

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Dennis Brutus: An Interview

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6tc554rb>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 12(2)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Thompson, William E.

Publication Date

1983

DOI

10.5070/F7122017163

Copyright Information

Copyright 1983 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

DENNIS BRUTUS: AN INTERVIEW

By

William E. Thompson

Question: Could we look at an early, primarily political poem? For example, what were the circumstances surrounding the writing of your poem "At A Funeral" in *A Simple Lust*?

Brutus: Usually my poems don't have titles because I hope that the poem works sufficiently well that it doesn't need a kind of signpost to it. In this case, the poem "At A Funeral" needed a title because I don't think you could have guessed otherwise what it was all about. Also, I do think it needs some explanation.

It's about a young woman called Valencia Majombozi, an African woman who managed to qualify as a doctor after enormous hardship and sacrifice by her parents. Her mother took in washing and ironing, did the cleaning of apartment buildings, and put her through University. She got her medical degree and then, by an incredible irony, just after Valencia had completed her internship, she died. I went to her funeral. The poem is about the years of sacrifice that end in nothing, and you could read the poem entirely on that level, as just an expression of frustrated and aborted hopes.

Voice of the Voiceless

But I am also seeing her as a symbol of the predicament of the Blacks as a whole in South Africa. Eighty percent of the people are voiceless, voteless, generally deprived of education. Their lives are controlled not so much by the police and the army, though those are there all the time, but the lives of Blacks in South Africa are controlled more by a "convention"--something which people agree on. This is a curious thing called a Pass Book, which every Black must carry from the age of 16, which controls your movement, and even determines where you will be buried when you die. Your life is segregated all the way through. The poem is also about that kind of situation.

It's a poem in which I'm trying to do a whole series of things all at the same time. When Keats first started writing, Shelley told him he ought to "load every rift with ore," you've got to pack them as much as you can. That's what I'm trying to do with this poem. But it's also written at a time when I was reading a lot of two of my own favorite poets, Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Donne. Donne, as you know, often is speaking about several things at the same time; and on the other hand Hopkins

was trying to do very complicated things with sound, playing consonants and vowels against each other, creating tensions in sound. All that kind of thing is in the poem. I say this by way of almost apology, because I don't write this kind of poetry anymore. But you can see some of the concealed political statements I'm making, as well as the overt comments on a particular woman's funeral:

At A Funeral

*Black, green and gold at sunset: pageantry
And stubbled graves: expectant, of eternity,
In bride's-white, nun's-white veils the nurses gush
their bounty
Of red-wine cloaks, frothing the bugled dirging slopes
Salute! Then ponder all this hollow panoply
For one whose gifts the mud devours, with our hopes.*

*Oh all you frustrate ones, powers tumbled in dirt,
Aborted, not by Death but carrion books of birth
Arise! The brassy shout of Freedom stirs our earth;
Not Death but death's-head tyranny scythes our ground
And plots our narrow cells of pain defeat and dearth:
Better that we should die, than that we should lie down.*

[--A Simple Lust, p. 17]

The poem is also operating on a political level, and I'll touch on a few of those things. The resistance movement in South Africa has its own flag, as opposed to the State flag; the resistance movement's flag is black, green and gold. The choice of those colors at the beginning of the poem is not an accident. But also many of the colleagues of this doctor attended her funeral wearing their university robes; these were black caps and gowns, but often with a gold hood indicating an arts degree, green indicating a science degree; so again you have a combination of black, green and gold. This academic level of symbolism is literally there if you want it.

There were nurses there from the hospital. In South Africa the nurses wear cloaks which are lined with bright red-- the "red-wine." Other nurses at the funeral wore white, which echo the nuns in their habits "In bride'-white, nun's-white veils." And away back behind the hill in the cemetery on the edge of the ghetto there's a Boy Scout with a trumpet, blowing the last Post, "the bugled dirging."

