

The Troubadour: The Poet's Persona in the Poetry of Dennis Brutus

TANURE OJAIDE

DENNIS BRUTUS, one of the best known African poets, is particularly significant for his consistent exposure and condemnation of the apartheid system of the Republic of South Africa. Born of South African parents in 1924 in Salisbury in then Southern Rhodesia, he attended the University of Witwatersrand. He later taught in South African schools. He was arrested in 1963 for his political views and escaped while on bail. Upon being re-arrested, he was jailed, and was shot as he made a bid to escape. He has since his release gone into exile and has travelled extensively. He has for many years been teaching in Northwestern University, Evanston, U.S.A. As President of SANROC (South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee), Brutus contributed to the exclusion of Rhodesia and South Africa from many international sports.

Much has been written about the poetry of Brutus, especially his images of pain, his prison poems, and his portrayal of the apartheid society.¹ My aim in this paper is to identify the poetic mask in the poems, describe it, and show its ramifications. In addition, I will quote extensively to establish the consistency and validity of the poet's persona.

The poet is consistently represented as a troubadour and this persona unites all of Brutus's poems. Brutus acknowledges in an interview:

... there recur in my poetry certain images from the language of chivalry — the troubadour, in particular. The notion of a stubborn, even foolish knight-errantry on a quest, in the service of someone loved; this is an image I use in my work, because it

seems to me a true kind of shorthand for something which is part of my life and my pursuit of justice in a menacing South Africa.²

The troubadour was a medieval knight “who was also a poet and who dedicated his life to the service of a lady (usually called a mistress) and whose unattainable love he praised in poetry. Often his service entailed fighting in order to rescue the mistress from monsters and other unfaithful knights.”³ This mask of a troubadour who loves and fights for his mistress is transplanted from medieval European times to the modern world to represent the non-white poet in the apartheid society of South Africa.

The troubadour mask is extended and complicated after *Sirens Knuckles Boots*, *Letters to Martha*, and early exile poems. The later poems present an alienated exile, still a troubadour in his being a poet of the open road. There is a close correlation between the poetic personality and the man in Brutus's poetry. The poet is familiar with his country and the world and speaks of human suffering because of socio-political injustice from the wealth of his individual experience as a sage and philosopher in his struggle to free the oppressed. Brutus uses this mask of a troubadour with ambivalence, but his position remains a valid poetic standpoint.

The opening poem of *A Simple Lust* establishes the poet as a troubadour:

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:

and I have laughed, disdaining those who banned
inquiry and movement, delighting in the test
of will when doomed by Saracened arrest,
choosing, like unarmed thumb, simply to stand.

Thus, quixoting till a cast-off of my land
I sing and fare, person to loved-one pressed
braced for this pressure and the captor's hand
that snaps off service like a weathered strand:
— no mistress-favour has adorned my breast
only the shadow of an arrow-brand.⁴

In the poem the troubadour is represented in diverse ways. The upturned thumb, drawn from the salute of the African National Congress, is also an image of the troubadour who is hiking, hitching.⁵ According to Brutus, Don Quixote also in the poem is a variation of the troubadour, "the man who travelled across Europe, fighting and loving and singing. It's the combination of conflict and music in the troubadour which interests me — the man who can be both fighter and poet, and this is a kind of contradiction which is also present in Don Quixote."⁶ The poet wears the mask of this romantic knight on the road fighting in defence of his mistress.

The poet is a troubadour who fights for a loved one against injustice and infidelity in his society. He is the spokesman for his oppressed people and exposes the brutality of the oppressors, South Africa's white minority. The poet takes the side of the majority but oppressed non-whites against the perpetrators of apartheid, the monsters the knight has to fight for the security of his mistress. It is a case of "we" against "them." The poet establishes his spokesmanship for the oppressed by varying his use of pronouns to show himself as both individual and representative. The "I" and "me" of the poems show the poet as one of the many oppressed. In "Nightsong: City," when the poet exhorts "my land, my love, sleep well,"⁷ he is talking about the country at large. It is in the same light that "my sounds begin again" (p. 19) should be seen. In "The sounds begin again" the poet speaks not only for himself but for all "the unfree" against "their woe." The representative voice is clear in the poet's use of the first person plural. His "we" and "us" identify the poet's group — the oppressed non-white people of South Africa — and create the tone of a spokesman. The poet speaks for his group in:

