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 Simon Lewis is a professor of English at the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina, USA. He also edits Illuminations: An International Magazine of Contemporary Writing that in 2004 published a special tribute issue in honor of Dennis Brutus’s 80th birthday. E-mail: LewisS@cofc.edu

Obituary

Dennis Brutus (1924–2009):
An appreciation

Simon Lewis

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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 Hop- 
kins. Although Brutus was to rub shoulders with contemporary British and Ameri-
can 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 frag-
mentation, and never by postmodern indeterminacy and play. Linguistically, too, 
Brutus’s poems remained slightly old-fashioned, relying on plain, clear, formal Eng-
lish; one or two Langston Hughes-esque “blues” apart, they rarely include vernacu-
lar 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 rad-
icalized 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 brilli-
ant 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 disen-
franchised 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[g]ing 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

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