

DENNIS BRUTUS AND THE REVOLUTIONARY IDEA

By

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It will hardly be denied that Brutus is a poet deeply committed to an intellectual perspective and with a strong systematizing bent, yet the coherence of his intellectual development has often been doubted and, not surprisingly, the task of elucidating his poems within the framework of this development has been shirked. Without implying that poetry may be reduced to ideas or to the promulgation of an outlook, I would suggest that an adequate appreciation of Brutus requires a placing of his work within the context of the governing ideas relevant to its understanding. I do not mean to indicate by this a concern on my part with the history of ideas, nor am I greatly interested, though regardful of influences too important to be ignored, in intellectual sources and contemporary movements of thought. Naturalism, I would suggest, is more than a controlling idea in Brutus's thought; it is the principal subject matter of his poetry, and it provides the conceptual foundation for his way of looking at things.

The disposition to substitute nature for God is the mark of naturalism, and is more or less present in Brutus. This is partly grounded in the scientific desire to stress the regularity of natural law and eliminate the arbitrary and irrational from the process of the universe. But the concept of God as the original substance, the guarantee of rationality, purposiveness and benevolence--it is this which makes nature worthy of the enthusiasm of its devotee; and the spiritual principle, latent or overt, is never altogether absent from his poetry.

At the beginning two precautions must be mentioned. First, to trace such intellectual pattern will initially over-emphasize it, simply because other poetic matters will be ignored even when they are more important. Poems with little philosophical interest will be skipped over and much that is only implicit will swell to undue importance merely by being made explicit. Second, and vastly complicating everything, Brutus is at times inconsistent. Sometimes he even reverses himself by mocking his own message. To ignore all these things entirely would create a false picture of his work. Yet in this essay, they will be mostly ignored.

A central and persistent concern of Brutus's poetry is to assert the cardinal value he calls "spirit of freedom," which he opposes to the state of mastery, tyranny, thralldom and

servitude--a mastery exerted by totalitarian despots and their institutions. Mourning the death of Albert Luthuli, a former president of the African National Congress of South Africa, he writes as follows:

*Spirit of freedom and courage
guard us from despair
brood over us with your faith.*

*Fire the flagging and the faint,
spur us to fierce resolve,
drive us to fight and win.¹*

In another poem "freedom," "courage," and "faith" are seen as operating under the aegis of "wisdom," with the "will" generating the energy that produces "justice" and "quiet":

*Now that we conquer and dominate time
hurtling imperious from the sun's laggard slough
transcendentally watching the Irish jigsaw
ship astream dumbly under masking cloud,
green England dissolved in history-grey
and fanatic old Yeats made mellow by height,*

*now that all canons of space-time are dumb
and obey the assertions of resolute will
and an intricate wisdom is machined to leash
ten thousand horses in world-girdling flight,
how shall we question that further power
waits for a leap across gulfs of storm;
that pain will be quiet, the prisoned free,
and wisdom sculpt justice from the world's
jagged mass.²*

Much of his thought was influenced by the Enlightenment from which he borrowed the idea of nature, and the Chain of Being which linked man with the spiritual unity of the universe, and this idea was reinforced by an intense temperamental interest in the proliferation of natural forms, and the wonders of the physical universe. He is thus aware of some pattern in the universe, of which man is a part; yet man has in some way taken a wrong turning. The meaning of liberty, which the Greeks have given to the West, has been lost as men sink beneath the tyranny of political power-bags. In his own country the spirit of liberty has begun to stir, but it has to fight against the forces of a fascist government, and hence Brutus shows a passionate interest in the Sharpeville Massacre, and the recent revolts in Soweto and other ghettos, which he takes to be the beginnings of a new age of liberty for South Africa. What exactly "freedom" means to him in a political sense is not often easy to say, and it is true that the "freedom" of South African revolts is so far

a very inexplicit creed. But Brutus is not the child of politics he has sometimes been made out to be. A close study of his ideas will show that he has a clear grasp of realities, and that politically he is more moderate than he seems. But he is less interested in political forms than in the spirit of freedom, and that to him means in some way the release of the personality of men and women from economic, intellectual and spiritual bonds. He speaks often in support of "revolution" but it seems not a revolution of violence which he advocates, but a moral transformation whereby individualism and social justice would be released, and tyranny would succumb simply because it was obscurantist, outmoded and inadequate. How society would then be organized, and how individualism would be reconciled with social obligations he does not enquire too deeply. In a new era of universal love such problems would solve themselves.