Somehow we survive
and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither (p. 4)

A common hate enriched our love and us (p. 22)

We have no heroes and no wars
only victims of a sickly state
succumbing to the variegated sores
that flower under lashing rains of hate. (p. 34)

In addition, Brutus often uses “one” to express both personal and representative experiences:

So one cushions the mind
with phrases
aphorisms and quotations
to blunt the impact
of this crushing blow (p. 63)

Later one changes,
tries the dodges,
seeks the easy outs (p. 65)

It is a way of establishing one is real. (p. 80)

Also the poet uses “one” mainly in the prison and exile poems to avoid self-centredness by distancing himself from the experience to avoid sentimentality. In any case, “one” succeeds in portraying the poet’s experiences as representative of the black inmates’. This representative voice creates a sense of solidarity among the oppressed and establishes the poet as a prime mover in his society.

Conversely, the whites are referred to as “they,” as in “Blood River Day”:

Each year on this day
they drum the earth with their boots
and growl incantations
to evoke the smell of blood
for which *they* hungrily sniff the air:

guilt
drives *them* to the lair
of primitiveness
and ferocity. (p. 77; emphasis mine)

And in “Their Behaviour,” the contrast is clear as “Their guilt / is not so very different from ours” (p. 79). The contrast of the two socio-political groups which causes tension in real life also brings tension to the verse. Besides, the poet stands out as taking the side of justice, for he is satirical and critical of the apartheid oppressors.

As spokesman, the poet speaks about South Africa to South Africans and all of humankind. He speaks of the brutality of the apartheid system:

More terrible than any beast
 that can be tamed or bribed
 the iron monster of the world
 ingests me in its grinding maw:
 agile as a ballet-dancer
 fragile as a butterfly
 I eggdance with nimble wariness
 — stave off my fated splintering. (p. 7)

The ferocity of the apartheid machine is contrasted with the fragility of the non-whites. The savagery of the apartheid system is exposed in:

the siren in the night
 the thunder at the door
 the shriek of nerves in pain.
 Then the keening crescendo
 of faces split by pain
 the wordless, endless wail
 only the unfree know. (p. 19)

As spokesman the poet explains the state of the oppressed and imprisoned to the outside world. Because he has been a victim himself, the poet understands the oppressive situation and tells others the true state of things. This helps to make outsiders view the oppressed sympathetically. The poet, for instance, says:

Presumably
 one should pity the frightened ones
 the old fighters
 who now shrink from contact (p. 75)

The impregnation of our air
 with militarism
 is not a thing to be defined
 or catalogued;
 it is a miasma
 wide as the air itself
 ubiquitous as a million trifling things,
 our very climate.
 We become a bellicose people
 living in a land at war
 a country besieged;
 the children play with guns

and the schoolboys dream of killings
 and our dreams are full of the birdflight of jets
 and our men
 are bloated with bloody thoughts; inflated sacrifices
 and grim despairing dyings. (p. 78)

The poet thus explains things to outsiders so that they will be able to understand the predicament of the non-whites.

The role of the poet as a fighter is manifested in diverse ways. To discredit and embarrass the establishment on the one hand and inspire the oppressed non-whites on the other, the poet acts as a reporter and chronicles the atrocities of the "monsters" so that history will confirm the guilt of the oppressors. "For a Dead African" is about "John Nangoza Jebe: shot by the police in a Good Friday procession in Port Elizabeth 1956" (p. 34). He thus gives the correct but unofficial account of things in South Africa. The fight is not physical but mainly psychological — making "them" feel guilty and embarrassed so as to stop the inhuman policies of apartheid.

The troubadour-poet-fighter relationship is in evidence as

we were simply prisoners
 of a system we had fought
 and still opposed. (p. 64)

He causes the oppressors discomfort as he hurts them psychologically and the poet becomes a threat to the apartheid establishment:

I have lashed them
 the marks of my scars
 lie deep in their psyche
 and unforgettable
 inescapable. (p. 89)

Moreover, the poet discredits the tyrannical establishment as in "And they know I will do more":

anger and resolution
 yeast in me
 waiting for the time of achievement
 which will come if God wills
 when I flog fresh lashes across these thieves. (p. 91)

As part of the struggle for justice, the poet encourages his people. He believes that despite their current plight the oppressed will be free. As a singing troubadour, he instils hope in his people, thus contributing positively to the psychological upliftment necessary for a successful struggle. He assures all:

Peace will come.
We have the power
the hope
the resolution.
Men will go home. (p. 96)

By fighting for and encouraging his people, the poet is his brother's keeper as he continues the fight even after his release from jail. He believes that as long as others are in jail or suffering, he is himself not free.