In the later segments I talk of "carrion books of birth," saying that the life of the Black begins as a kind of death. From the moment of birth you're given this Pass Book, so that you cease to be a human being from the point of birth. You are

devoured. You become carrion, dead flesh. And this of course ties in with the notion of abortion. It's helpful to know the symbol of "death's-head tyranny." I saw a film in South Africa called "Judgement at Nuremberg." It begins with the tanks rolling through the streets of Berlin with the Panzer Divisions, whose insignia was a skull and crossbones -- the death's-head being wildly cheered by the audience. The Nazis are regarded as great heroes by the South African regime, and people imitate them; the Nazis are the model for how one should behave if you are a white in South Africa.

'Viva La Muerte!'

I was trying to say that it is not the physical event of Death which destroys the Blacks; their destruction does not come from Death, which I capitalize, but from a tyranny which is associated with the death's-head. I'm saying it's the Nazi system in South Africa which destroys people; they're destroyed even before they die.

So you can see how one could look at the poem simply as a description of the funeral of a particular person, or see it operating at another level, as a poem which is making a political statement. In the last two lines I'm anticipating prison, I anticipate the "narrow cells," and I assume that in resistance to the system it is necessary to go to prison. Then I conclude by saying "Better that we should die, than that we should lie down." Here I switch suddenly from the kind of multi- and polysyllabic structure to a line of Anglo-Saxon monosyllabic simplicity. That's a very conscious change of mood and tempo to make the concluding statement.

I'm going to read a quite recent poem to show you the kind of poem I'm trying to write now -- stripped, bare, austere, trying to find, if possible, just one kind of meaning. Because it is such a deceptively simple poem it does need an introduction (emphasis added). In 1976 there was a massive uprising of Blacks in the ghettos in protest against the educational system. It was a protest led by University and High School students. The protesters had identified education as the most dangerous instrument in the entire armory of racist oppression in South Africa. There are the Pass Laws, which control the lives of the Blacks from birth to death; there are the ghettos; there is the police; there is the army; there are the churches collaborating with the system; but the students and the people in the ghetto had identified the educational system as the most dangerous of all the instruments of repression. That is because in South Africa the apartheid system requires all the Blacks' kids to learn three things: one, that God made them black; two, their blackness and consequent inferiority must be accepted as God's will; and three, they have to be happy in their acceptance of their natural in-

feriority. Perhaps that is the most dangerous of them all: that they should not only know that they are black and inferior, and that God made them that way, but that they should like it. The South African Minister of Education, in making a statement on black education, said that "what we must do with black education is teach the blacks" (I'm quoting from a speech now) "that equality is not for them, so that they will not aspire to the green pastures that are reserved for whites." Therefore they will not get any ulcers, because they won't have any anxiety about wanting things that are not for them. The students decided that this education was the most dangerous part of the system because, if you can persuade the Black majority, which is 80 percent of South Africa's population, that they are not only inferior and it's God's will, but that it's very nice to be inferior, then you don't need the army or the police anymore, because the Blacks will cooperate with you.

Part of the uprising took place in a series of ghettos which lie to the southwest of Johannesburg. They're called the South West Townships. This group of ghettos is called for convenience "SOWETO," which incorporates the first two letters of each of the three words "South West Townships." "Township" is the South African equivalent of the word "ghetto." When the marches took place, the police opened fire, and they killed about a thousand students between June 16 and December of 1976; over a period of six months they killed about a thousand. The police themselves admit to about 636 killings, but the students saw the corpses in the morgue, each corpse would have a number pasted on its forehead, and the numbers went well over a thousand.

One of the students who escaped from Soweto appeared before the United Nations to testify about what had happened there. His name was Tsietse Mashinini. When he testified, [i.e., according to the testimony, Ed. K.M.] there was one little eight-year-old girl playing with her dolls or her jackstones by the roadway. When she saw the students marching along, demonstrating, she joined them and imitated them, not really knowing what it was about. When the police opened fire she was caught in the machine gun fire. They used Israeli-made automatic weapons, the Uzzi machine guns, which fire about 600 rounds per minute. She was caught in that. The poem I'm about to read is about that:

*There was a girl
eight years old, they say,
her hair in spiky braids,
her innocent fist raised in imitation.*