Man, to Brutus, is a pure and noble being who should enjoy the fruits of the earth in happiness and peace, but alas, he has been perverted and borne down by the weight of power. It is the nature of the spirit to be free, but man's spirit has been imprisoned, and his nature violated:

*Sleep well, my love, sleep well;
the harbour lights glaze over restless docks,
police cars cockroach through the tunnel streets;*

*from the shanties creaking iron-sheets
violence like a bug-infested rag is tossed
and fear is immanent as sound in the wind-swung
bell;*

*the long day's anger pants from sand and rocks;
but for this breathing night at least,
my land, my love, sleep well.³*

For Brutus political power is symbolized by police and prisons, around which avarice and hatred fatten while the innocent wither. Their influence pervades society, and debases all men; is it so strange therefore that men have forgotten the nobility of their nature in the atmosphere of decadence?

*Perhaps most terrible are those who beg for it,
who beg for sexual assault.*

*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.⁴*

This is the explanation why men have not risen long ago to overthrow tyranny. It follows that when men learn to understand their true nature they will destroy the political powers which have oppressed men and made misery and wars:

*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 ballet-dancer
fragile as butterfly
I eggdance with nimble wariness⁵
-stave off my fated splintering.*

The contrast is always between the peace, beauty and harmony of nature, and the misery created by man:

*Out of the granite day
a stream of sunlight thrusts,
spills over sombre dust:*

*brightness afar
cascades images
of someone bright and dear
and far away.⁶*

The fruits of the earth were meant to be enjoyed by all alike, yet in practice they were the preserve of the few. The Spirit of Nature, the Spirit of Love and Freedom, is in all men, just as it pervades the whole universe, the life of minute creatures, and inanimate nature alike, and once men recognize the need to follow its lead there would follow a reign of eternal peace. Rhapsodizing the Spirit of Nature, the poet declares:

*Between the time of falling for the flowers
and lush profusion of the summer's leaves
the trees with naked boughs achieve
an almost-autumn elegance
of delicate austere intricacy:
this is the end of spring, the start of summer
and in this stripped athletic grace
subdued assurance of fresh hope*

*more certain than the burgeoning of spring
more meaningful than summer's fulsome load.⁷*

Brutus does not answer the various questions which arise concerning his attitude to nature. If man is in every respect a part of nature, how is it that he has become depraved? It is clear that Brutus is drawing in part on traditional ideas. The Spirit of Nature, which pervades alike the motions of the stars and the lives of the smallest birds, is a new version of the traditional concept of the Great Chain of Being, and the corruption which has entered men's lives is only another way of stating the Fall and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The wickedness of Satan is transformed to the wickedness of police, who have corrupted man from his true nature. Similarly the ideal future which awaits man is a secularized version of the changeless eternity of Paradise.

How important these concepts are to the literature of revolt may be seen if we compare Brutus's ideas with those of the greatest philosopher of revolt of the past century, Karl Marx. Marx, too, believed in the innate goodness of human nature. He, too, believed that men had been corrupted--his word was "alienated"--not by political figures, although that was part of the story, but by the economic system, and by the modern world of capitalism. He, too, believed that there were sufficient fruits of the earth for all if only they were fairly distributed, and that in order to achieve this desirable state of affairs it was necessary to overthrow the existing system, to destroy political power (so that the State would "wither away") and establish an eternity of changeless peace and equality. Moreover, the same uncertainty arose with Marx's theory that arises with Brutus's. For, if the whole universe is actuated by the Spirit of Nature (in Marx's version it was the historical process, inexorable and scientific in character), why was it necessary to change it by force, and if man stood outside the order of Nature (having the power to choose alternative courses of action), how could it be certain that he was bound by its laws?

Neither Brutus nor Marx would have anything to do with a doctrine of original sin. Men were not corrupt by nature, but only by circumstance. To Marx they were the victims of the economic system under which they lived; to Brutus they are the products of the atmosphere of political violence:

*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.⁸*

The child has no chance to develop according to his nature:

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;
our 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 thought; inflated sacrifices
and grim despairing dyings.⁹

To Brutus the instruments of this "siege" are always the same;
police and the prisons willfully tormenting the people. And
Brutus is in full agreement with Marx that the economic system
is unjust and oppressive:

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.¹⁰

The world is tainted by what Milton would have called Satanism:

These are the faceless horrors
that people my nightmares
from whom I turn to wakefulness
for comforting

yet here I find confronting me
the fear-blanked facelessness
and saurian-lidded stares
of my irrational terrors
from whom in dreams I run.