The troubadour has his mistress whom he loves. Brutus subtly symbolizes South Africa — his land and his country — as the mistress;⁸ hence his personification of the land:

exploring all her wide-flung parts with zest
probing in motion sweeter far than rest
her secret thickets with an amorous hand. (p. 2)

Besides, "my land takes precedence of all my loves" (p. 24). It is in pursuing the motif of the troubadour in defence of his mistress that the poet laments that "— no mistress-favour has adorned my breast / only the shadow of an arrow-brand" (p. 2). In other words, unlike the troubadour who is rewarded for his service by his mistress, the poet receives wounds from the South African regime. Therein lie the irony and ambivalence of the poet in the apartheid state — that this "Dear my land" should evoke "love and pain" (p. 16). The poet loves the country but hates the inhumanity practised in it. This tension runs through the poetry of Brutus. The poet fights for his mistress to achieve justice which in the social context of the poems involves condemning apartheid and embarrassing its perpetrators. The poet thus fulfils his troubadour roles of lover and fighter in the poems.

But the poet remains a romantic figure, hence he is labelled "poet dreamer troubadour" (p. 92). This partly humorous, partly pathetic voice is reminiscent of Don Quixote. It is Don

Quixote before the windmill that is suggested in the various metaphors the poet uses to describe himself :

I am the tree
creaking in the wind
outside in the night
twisted and stubborn :

I am the sheet
of the twisted tin shack
grating in the wind
in a shrill sad protest :

I am the voice
crying in the night
that cries endlessly
and will not be consoled. (p. 106)

The poet is impractical. As a poet of the open road, he implores, "My land, my love, be generous to forgive / my nomad roving down the vagrant streets" (p. 40). As a restless music-maker, the poet explores his land as in "Train Journey":

Along the miles of steel
that span my land
threadbare children stand
knees ostrich-bulbous on their reedy legs,
their empty hungry hands
lifted as if in prayer. (p. 49)

Through his wanderings, the poet knows the land and the plight of his people, including the "threadbare children." It is through this knowledge of his land that he establishes himself as a credible spokesman for the oppressed and suffering group in his land.

The poet is a singer whose song is a complaint against his land's violation. He makes music through repetition of words, word-groups, and lines. Some poems such as "Somehow we survive" and "The sounds begin again" repeat their first and last lines with slight variations. "A troubadour, I traverse all my land" is a sonnet with its special rhyme-scheme. In many of the poems alliteration and assonance add musicality to the poet's voice. The poet thus sings emotionally about the plight of his land.

The troubadour motif also dominates the poems after exile. Exile itself is a journey, a quest which corresponds to the wanderings of the troubadour. However, different facets of the poet's personality emerge. The poet acknowledges:

I *am* the exile
am the wanderer
the troubadour. (p. 137)

The poet gives the impression of lack of confidence, of fighting a losing battle in this post-exile stage. Despair is immanent in the ineffectual role the poet sees himself playing. He can only

remouth some banal platitudes
and launch-lodge some arrows
from a transient unambitious hand,
a nerveless unassertive gripe. (p. 124)

His plight in exile is reinforced by the Biblical allusion to the king identified as Xerxes I,

old Ahasuerus of unrevealed destiny —
reeling doggedly in the corridors of circumstance
impelled by an impersonally benign
uncaring supernal omniscience. (p. 125)

Perhaps the poem that best expresses the wandering nature of the poet in the post-exile stage is "And I am driftwood." The repetition of "I am driftwood" emphasizes the wandering nature of the poet who drifts from place to place not of his own volition, but as an act of destiny:

For I am driftwood
in a life and place and time
thrown by some chance, perchance
to an occasional use
a rare half-pleasure on a seldom chance

and I grate on the sand of being
of existence, circumstance
digging and dragging for a meaning
dragging through the dirt and debris
the refuse of existence
dragging through the diurnal treadmill of my life. (p. 142)

Here the purpose of the wandering is spelt out: a quest for meaning to human existence. The meaning the poet looks for is socio-political justice that will free the victimized non-whites of the apartheid system. All "the restlessness, the journeyings, the quest, / the queryings, the hungers and the lusts" (p. 142) are towards social justice.

