

Simon Lewis

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Obituary

Dennis Brutus (1924–2009): An appreciation

The death of Dennis Brutus sees the passing of South Africa's most internationally renowned poet since Roy Campbell. There may be no other point of comparison between the two men, and their international renown probably says more about international readers and the business of poetry publishing than it does about the quality of their work or the qualities of their character, but it points to one of the biggest ironies about Brutus's life and career: that this most intensely South African poet felt that he had not really got the respect he deserved in his own country. Although it seems fitting that after his long exile he will be buried in the land that he loved, even at his death he was at political odds too with the national regime whose policies he viewed as complicit with a global economic system that replicated apartheid injustice on an international scale.

Brutus was born in 1924 in colonial Rhodesia but was brought within six months of his birth to South Africa where his teacher-parents brought him up in Port Elizabeth. His love of language was fostered by his mother's attachment to English poetry, and Brutus recalled how, while washing dishes, she would recite from memory the classics of nineteenth-century poetry she had been taught: notably poems by Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Longfellow. In one of the rare poems written about his family, Brutus alludes to Tennyson's elegy for the Duke of Wellington, a favorite poem of his father (*A Simple Lust*, 108).

With such a strong commitment to education in his background, Brutus did well in his formal schooling. One of only two pupils from Paterson High School to get into Fort Hare, Brutus earned a degree in English (with a second major in Psychology) and became himself a teacher. Throughout the turbulence of his later life, both formally and informally Brutus remained a great and inspiring teacher and mentor. Arthur Nortje is perhaps his most famous pupil and protégé, but he was also generous in his advice to Bessie Head, and made profound impressions on students all over the world – in China, Nigeria, the United States, the United Kingdom, as well as in South Africa. When he returned to South Africa after his quarter-century exile, an elegy to Wanda Cele, a student of his killed in weekend violence (*Poetry and Protest*, 366), sadly reprised early work such as the 1956 "Poem to a Dead African" in which

Brutus had elegized John Nangoza Jebe as an emblem of endemic violence in the apartheid state (*Lust*, 34).

Although Brutus had also studied and taught Afrikaans, the first poetry he wrote was firmly English in language, style, and form – “For a Dead African,” for instance, consists of three four-line stanzas, with an abab rhyme-scheme and a conversationally inflected iambic pentameter reminiscent of Robert Browning, another of the young Brutus’s poetic models. In other early poetry one hears occasional echoes of the terse physicality of John Donne, and the consonantal word-play of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Although Brutus was to rub shoulders with contemporary British and American poets such as Auden and Spender in the 1960s and beyond, and although first his prison experience and then a visit to China prompted a shift toward compression and an imagistic mode, his style was little marked by modernistic obliqueness and fragmentation, and never by postmodern indeterminacy and play. Linguistically, too, Brutus’s poems remained slightly old-fashioned, relying on plain, clear, formal English; one or two Langston Hughes-esque “blues” apart, they rarely include vernacular expression or words from any of South Africa’s other official languages. The poetry, in short, is all of a piece – all of a piece of Dennis Brutus the man, all of a piece of Dennis Brutus the champion of justice driven by his simple lust for freedom, his stubborn hope that another, better world is possible.

Brutus’s experience as a teacher in and around Port Elizabeth in the early 1950s, when apartheid policies were becoming more and more constricting, inevitably radicalized him and he began to demonstrate his particular genius for organizing, first in local sports and PTA groups, but rapidly moving to the national level with the brilliant insight that sports-mad white South Africa could be grievously hurt by securing the country’s expulsion from international sport, at little cost to the country’s disenfranchised majority. In one of the memoir sections in *Poetry and Protest* (2006), Brutus recalls speaking at and “taking over” a meeting in response to the imposition of the Group Areas Act, and subsequently being asked by a teacher friend, “Do you have the stamina?” In his account of this event, Brutus writes that he liked the challenge implicit in his friend’s question (28), but neither man could have known quite how much stamina Brutus actually possessed, “lug[ging his] battered body” around the country and the world for nigh on another six decades (*Lust*, 130).

