

MUSICAL PARADIGMS OF SOCIAL HORROR IN THE APARTHEID POETRY OF DENNIS BRUTUS**Kontein Trinya****ABSTRACT**

The poetry of Dennis Brutus the anti-Apartheid South African freedom fighter is often an intricate combination of content and form, with its sometimes overt, sometimes covert but pervasive structure of bipartition involving multiple units of paired (often volatile and conflicting) opposites. This paper shall largely explore how skilfully he casts that theme of horror against the contrasting backdrop of music, by which he further stresses the dimensions of the horrific conflicts between victims and victimizers. It is the persuasion of this paper that the binary vision of Dennis Brutus is the tacit censorious expression of his creative perspective on the social conflicts in Apartheid South Africa; unspeakable conflicts for whose imperative expression even the devices of music become a (sometimes camouflaging, sometimes accentuating) technical paradigm.

The poetry of Dennis Brutus the anti-Apartheid South African freedom fighter has amazed some readers with its determined musicality in spite of the anguish of the souls from which the lyrical echoes ring. That appears to be the poet's very aim, to enact a shocking counter-position between music and pain, and that as an ultimate enactment of the conflicts between the Apartheid agents of those pains on one hand, and the oppressed victims on the other; between the infliction of pain and the astonishing lyrical responses. Music, thus, offers a further paradigm for the expression of the fundamental theme of conflicts in South Africa.

The present interest is to critically highlight Brutus's musical paradigm from the novel perspective of the relationship, often of opposition, between his musical forms and their contents, between the musical forms themselves, and especially between aspects of his musical contents. Those multiple contrapuntal musical relationships are ultimately posited as Dennis Brutus's creative enactment of the orchestral conflicts in Apartheid South Africa, whose 'state of war' appears to have been well expressed in the poem, "The impregnation of our air" (*Simple Lust*¹ 78), where the nation is described as "*a land at war.*"

One conceives of musical form in this paper in terms of the auditory aspiration, or realization, or appeal of the poem when read or heard (phonic form). Content is conceived of in the traditional sense in which it refers to subject matter, theme, or the information conveyed by or 'contained' in the work of art.

Some of Brutus's poems are so rhythmically patterned that they could easily be set to music. One example, perhaps the most formally lyrical of Brutus's poems, is "Sirens contrail the night air" (*Stubborn Hope*² 50).

Sirens contrail the night air:

*Images of prison 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 mewdupeness is my perennial ache
their voice the texture of my air:*

Sirens contrail the London air:

Unlike "Sirens..." (above) a poem like "For Bernice" (*SL* 29) (below) derives its auditory appeal largely from alliterations and refrains.

*How delicately the blossoms fall!
Like gauze to clothe and swathe my naked lands,
so delicately the blossoms fall.*

*How delicate their mauve suffusal!
Like allusions to elusive or illusory perfumes,
so delicate their mauve suffusal.*

*Scarcely disturbing the jacaranda air!
Descent and elegance distil a fragrance
scarcely disturbing the jacaranda air.*

*And I observe with nervous hands
How delicately the blossoms fall
And, hesitating, half-approach the parent bole
So delicately the blossoms fall!*

This poem has a strong enchanting emotive appeal deriving from its rhythm, its refrains and soft subdued sounds. That, with the very minimal occurrence of harsh and plosive sounds, as well as the preponderance of soft sibilants and fricatives, appears to reinforce the edenic mood of the poem. Yet we cannot miss the apparently incongruous images of wound and pain suggested by the clinical “gauze” and “swathe” that stand in sad counter-position to the slow sedative rhythm.

Luke Eyoh has well observed that “A discussion of sound and rhythm in poetry naturally calls for a discussion of music, for, sound, rhythm, and... emotion, basically connect music to poetry” (107). That offers prefatory illumination on the subsequent analysis of Brutus’s “The sounds begin again” (SL 19); a poem with a different kind of form or melody; a poem with a binaural appeal; less uniformly rhythmic than any of the poems above, but very musically patterned, with a peculiar appeal to, and use of, sounds; sounds suggesting various modes of sadistic inflictions and speechless horrors.

The music in “The sounds begin again” exists at two different but related levels. The first level is that of the external music of the poem’s phonic appeal, its measured motions and accents, its general appeal to the ear through rhythm and repetitions. In other words, its physical, phonic form. The second is that of the internal music of the acoustic content of the poem; the music of the various sounds which, in the poem, crescendo to a keen wordless pitch.