O my people
O my people
what have you done
and where shall I find comforting
to smooth awake your mask of fear
restore your face, your faith, feeling, tears.¹¹

Men are the prisoners of the system under which they live:

*How deadly an enemy is fear!
How it seeks out the areas of our vulnerability
And savages us
until we are so rent and battered
and desperate
that we resort to what revolts us
and wallow in the foulest treachery.¹²*

They are prisoners, but not permanently corrupted; they have before them a clear choice of liberty or servitude, of life or death. There is no middle way:

*O let me soar on steadfast wing
that those who know me for a pitiable thing
may see me inerasably clear:*

*grant that their faith I might hood
some potent thrust to freedom, humanhood
under drab fluff may still be justified.*

*Protect me from the slightest deviant swoop
to pretty bush or hedgerow lest I droop
ruffled or trifled, snared or power misspent.*

*Uphold--frustrate me if need be
so that I mould my energy
for that one swift inerrable soar*

*hurling myself swordbeaked to lunge
for lodgement in my life's sun-targe--
a land of people just and free.¹³*

In his general indictment against history Brutus is particularly severe in his condemnation of the Church. The triumph of fascist forces in South Africa only confirms him in his view that the God of orthodoxy is an evil and vengeful being. God appears as a vengeful being, choosing to save his Elect, but ready to condemn the mass of mankind to perdition:

*Our aims our dreams our destinations
Thought reconstructed in vacuity
a dialogue:
But God doesn't answer back.*

...

*Well if He damn me,
drive me to damnation
by inflicting the unendurable,
force me along the knife-blades till I choose
perdition*

how shall I feel guilty?
When my sense of justice says
He drove me
He's the guilty one
and if He chose--
BE DAMNED HIM

And then to spend eternity
eternally in revolt
against injustice-justice
fighting in vain
against injustice
in the service of my private justice
against a God turned devil
hoping forever for the triumph of despair.
"Evil be thou my Good."¹⁴

Now this God of Brutus's is clearly the God of Voltaire and the eighteenth century Enlightenment, the God which science had appeared to confirm. Brutus seems fascinated with the age-old idea of the Great Chain of Being which stemmed from Plato, in which every detail has its appointed place in the pattern of the universe. In the hands of tyrants the God of history has been the instrument of oppression. If this is the God of history, it cannot be Brutus's God. In its place he falls back upon a God of his own, the Spirit of Nature, which stands for justice, peace and love.

Herein lies the weakest link in Brutus's argument, for his Spirit of Nature is not in truth the spirit which the Enlightenment has revealed, but the old view of Paradise which would come for all eternity once man has regained liberty. It was also Marx's view of the classless society. Brutus envisages the "garish sun" of present-day tyranny to melt into "dove-soft dust":

In the dove-grey dove-soft dusk
when the walls softened to frozen smoke
and their rigidity melted
receding to miles,
when the air was alive and tender
with a mist of spray from the sea,
the air luminous
and the sky bright with the dulling glimmer
of cooling molten lead;
when the island breathed--
trees, grass, stones and sand breathing
quietly at the end of the long hot day--
and the sea was a soft circling presence--
no longer a tight barbed menacing ring:

*in the dusk
nothing was more agonizing than to be seized
by the poignant urgent simple desire
simply to stroll in the quiet dusk:
as I do now:
as I do now, and they do not.*¹⁵

All this is attainable, for man is capable of perfectibility; for "every heart contains perfection's germ"¹⁶ if only it were allowed free expression.

But is there no evil in Brutus's cosmos? The question is absurd. For whence the violence? Brutus does not offer, it must be acknowledged, any very satisfactory explanation of the origin and nature of evil. He has other purposes. The immediate targets are large and obvious. Enough philosophy is required to support the campaign. The poems do not, however, represent clearly his thinking on the problem in his later writing, written in the relative freedom of exile, when he could measure the adversary in progressively more subtle descriptions.

Brutus's writings reflect the Enlightenment contrast between unspoiled Nature and outcast man. He does tend to regard Nature with a religious reverence, and he does see totalitarian institutions as departures from the ideal. The praise of "natural" simplicity implicit in his nature descriptions suggests a degree of acceptance of the ideals of primitivism and natural innocence. Against the notion of human depravity, as we have indicated, Brutus argues that it is tyranny which corrupts man. Though he does, therefore, assume something akin to Rousseau's notion of man's original goodness, as a believer in progress Brutus does not share Rousseau's conviction that knowledge and civilization have worked the corruption. In fact, there are many references to art and music and science, in his work, which reveal his admiration for civilization. The primitive state is associated with "ferocity," as in the following poem, "Blood River Day," in which he describes the bestiality of the Boers:

*guilt
drives them to the lair
of primitiveness
and ferocity.*¹⁷

Equality, justice, and knowledge are the associated fruits of higher civilization.

The main problem, for Brutus, is to reconcile the advantages of intellect and civilization with the pure pleasures of natural life. Original sin is rejected for the belief that the present obvious taints in our civilization are the result of totalitarian institutions. The view of radical empiricism

that character is a product of circumstance, is adopted by Brutus. The villain is not society in itself nor civilization nor the advancing knowledge which graces both. It is the corrupted and distorting totalitarian institutions which have not kept up with the general progress of civilization. These defective forms blight men from birth. The question-begging nature of the indictment is not realized by Brutus.

