

**CITATION FOR DENNIS BRUTUS****Honorary Graduand, Rhodes University, 17 April 2009**

By Professor Paul Maylam

When one thinks of poets who have also been activists certain names spring to mind – Pablo Neruda, Leopold Senghor, Aime Cesaire, for instance. For South Africa the name that immediately comes to mind is Dennis Brutus – long-standing anti-apartheid activist and eminent poet.

For Dennis Brutus both concerns – poetry and protest – go back many decades. First stimulated by his mother reading Wordsworth and Tennyson to him as a child, he wrote his first poem as a teenager at Paterson High School in Port Elizabeth, the city where he grew up. He saw the moon rising over a lake and liked the image – from this came his first poem. As a student at Fort Hare in the late 1940s he was known to wander about, mumbling poetry to himself – Donne and Hopkins among his favourites.

Dennis Brutus' activism dates from his time as a school-teacher in Port Elizabeth from the late 1940s to the early sixties. He was initially aligned with organisations like the Unity Movement that insisted on absolutely no participation in dummy institutions, such as the Coloured Affairs Department, set up by the apartheid government. Soon, though, he moved towards the ANC, drawn there through a friendship with Govan Mbeki.

From the late fifties Dennis became involved in an area of anti-apartheid protest that would dominate his activism for the next 30 years or more. Although no sportsman himself, he came to see that campaigning for South Africa's isolation in the sporting world would hurt the white minority regime. So in 1958 he was a driving-force behind the founding of what would become SANROC – the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee, whose purpose was to show how apartheid policies violated the Olympic Charter.

As SANROC's campaign began Dennis could not resist a dig at a Mr Honey, the head of the South African Olympic Committee. "Mr Honey", said Dennis, "despite your name, things are going to get very bitter". And bitter, indeed, they did become. SANROC's campaign, headed by Dennis, led to South Africa's exclusion from the 1964 and 1968 Olympic Games, and in 1970 to the country's full expulsion from the International Olympic Movement.

In the meantime Dennis' own personal circumstances had changed dramatically. The 1960 Sharpeville massacre confirmed his decision to align with the ANC. While Mandela was in hiding after Sharpeville, Dennis was one of the people to shelter him in his home, in Port Elizabeth. In 1961 Dennis himself was placed under a banning order that severely restricted his movement and activities. Two years later he was arrested for contravening the banning order. While out on bail he fled to Swaziland, but on trying to enter Mozambique was detained by the Portuguese police who handed him over to the South African authorities. When being driven back into Johannesburg he tried to escape, only to be shot by a policeman, the bullet passing right through him. There followed eighteen months in prison, including a stint on Robben Island which coincided with the arrival there of Mandela and the other Rivonia trialists. Dennis was soon appointed 'minister of culture' by his fellow prisoners.

Forced to leave South Africa on a one-way exit permit in 1966, Dennis began a 25-year period in exile – first in London working for the International Defence and Aid Fund, which gave support to South African political prisoners and their families, and continuing the campaign for South Africa's sporting isolation. On one occasion, during the Wimbledon tennis championships he sat on court to disrupt a match in which a South African was playing. No wonder one figure in the apartheid government once paid Dennis the compliment of calling him "one of the 20 most dangerous South African political figures overseas".

The greatest part of this exile was spent in the US, where an academic career was launched – first, teaching in the Northwestern University English Department from 1971 to 1985, and then as Professor of Black Studies and English at the University of Pittsburgh. This stay in the US was not without its travails. Three times in the early 1980s the Reagan administration tried to deport Dennis before eventually granting him political asylum.

The agony of exile is a theme that permeates Dennis Brutus' poetry. In one poem can be found these anguished words:

Exile is the reproach  
of beauty in a foreign landscape.

His own personal experiences, tribulations and hopes infuse his twelve volumes of published poems: the time in prison, life under apartheid, the struggles for justice. He writes with a commitment to "recovering our humanity". For him the artist is "a cultural guerrilla...a fighter for justice", and the only relevant art is that "which relates to the human condition".

His poetry has been described as "restrained and beautifully crafted", written with "grace and penetration". Given due recognition, last year he received the South African Literary Award for Distinguished Lifetime Literary Achievement – to stand alongside the first Paul Robeson Award, conferred on Dennis in 1989 for "artistic excellence, political consciousness and integrity".

In the post-apartheid era, dividing his time between the US and South Africa, he has continued to be an outspoken activist, devoting his energy to the global justice movement, giving addresses at the World Social Forum, speaking out against neo-liberalism and inequality, voicing support for the Palestinians and opposition to the Iraq war. Nadine Gordimer has said of Dennis Brutus that "His passion for justice in our African continent has now long extended to the whole world where the abyss between rich and poor countries grows instead of closing".

Tonight Rhodes University honours a man who has, for the past sixty years, fought for justice in the face of state harassment, imprisonment, the threat of deportation. Poet, professor and protester; writer and rebel; artist, academic and activist.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer on Dennis Brutus the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.