In the quest two things stand out about the poet. He is both an alienated being and a spokesman for his people. He is an "alien in Africa and everywhere" (p. 121), a state exacerbated by Brutus's mixed blood. He is dogged by the burden of responsibility and imagination so that even in exile, he thinks of those suffering in Robben Island, "the men who are still there crouching now / in the grey cells, on the grey floors, stubborn and bowed" (p. 102). As in earlier poems, the poet's plight is representative of the suffering group in South Africa. It is for this that he is spokesman telling the world of the plight of the victims of apartheid:

only I speak the others' woe:
 those congealed in concrete
 or rotting in rusted ghetto-shacks;
 only I speak their wordless woe,
 their unarticulated simple lust. (p. 176)

So far the poet is still a troubadour, a poet of the open road in his exile and a fighter in his protest. The troubadour image is reinforced by quester-related metaphors. In *Stubborn Hope* different quest metaphors describe the poet in his exile. Most of *Stubborn Hope* are travel poems, since the poet is in flight, "one more wide range on a troubadour's earth."⁹ The poet is still on the road and this time the whole world is the setting of his poems and the experiences are universalized. He tells his readers:

I will be the world's troubadour
 if not my country's

 knight-erranting
 jousting up and down
 with justice for my theme

 weapons as I find them
 and a world-wide scatter of foes

Being what I am
 a compound of speech and thoughts and song
 and girded by indignation
 and accoutred with some undeniable scars
 surely I may be
 this cavalier? (pp. 22-23)

And he is a pilgrim who shuffles "through the waiting rooms / and the air-terminals of the world" (p. 25). The pilgrim as a metaphor for the poet has the same role as the troubadour; the pilgrim quests for an ideal. The poet is thus a Christian knight and the shrine is symbolic of the romantic mistress he seeks and defends. To the knight the mistress meant adoration, and the implication that the mistress could be a Christian saint is significant.

Images of sea travel reinforce the driftwood image of the poet. He begins an odyssey in the first poem of *Stubborn Hope*, "Words for Farewell." The bird image in *A Simple Lust* is also present in *Stubborn Hope*. The bird is symbolic of the poet in his quest and poetic imagination. Hence, ". . . all birds fly a vagrant trail / and the music cannot stale" (p. 1). There is a synthesis of the voyager and the bird as images representing the poet, who calls himself a "lacustrine mallard" (p. 55).

The pain and suffering the poet witnesses are not restricted to South Africa as in the early poems but are a world-wide phenomenon. So intense is universal suffering that

Sirens contrail the night air:
 Images of prisons around the world,
 reports of torture, cries of pain
 all strike me on a single sore
 all focus on a total wound:
 Isle of Shippey, Isle of Wight,
 New Zealand and Australia
 are places with a single name
 — where I am they always are:
 I go through the world with a literal scar,
 their names are stitched into my flesh,
 their mewedupness is my perennial ache,
 their voice the texture of my air.
 Sirens contrail the London air. (p. 50)

The same universality of suffering is expressed in "Stop," where the poet asks his audience to think not only of pain and hunger but also of:

... people dying
 dying by the gun,
 the boot
 the fist.
 Think of them,
 the people who are not free,
 who will give their lives to be free. (p. 53)

So wherever the poet finds himself, he lives with the burden of the suffering people; he always thinks of "those who toss on coir mats amid stone-walls / and writhe their restless loneliness" (p. 16). The Sharpeville massacre, the epitome of apartheid's inhumanity, is an intensification of what obtains elsewhere:

Nowhere is racial dominance
 more clearly defined
 nowhere the will to oppress
 more clearly demonstrated

 what the world whispers
 apartheid declares with snarling guns
 the blood the rich lust after
 South Africa spills in the dust. (p. 89)

It is in the same "wounded land" (p. 65) that there exists "the unquenchable will for freedom" (p. 89).

As a result of general suffering, the poet praises endurance and stoicism. The title poem, "Stubborn Hope," is an ode on endurance:

Yet somewhere lingers the stubborn hope
 thus to endure can be a kind of fight,
 preserve some value, assert some faith
 and even have a kind of worth. (p. 22)

This is the undaunted will of the troubadour in his relentless struggle. To him, "Endurance is the ultimate virtue" (p. 10), a shield against despair. Other poems such as "The beauty of this single tree" (p. 8) and "At Odd Moments" (p. 43) emphasize the poet's extolling the resolve to endure oppression with hope.