Brutus has no single consistent answer to the problem of evil, as one might expect given the nature of the problem, the many possible ways of looking at it, and the multiplicity of varieties, kinds, expressions of evil in man and society. When the metaphysical impulse is strong in him, from the "China poems" onwards, his sense of the reality of the evils confronted by radical reformers may very well be tending to dwindle. There is nothing surprising about that. One's view of the surface is directly affected by the depth of his basic penetrations. Social problems must seem remote to the astronomer while he is charting the heavens. One can, of course, hold both radical and Platonic views of evil. The natural Platonist is bound at least at times to associate evil with the imperfect world of matter and being, change or mutability. When one lives in a world of changeless ideas outside the imperfect world of matter and becoming, violence and wrong must often seem as a dream beside the reality of steadfast truth.

But if there is, as Brutus and Utopian visionaries of the Enlightenment seem to think, an analogy or correspondence between the moral and natural worlds, if nature and man are directed by parallel sets of laws, then man, who restores Paradise by projecting his inner illumination out onto nature, may also create an Inferno of disease, storms, and ugliness which reflects his moral degeneration. The path of progress may seem clear but not easy, as long as the mind can be perverted.

Moral evil certainly exerts a morbid fascination over man. The mind closes to vision. Such is the psychology of reaction. When the expansive energies generated by love and hope retract, then the victim of tyranny assimilates from the tyrant the narrowing, self-centered passions of fear, hate and revenge, as can be felt in the following poem in which Brutus celebrates his successful campaign against South Africa's participation in the Olympic games:

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.*¹⁸

According to Brutus's view, the great problem of political justice and human happiness is not primarily to give men knowledge of what is right and good, but to arouse in them the will to do that right and act that good which they already know. Brutus allows for a separable will, capable of corruption and in need of stimulation by the imagination. Perhaps perversity rather than human ignorance keeps man in the pit. The position is not far from that of the later Shelley and the early Auden.

One cannot consider the great subject of evil and the significance of apartheid, of separation in Brutus's poetic vision, without reference to the central importance of love as a unifying force between man and man, and between man and the universe; and Brutus's prison and love poems give occasion for specifying the conditions which fostered the pervasive view of radical good and evil. South Africa is a country of political and social revolutions--of increasingly massive industrial slums, of sharp disparity in economic and political power, and consequent tightening of the class structure; of competing ideologies and ever-imminent social chaos. To such a world of drastic division and conflict, the inherited pieties and integrative myths seem no longer adequate to hold civilization together. In Brutus's poetic universe the ancient view that evil is the fragmentation of a once harmonious whole into alien and embattled parts was refined and expanded to express the general sense that, in W.B. Yeats's famous formulation,

*Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*

Brutus's position could be put in this way: If essential evil is equated with the aggregate of what drives things apart, then essential good will be equated with the aggregate of what pulls the sundered parts together; and for this centripetal force the most eligible general name is "love." The inclusive application of the term to all cohesive forces in the human and nonhuman universe is central to Brutus, for whom dispersion and integration, as we shall see, are primary categories. The sovereign function of poetry for Brutus is, as it was for Wordsworth, to sustain and propagate connectedness, which is love; the poet, as Wordsworth said in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, "is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love."¹⁹

In Brutus's application of the term "love," as in recent depth-psychology, all modes of human attraction seem to be conceived as one in kind, different only in object and degree in a range which includes the relations of lover to beloved, children to parents, brother to sister, friend to friend, and individual to humanity. The orbit of love is enlarged to include the relationship of man to nature as well. The perception that dead nature is really alive, Schelling said, is the result of "the attraction of inner love and relationship between your own spirit and that which lives in nature."

What makes the fusion of all affinities into love especially conspicuous in Brutus (as, among English romantic poets, in Shelley) is that his paradigm is sexual love, with the result that in his poetry all types of human and extra-human attraction--all forces that hold the universe together--are typically represented by categories which are patently derived from erotic attraction and sexual union. This procedure has provided some critics with grounds for reducing much of Brutus's poetry to the expression of regressive sexual fantasies. It may well be that Brutus's choice of a paradigmatic relation, like Shelley's before him, is rooted in his private preoccupations and emotional complexes. But whatever its motivation, Brutus's procedure is not in the least an unconscious one, for he is aware that he is putting a part, which he assesses as a salient but relatively lesser part, for the whole.

Notes

1. Dennis Brutus, A Simple Lust, London: Heinemann, 1973, p. 1
2. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
16. This is Shelley's phrase that occurs in his poem, Queen Mab. Although there are striking differences between Brutus and Shelley, yet it is true that the earlier poet's revolutionary zeal, founded on his view of the sacred nature of man, had a marked affect on Brutus's thought and work.
17. Brutus, A Simple Lust, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
19. This version is of 1802, in Literary Criticism, ed. Zall, p. 52.