*Afterwards, there was a mass of red,
some torn pieces of meat
and bright rags fluttering:
a girl, once, in a print dress, they say.*

(Soweto, June 16, 1976)

©1979 Dennis Brutus [previously unpublished]

That is the kind of poetry I now write. What I'm assuming is that there's really no necessity for ornament, for complex organization, or indeed for any kind of strategy of persuasion -- which is one way of looking at poetry, as a technique or strategy of persuasion. I'm assuming that the words, the images, will function by themselves. Of course sometimes the poem will fall flat, make no impact at all. On other occasions, to other audiences, the poem will say a great deal. The new book of poems that came out last year has some of the poems written in this kind of naked unornamented way.

Question: How much of the direct style is due to exile?

Brutus: My own hunch is that it happened in prison. I was left in solitary confinement for five months. You have to entertain yourself in prison or you go crazy; so one of the things I did in solitary was to re-examine my own poetry. I decided that what I had been doing before, like the "Erosion" poem, was too elaborate, too fancy, too complex. In fact, I felt so bad about it that I tried to get all my poetry destroyed; it seemed to me so much of a show-off and self-display that I was embarrassed by my own work, and I tried to have it destroyed.

I had a very long period in solitary. I was probably one of the few people who welcomed the opportunity of going into solitary, because I thought that I would like it. I was in a small cell that was supposed to accommodate thirty-five, but in fact 65. It was crowded, with people trampling on you all day; and you had to sleep on the floor with people walking over you in the night -- that kind of thing; and I thought that when I was transferred to solitary I would do very well, that it would be a relief. In fact, however, after a month or two I began to have hallucinations, and I attempted suicide, and I had to be hauled out of there. So it wasn't all that simple.

One of the things I did was to say 'if the poetry is so bad, instead of panicking about it and feeling miserable and suicidal, I should start thinking about how to write poetry which I would not be ashamed of.' I began to settle for a much simpler, more direct, more immediate, unornamented poetry, less pretentious, it seemed to me, less guilty of self-display. So it's quite likely that exile has contributed to it, but I think the turning point comes in prison, when I begin to examine what I've written previously and I decide I don't want to write that way anymore.

Political Landscape

Question: If you think of yourself as a "political poet," what does it mean to experience your country from afar?"

Brutus: I don't see myself as a 'political poet'. I think that

poets who decline to deal with the real world and who exclude politics and everything else that happens in life from their poetry do themselves a disservice. Nothing that is human is alien to the poet. I remember when I read poetry at the Edinburgh Festival some years ago with W.H. Auden. He complained of my "Cold" prison poem; he said the experience was too raw, too painful, that it could not be worked into a poem. He is entitled to his view. I don't share that view. I don't think there's anything that's unpoetic; it's a matter of how you manage it.

South Africa is a landscape in which you cannot escape the politics. Wordsworth couldn't escape writing about Grassmere Rydal Mount; Eliot couldn't escape writing about the urban images of the cities; it seems to me you have to deal with your landscape, and that's my kind of landscape.

The poem "Cold" (*A Simple Lust*, pp. 52-53) was written between two prisons. I was kept in a prison in Pretoria for observation; then they decided I was very dangerous, so they sent me to the maximum security prison on a kind of Devil's Island off the coast of Cape Town called "Robben Island." This poem is written about being in transit. We travelled about a thousand miles, sixty of us chained together and put in a truck. We are barefooted, and all we have on is a pair of little short pants. We stop at midnight at a small prison where they give us each a bowl of porridge. No milk, no sugar, and no spoon, so you just eat it with your fingers, then get back in the truck and carry on. This poem is about that experience:

Cold

*the clammy cement
sucks our naked feet*

*a rheumy yellow bulb
lights a damp grey wall*

*the stubbled grass
wet with three o'clock dew
is black with glittery edges;*

*we sit on the concrete,
stuff with our fingers
the sugarless pap
into our mouths*

then labour erect;

form lines;

steel ourselves into fortitude
or accept an image of ourselves
numb with resigned acceptance;

the grizzled senior warden comments:
"Things like these
I have no time for;

they are worse than rats;
you can only shoot them"

Overhead
the large frosty glitter of the stars
the Southern Cross flowering low;

the chains on our ankles
and wrists
that pair us together
jangle

glitter.