Oppositions exist both between as well as within the levels. It is possible, therefore, to speak of a ‘form versus content’ opposition (for example, between the pleasant sound-form of the poem and its content of pain), as well as a ‘form versus form’ opposition (for example, between the

euphony and symmetric rhythm in the first stanza, and the relative offbeat phrasing of the last two stanzas). It is also possible to speak of a 'content versus content' opposition, for example, between the cruel forces of Apartheid and its oppressed victims, of which the poem speaks; in other words, oppositions also within the lyrical content of the poem.

*The sounds begin again
the sirens in the night
the thunder at the door
the shriek of nerves in pain*

*Then the keening crescendo
of faces split in pain
the wordless, endless wail
only the unfree know*

*Importunate as rain
the wraiths exhale their woe
over the sirens, knuckles, boots;
my sounds begin again.*

In this poem, the sounds of the internal music start as impersonal, distant sounds; for example, the piercing siren as well as the pounding thunder, all amplified by the silence of night. However, those initially distant and impersonal sounds begin to come closer home with the orchestral accretion of each kind of vocal response of pain, such as the piercing "keening crescendo" of shrieks of pain, and the "wordless, endless wail..." Finally, the sounds are no more just "The sounds" but "my sounds."

The different internal sounds, like the different 'symphonic' parts or movements of a choral or an orchestral piece, are introduced into the mainstream of the music at specific intervals in the progression of the rendition, as the music swells up significantly to a "crescendo." First, the siren, then the thunder, then the shriek, then the keening sounds, and finally the wordless wails. The sounds peak up to a thunder, and fall off into wordless wails. But this internal music is, however, a *liede ohnne worte* - music without words. It consists only of sounds, largely impersonal (or material) sounds, although the poem itself is necessarily composed out of words. It is, in the words of David Cook's description of the rhythmically controlled poem, "something to be judged

by our ears and senses" (50).

There is a pausal, somewhat spiccatic, effect, at the end of the lines in the external music. This derives from the lines (of the first stanza) being end-stopped. The feeling is like reading out a list of items. The effect or musical tempo is different in the second stanza with its parallelism between two sets of two lines each: the first two lines comprising the first set, and the last two comprising the second. Each set of two lines is paired by the sense in the initial line 'running off' into and being completed in the other. Thus we have a situation where, to use the words of Levi-Strauss, a "system of intervals provides music" or becomes a musical device, and itself creates a "level of articulation" (qtd. in Fubini 495). This is one poem which, in several ways, stresses Owen Barfield's point that "the sound of language is crucially relevant to its poetic meaning" (47).

The opening line of the poem seems to serve as a General Introduction, or a 'Prelude,' which prepares us for the other sounds that come in, strain after strain, timbre after timbre of pain (or of pain's expression), in each successive line, like counterpoints. The first line seems to say, "Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the sounds – they begin again." But, "What sounds?" we are likely to ask, hence the clarification that follows:

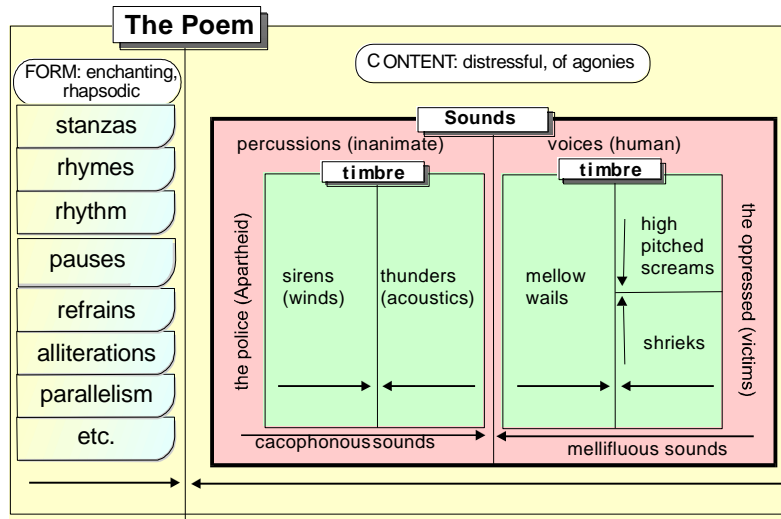
*the siren in the night
the thunder at the door
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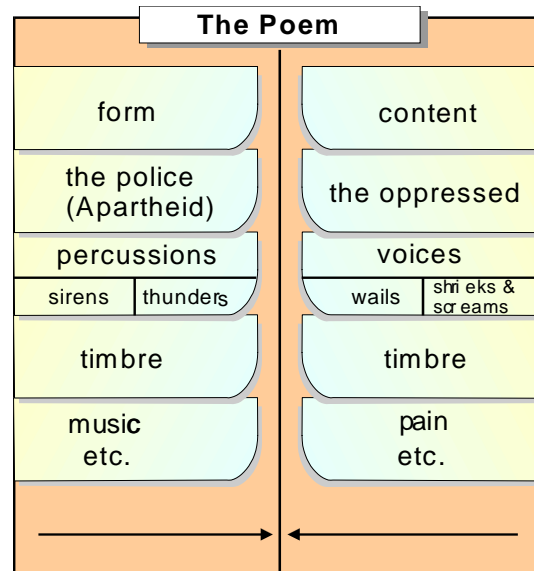
The nature of the 'rendition' of the music (or the pattern in which each sound enters into the mainstream of the rendition) is worth describing further: first the pianistically sustained whining whistling siren, then the brute percussion of ligneous thunder at the door, as well as of the knuckles and boots. These provide some sort of an 'orchestral' background to the vocal responses, namely the sharp choral shrieks that keen to a crescendo and later fall off into mellow wails. Like the good conductor of whom Brown-Azarowicz speaks in *A Handbook of the Creative*

Choral Speaking, in this poem, we are “able to hear patterns of speech and sound with a sensitive ear” (82).

The first set of impersonal (or material) sounds (the siren and the thunder) provides the ‘instrumental accompaniment’ to the vocal sounds (the shrieks and the wails). The ‘instrumental’ sounds constitute the ‘strophe.’ The ‘performers’ are the faceless police, phonic and metonymic reference to whom is implied by the siren of their car, the sound of their vicious knock “*at the door,*” and the impact of their boots.



Levels of antiphonal relationships in “The sounds begin again”



Layers of contrapuntal relations

The 'antistrophe' comprises the vocal responses of pain (from the unfree) to the initial 'instrumental' sounds (from the police). Thus, in the internal music, there is a counterposition, a balance between the parts, deriving from the antiphonal structure of the music; an antiphony comprising the brutal percussion from the police and the painful vocal responses from the unfree. We may, therefore, speak of a kind of harmony or mutuality, but a tense mutuality, between the two groups of 'musicians,' namely the police and the oppressed.

Commenting on the prison poems of Jeremy Cronin, another anti-Apartheid South African writer, especially about the comic poem, "Prologue" in Cronin's *Inside*, Rita Barnad observes: "The poem's emphasis on the production of sound urges us to think of it not as written... but as an oral performance" (163). It is an observation equally applicable to Dennis Brutus's "The sounds begin again." It strikes us verily not as written, but as oral performance.

If we accept Aristotle's definition of harmony as "a blending or combining of opposites" (qtd. in Fubini 21), we would at least concede the word "harmony" (even if we might be reluctant to use the word "melody") in describing this 'music' with its blending or combining of several levels or opposing units of paired relationships, not only between form and content but also between aspects of the musical content itself. The combination of opposites within the content may be seen, for instance, in the opposition between the sounds of oppression (or the sounds emanating from the oppressors) and those of (or emanating from) the oppressed. Acoustically, we also find an opposition between percussions and voices, between sound and wordlessness, between material and human sounds, between the different timbres of sound, as well as in terms of the amplitude of the various sounds, for instance between the ligneous thunder of the police at the door and the mellow wails of the unfree. A unique harmony is the result of the skilful blending of these several ghastly counter-positions.

Within the poem, the musical oppositions inhere in a social conflict, which ultimately refers to a wider social conflict outside the poem. The patterns of opposition in the poem become meaningful, therefore, as a paradigm for appreciating their ultimate referents – the orchestral conflicts in the society, between the mutual (through circumstances of politics and a common

social context) but similarly opposed forces of Apartheid on the one hand and its 'wordless' victims on the other. The poem is a meticulous reconstruction of the poet's own world.

