mexico in 1968. It was the first time that South Africa, because of her racial policies, was banned from the Olympic Games. To celebrate this victory, Dennis Brutus wrote:

Let me say it

*for no-one else may
or can
or will
or dare*

*I have lashed them
the marks of my scars
lie deep in their psyche
and unforgettable
inescapable.*

*Of course there were others who served
and much that I could not have done
but I am a part of the work
and they connect it with me*

they know I have done them harm

*they who are artists in deprivation
who design vast statutory volumes
and spend their nights in scheming deprival*

I have deprived them

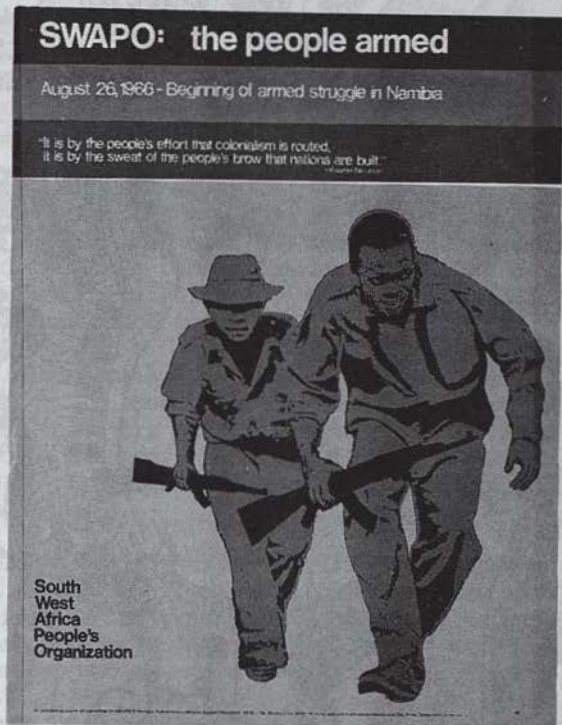
*that which they hold most dear
a prestige which they purchased with sweat
and for which they yearn unassuagedly
- their sporting prowess and esteem
this I have attacked and
blasted
unforgettably. . . .25*

24 This is pride and why shouldn't it be? Dennis Brutus' victory was a blow against not just South Africa. It was also a blow against all those powers that sympathize and help sustain this inhuman regime in power. It was a blow against Britain, France, the United States, Rhodesia. . . It was a blow against all these and other powers that have the nerve to say they are against South Africa's racism and in the same breath turn around and arm the murderer to the teeth. It was a blow to the gigantic American international corporations: I.B.M., Ford, General Motors, Gulf, Shell, Caltex, Goodyear, etc., without whose support the South African economy would crumble to pieces. It was also a blow to large educational institutions such as the University of California which invest billions of dollars in South Africa facilitating that country's exploitation of its blacks.

In the poem, Dennis Brutus says prophetically, "And they know I'll do more. . . /When I flog fresh lashes against these thieves."²⁶ And indeed, he did more. For two years later in 1970, the International Olympic Committee meeting in Amsterdam voted to throw South Africa out. Then in 1972 at the Olympic Games in Munich, Germany, not only was South Africa excluded, but so was her neighboring sister Rhodesia who pursues the same racial policies. Need I add what happened in 1976 at the Olympic Games in Montreal, Canada? This time it was not enough for Dennis Brutus that South Africa and Rhodesia were not going to participate in the games. He mobilized the entire African continent except for two countries, *Senegal* and *Ivory Coast*, to boycott the games if New Zealand, South Africa's sports buddy, was allowed to participate. The consequent fiasco made a mockery of the games. Those of you who watched on T.V. must remember the humility and disappointment with which those who participated received their medals. From all over the globe athletes had trained day and night for years to come to Montreal and face the world famous sportsmen from Africa. Men and women who held and

5. *Ibid.*
6. *Transition*. Vol. III, No. 2 (November 1963), p. 50.
7. *Ibid.* pp. 32-33.
8. Mary Benson, *South Africa*. Minerva Press (1969) pp.258-59.
9. Dennis Brutus. *A Simple Lust*, p. 50.
10. Dennis Brutus. "Protest Against Apartheid" in Cosmo Pieters and D. Munro. *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*. London: Heinemann (1969) pp. 93-94.
11. *A Simple Lust*, pp. 58-59.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
19. John Povey. "Profile of an African Artist," *Journal of the New African Literature*. Stanford, No. 3 (Spring, 1967), p.
20. Porter, *op. cit.*
21. *A Simple Lust*. p. 2.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
23. *African Agenda*. (December 1976), p. 1.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *A Simple Lust*. pp. 89-90.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
27. Unpublished poem.
28. *A Simple Lust*. p. 4.

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