We begin to move
awkwardly.

[Colesberg: en route to Robben Island]

[-- A Simple Lust, pp. 52-53]

Adding to what I've said elsewhere about this poem*, I'm deliberately choosing the word "awkward" because the implication is of being "Graceless," of being "without grace." I'm using "grace" not only in the sense of "elegant movement," but of Grace in the theological sense, so that we are bereft of Grace. And if you work more carefully into the poem you will see the use of the "chains" and the constellation of the "Southern Cross," which are all part of a statement I'm making at a spiritual level in addition to the purely descriptive or objective level. The poem works at two levels, but it's part of the process of moving away from the complex, ornamented, tightly-structured poetry into a much simpler poem.

Question: In some of your poems you give at the end an impression of hope for the people of South Africa. But at the end of "Cold" I don't get a feeling of much hope. Did you intend the "Cross" to give a sense of hope there?

Brutus: No, you're right. It was one of my more desolate moments.

*Palaver: *Interviews with Five African Writers In Texas*, ed. Bernth Lindfors, Occasional Publication #3 of the African & Afro-American Research Institute, The University of Texas at Austin, 1972, rtp. 1974, pp. 30-31.

I really did feel thoroughly desolated. Literally not only deserted, but bereft, being bereft of Grace. I don't want to put it too strongly, but recalling the kind of experience that Christ might have had on the cross, where the ultimate pain was not the nails or the lance, but the sense of loss of the presence of God when Christ has to cry out "my God, why have YOU forsaken me?" -- that kind of desertion and total denial of Grace. It really is a desolate poem. You're right, there really is no hope there.

Here's one from *Strains* that's a bit more hopeful. In 1962 I was in Johannesburg when students were organizing sabotage. These were mainly white students at University who did some very skillful acts of sabotage. One of the most brilliant feats of sabotage was this: outside Johannesburg, with its great industrial complexes, power lines are carried on triangular pylons. They blew up one of these pylons and made it fall at an angle so that it hit another pylon and short-circuited the whole city. There were one and a half million people without lights; factories were at a standstill; it was a brilliant piece of engineering. And the night it happened, I wrote this poem. I call it "Sabotage, 1962"; I'm looking at the sky at night:

Sabotage, 1962

*Here, thunderheads rear in the night
dominating the awed quiet sky;*

*on the quiet-breathing plains
fractured metals shriek abandoned walls;*

*my country, an ignorantly timid bride,
winces, tenses for the shattering releasing tide.*

[-- *Stubborn Hope*, p. 83]

Matter of Necessity

A Simple Lust sums up what my poetry is about. I used to be baffled in South Africa when I saw people in the resistance movement who endured much more than I did. I saw men beaten and tortured, some of them maimed for life. I saw a professor of mathematics, a brilliant man, who sat all day in a corner of his cell on Robben Island, in a heap, like a sack of potatoes. His brain had been shocked so many times with electrodes that he was like a vegetable. He wasn't like a human being any more. But what puzzled me about them was that these people had the determination to continue the struggle. It seemed to me that it had something to do with the need to be free. It must be absolutely basic for a human being to be free, it is part of our psyche, our nature. It's as elemental as the need to breathe or to eat or to sleep, to excrete, or to make love. (Emphasis added: Ed.,

K.M.) Freedom is an appetite, a lust which we have. And if you can't have it, you'd rather die than go without freedom. And so I wrote this poem about it:

*A simple lust is all my woe:
the thin thread of agony
that runs through the veins
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.*

[December 1971]

[-- *A Simple Lust*, p. 176]

NOTES

Brutus, Dennis. *Stubborn Hope* [his latest collection of poems]. Three Continents Press, 1346 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20036, 1978.

Brutus, Dennis. *A Simple Lust*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1973.