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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 the stinking lubrication that helps the huge cogs of the economy run smoothly."<sup>1</sup> 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, in my hope that during the course of this article we shall see 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 private individual. As of today, the black artist, because of the constant pressures put on him on account of his race, can 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 with 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 (other 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 Center, 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 comforting<sup>3</sup>*

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>*

A group of black writers all over the world including the Caribbean Andrew Salkey, C.R.L. James and V.S. Naipul drafted and signed and sent to the South African government a document testing its treatment of Dennis Brutus. Among other things the document said that the shooting of Dennis Brutus "followed an all too familiar pattern of action by repressive governments against political prisoners." It added that "the incident 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 will not be the last."<sup>7</sup>

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, sentenced to the notorious maximum security prison of Robben Island. The condition of the political prisoner in this prison is hard to imagine. Each inmate is fed on nothing but rice and 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 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."<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>*

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".<sup>11</sup>

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  
 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.<sup>12</sup>*

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.<sup>14</sup>*

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.<sup>15</sup>*

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 his prison poems, the reader is shocked into an awareness 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 motion of the clouds" to "a kind of music, poetry, dance "sends delicate rhythms trembling through the flesh" and "fantasies" through the mind: "where are they going/where they dissolve/will they be seen by those at home/and who they delight?"<sup>16</sup>

Thoughts such as these are soothing and sometimes can help in providing temporary relief from the lonely prison life. But even this is not always possible. At for example, the only way to see the stars is to switch cell light. To do this is against the law and the one that Dennis Brutus was foolhardy enough to do it, he paid for consequences.<sup>17</sup> Years later, while in New Zealand, Dennis Brutus wrote a poem called "The Island"<sup>18</sup> in which he 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 South Africa. This organized pressure to free Dennis Brutus and other political prisoners can only be compared to the way that the U.S. freed Angela Davis from the California State prison. It 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. It is a sense 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 Political Prisoners.

After his release from prison, Dennis Brutus was immediately placed under house arrest, another one of the many measures the South African police uses to harass persons they think potentially subversive. Soon after, with amazing irony as Professor Povey points out, the government policy toward political agitators changed in order to get rid of them, those who would accept a one-way 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 loved so much.

Out of this separation has emerged a sense of nostalgia so strong that it can only be understood by those who have been separated from their homes for a long period of time. It is not out either the option or any definite hope to return.



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."<sup>20</sup> 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 the dollar is to the American society. "South Africa is a sports-mad country," Brutus says.<sup>23</sup>

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 even 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 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

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."<sup>26</sup> 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

still hold impressive records like A. Bilala from Ethiopia, Amo Biwott and the now legendary Kipcho Keino from Kenya. Their absence was a humiliating devaluation of the medals that were awarded in the events in which they were supposed to participate.

But with all these and other victories, Dennis Brutus' fight has not been an easy one. More often than not, the odds have been against him. There have been moments of failure which have led to despair and desperation. Like every leader of a worthy cause, he has tasted "the frostbite of failure." He has been betrayed by his friends and often doubted his own ability to handle the role he assigned himself. "It is myself I doubt," he says. And he adds:

*Cool competence  
and an assured handling of passion  
rational and with calculated drama  
only intensifies pain:  
loveliness, ice-clad, is still vulnerable--  
yearning leads to wounding aspiration:  
no-one, no-one, is safe.<sup>27</sup>*

If we must look for the source of his sustained strength, we know that it is not in the few victories that I have described above, although they have helped. Rather it is in that tender love for his country on which I have already dwelt at length.

*Somehow we survive  
and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither.<sup>28</sup>*

This, then, is the profile of the artist. It is the profile of a man very sensitive to the wrongs that have been done to his people and his country. It is the picture of a man who has committed by the best way he knows how: through sports and poetry to bring about change in South Africa as soon as possible. Poetry is the best documentation of this struggle.

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Footnotes:

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2. Porter, G. Bruce, "S. African Exile" *New York Post* (Friday August 19, 1966), p.39.
3. Brutus, Dennis. *A Simple Lust* London: Heinemann (1973), p.48.

4. Porter, *op. cit.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Transition* Vol. III, No. 2 (November 1963), p.50.
7. *Ibid.* pp. 32-33.
8. Benson, Mary, *South Africa*. Minerva Press (1967), pp.258-259.
9. Brutus, Dennis, *A Simple Lust*. p.50.
10. Brutus, Dennis, "Protest Against Apartheid" in Cosmo Pieterse 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. Povey, John, "Profile of an African Artist," *Journal of the New African Literature* Stanford, No. 3, (Spring, 1967) p.95.
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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