By doing this, the poet does not give the oppressors the opportunity to rejoice in defeating the oppressed.

The poet is a humble fighter against injustice in the vein of the medieval knight. Though he is like every other person human, having "no amulet against despair / no incantation to dismiss suicide" (p. 50), he struggles against apartheid in sports: "Indeed I flog fresh lashes across these thieves! / And they bleed . . ." (p. 42). In "Dear God," he prays as a Christian soldier to God to fight the evil of injustice. It is for this pre-occupation with the ideal that he says: "my continental sense of sorrow drove me to work / and at times I hoped to shape your better world" (p. 4). And he admits: "I am a rebel and freedom is my cause" (p. 95).

The troubadour has his mistress in mind in *Stubborn Hope*. The romantic lady who inspires the knight to fight is subtly alluded to in

I gird from nestling to advance the struggle
A clinic dialectic titrates, dispells our charms
— Ah Love, unshoulder now my arms! (p. 57)

This same lady is the subject of "Even though you weave her":

Even though you weave her
with energetic quills
Medea-robos of flames
and thus contrive to smother
motion, speech and shame

yet in this clash of wills
I'll not consent to leave her
nor ever cease to love her
and therein lies my brute resistance. (p. 67)

This loved one is as in *Letters to Martha* a personification of the land of South Africa whose presence the poet yearns for in "What could be dearer." The poet's country is a "Timid bride" (p. 83). The mistress-land analogy is clearly expressed in "Land that I love, now must I ask" (p. 14).

A Simple Lust and *Stubborn Hope* clearly present the poet who is a fighter for justice at home and abroad, struggling to realize his poetic aims. The troubadour image is consistent in all

of the poetry of Brutus. The poet is variously a wanderer, an exile, a dreamer, a bird, a sea-voyager and in all these aspects he is pursuing an ideal. The poet is committed to his struggle and leaves no one in doubt as to which side he stands for: he fights as a spokesman and a representative of the oppressed and the victims of injustice in South Africa and elsewhere. As a troubadour he uses movement and the road to establish his wealth of experience and give credibility to his sayings. He is thus a witness and a victim of the injustice he fights against. The idea of being on the road has universal meaning as the road involves the quest for an ideal. The road also makes the experiences of the poet universal and human as it designates life. The poet's exile brought him the realization that there is evil everywhere, but there is an intensification of it in his country which he loves in spite of the apartheid system.

The poet in the poems and Brutus the man are inseparable, since his experience forms the basis of his poetic personality: his being a half-caste, his alienation in Africa and Europe, his detention, his being shot at while escaping from jail, his exile, his role in keeping South Africa out of international sports, and his travels are all materials for poems that sometimes look highly confessional. In times of harsh realities, as in the apartheid regime of South Africa, the poet and the man are rarely inseparable because of the compulsive experiences. The poems of Brutus are journalism by other means.

His choosing the persona of the troubadour to express himself is particularly significant as the moving and fighting roles of the medieval errant, though romantic, tally with his struggle for justice in South Africa, a land he loves dearly as the knight his mistress. The movement contrasts with the stasis of despair and enacts the stubborn hope that despite the suffering, there shall be freedom and justice for those *now* unfree.

NOTES

- ¹ Among others: R. N. Egudu, *Modern Africa and the African Predicament* (London: Macmillan, 1978), pp. 50-65, and Bahadour Tejani, "Can the Prisoner Make a Poet? A Critical Discussion of *Letters to Martha* by Dennis Brutus," *African Literature Today*, No. 6 (1973).

- 2 Per Wastberg, ed., *The Modern Writer in Africa* (New York, 1969), p. 98.
- 3 Theo Vincent and K. E. Senanu, eds., *A Selection of African Poetry* (Lagos: Longman, 1976), p. 57.
- 4 Dennis Brutus, *A Simple Lust* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 2.
- 5 Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse, eds., *African Writers Talking* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 55.
- 6 Duerden and Pieterse, p. 56.
- 7 Brutus, p. 18. Hereafter pages are cited immediately after quotations.
- 8 Duerden and Pieterse, p. 56.
- 9 Dennis Brutus, *Stubborn Hope* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 54. Hereafter pages are cited immediately after quotations.