The 'wordlessness' we find in the poem might seem to suggest, on the one hand, that the horror the poem 'reports' is beyond words; an idea which recurs in several lines in several of Brutus's poems, for example, "*wordless woe*" and "*inarticulate simple lust*" in "A simple lust is all my woe" (SL 176); "*mute rebellious blood*" in "I must conjure from my past" (SL 107); "...*wordless ultimate ballistic*" in "Longing" (SL 46); "*tactful silence*" in "It is time I said a word" (SH 14); and, very appropriately, "*inexpressible grief*," "*inarticulable woe*," and "*unencompassable woe*" in "When they deprive me of the evening" (SH 8), etc. On the other hand, the 'wordlessness,' or the choice of, as it were, a *liede ohne worte* (music without words) in the internal music, might also suggest the wordlessness or speechless astonishment not only of the victims being reported of but also of the reporting poet himself. Perhaps, then, one should say of this poem's wordlessness as Susan Baxter does of the technical silence, at times, in the poems of Yusef Komunyakaa the American poet: "There is nothing left to say, the scene speaks for itself" (16).

Brutus's 'scene,' however, is one of very loudly painful but wordless sounds; sounds which become, by their nature, the only appropriate, reticent 'language' for describing the conditions that generate them; sounds which, it seems, we are to view, in the language of music, and in Enrico Fubini's language about the 'noises' of music, as "a system of signs for bringing into operation [another] level of articulation" (496).

Adrian Roscoe properly describes the poem "The sounds begin again" as a "deceptively simple poem." He identifies a paradox "even at the simple level of aim," because the poet tries to use words to conjure a wordless situation, "which consists only of sounds." He states further that

nobody here, except the listening poet, says anything: we hear siren sounds, a thunderous knocking at doors, terrified folk shrieking, and a sorrowful wailing. The people's plight has gone beyond words, and in the last stanza we listen to wraiths exhaling their woe, the dead of this night and others simply ghosting forth their sadness. Rhyme helps the poem's auditory nature and its related pathos, for the thin, piercing vowel in *again*, closing

the final line, recurs in *pain* (twice), and in *wail* and *rain* in the remaining stanzas, creating a subdued effect of ceaseless wailing throughout the poem. Sound thus records a situation which is beyond words. (162, emphases in the original)

It would be apparent from the foregoing that, although the focus has been on the ‘inner music,’ both inner and outer, or formal and contextual levels of articulation are interwoven. Horrifying though the **inner** ‘music,’ with its shuddering sounds which **crescendo** to a deafening agonizing climax of pain, it rides on the rhythmic crest of the **outer** ‘music’ which, through the hypnotic power of refrain, terminates in a gratifying **diminuendo**. The outer motion of the poem thus balances the inner music of pain’s infliction and expression. The painful sounds of the inner music **mount up** to a frenzy; the rhythmic motions of the outer music **peter out** to an emotionally satisfying end that repeats the opening line in a significantly modified refrain. This combination of opposites is, according to the poet himself, the “contradiction of conflict and music” (Pieterse 35).

It is impossible to speak of this poet as a “passive recipient,” as Gerald Moore does, for example, of the poet-persona in Leopold Senghor’s “Elegie de Minuit” (Elegy to Midnight) (53). Brutus is the creative guerrilla fighter, who is able to forge a weapon out of the most unlikely tools, even the devices of music. He is the creative spokesman who has had to learn and ‘speak’ every possible language, even the universal language of music, for the global communication of his overwhelming vision and theme: the “contradiction of conflict and music.”

This poet’s resort to wordless sounds as the ultimate language for his inarticulable pains is also an illumination of his censorious Apartheid context, where non-white expressions of political dissent used to have the unpardonable ring of treasonable bells in government ears.

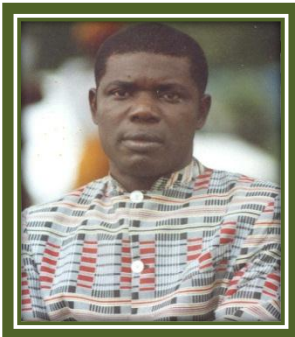
NOTES

¹ *A Simple Lust*, hereafter abbreviated as *SL*.

² *Stubborn Hope*, hereafter abbreviated as *SH*.

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