In the first period of Brutus’s activism, before banning, imprisonment and exile separated him from South Africa for 25 years, he developed one of his most distinctive poetic techniques. In the well-known “Nightsong: City” Brutus achieved what he called a “simultaneous statement” (*Protest*, 175), an expression of love and longing both personal and public for a mistress whose whiteness made their relationship illegal and for the land from which apartheid law in general sought to deny him access. Having opened with the striking image of “police cars cockroach[ing] through the tunnel streets,” Brutus famously ends the poem with the private-public blessing

“For this breathing night at least, / my land, my love, sleep well” (*Lust*, 18).

The “simultaneous statement” appears even in the poems from prison collected in *Letters to Martha* on which his reputation as a poet most firmly rests. Reading these poems, written with what a *Guardian* reviewer described as “a grace and penetration unmatched even by Alexander Solzhenitsyn,” one registers the depth of interiority of Brutus’s remarkably restrained and painterly images, his representation of the boredom and self-doubt of prison life, the effort of self-discipline required to resist such simple, brutal deprivations as listening to music or being allowed to see the stars. These were intensely personal poems, but in Brutus’s acknowledgment that he came to “embrace / the status of prisoner” (*Lust*, 65) they could speak for and to prisoners world-wide, and in the declaration “we were simply prisoners / of a system we had fought / and still opposed” (*Lust*, 64; emphasis added) they inspired hope, endurance, and continued resistance.

Released from jail but with little alternative than to go into exile, Brutus found himself in a state that had destroyed and was to destroy many other literary opponents of apartheid. Nothing, however, could silence Brutus. Despite not being a part of the formal apparatus of the ANC in exile, Brutus’s inspired and inspiring campaigning – against sporting ties with South Africa, and against investment in South Africa – placed him in the top ten of the apartheid regime’s “public enemies.” Brutus’s appearance on a Bureau of State Security (BOSS) hit-list was one of the factors that allowed him to resist deportation from the United States during the Reagan years, since his life would plainly have been in danger had he returned to South Africa.

As with the status of prisoner, so with the status of exile: Brutus embraced it, asserting, “I *am* the exile” in one poem (*Lust*, 137). Not only did exile enhance his sense of himself as the troubadour separated from his beloved homeland, but it gave him a place to stand from which he could shift the world. When the shift away from apartheid came, however, in the period between 1990 and 1994, Brutus was still “Dennis the Menace” in career-politicians’ eyes, roundly castigating the indecent haste with which South Africa was readmitted into the international sporting community before any substantial change had been made in internal sporting structures, and becoming one of the most vocal and persuasive critics of neoliberal ANC economic policies, such as the New Partnership for Africa’s Development – NEPAD – (which Brutus scornfully pronounced as “kneepad”), and the backing off from seeking reparations from multinational corporations that had profited from apartheid.

“I will be the world’s troubadour,” Brutus had written in 1978, “if not my country’s” (*Protest*, 392) and he was as good as his word. While he maintained a focus on South African issues, by the end of his career, Brutus’s campaigns and his poetic vision had taken on a global scope. Describing his transportation from Pretoria to Robben Island in “Cold” Brutus had written that the Southern Cross “flowering low”

was reflected in the manacles of his fellow prisoners as, chained together, they “begin to move / awkwardly” (*Lust*, 52–3). Bursting hyperbolically free of that earth-bound description, many of his most impressive late poems are written miles high in aircraft flying from protests at the World Trade Organization in Seattle or meetings of the World Social Forum. Returning from a WSF session in Porto Alegre, Brutus reuses the image of collective movement somehow blessed by the stars when he writes:

In this dim winged cathedral
soaring above oceans of silvery cloud
far beyond Atlantic’s tumultuous heave
we move, star-girt, distant
from greed’s debris, genocides, calcined bones
curled in our private shrines
or bent over light-pooled pages
to a new world, new earth, where finally
our dreams can be fulfilled. (*Protest*, 389)

Adapting the words Brutus used in elegizing Ken Saro-Wiwa: may the perfume of his inspiring voice continue to ascend, protesting.

Charleston, SC
Martin Luther King weekend, 2010

Works cited

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