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The Writer's Role In Shaping Society

By Dennis V. Brutus

²⁶ *Editor's note: The following was excerpted from remarks given at Howard University on March 24 at the reinvestiture of the Stylus Literary Society. First organized in 1916 by scholars Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory for the purpose of stimulating "creative efforts in literature and the arts," the society's list of honorary members included luminaries such as James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. DuBois and Langston Hughes. Named as honorary members at the reinvestiture ceremony were contemporary literary figures Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Walker, May Miller Sullivan, Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davis, Gordon Parks and Alex Haley, among others.*



Dennis Brutus

I speak as a South African, as an African, and I welcome, too, this fusion of our [African-American] cultures, this shared heritage which we recognize . . .

I certainly hope that [this presentation] will become part of a collection to which other writers will contribute, because I think an organization such as Stylus could perform a valuable function in becoming a repository of published work, of manuscripts, of drafts, which then become material for the scholar and the researcher as well as an inspiration to young writers and budding practitioners.

On an occasion such as this, it seemed to me, that obviously what I would have to talk about (as I always do) is the South African situation, the role of the writer there, and specifically the contribution the writer can make in the context of the apartheid racist system of oppression in South Africa . . . Also, I take this opportunity at least to recognize some of the elements that contributed to my own genesis as a writer. In particular, (and this I'm sure will interest you) certain Afro-American influences that reached me in South Africa and of which I've not had an opportunity to speak of previously. Finally I will look very briefly at the challenge as I see it in our times, specifically for writers in this country but indeed across the globe . . .

Long ago someone in Europe said that "the pen is mightier than the sword," which sometimes is trotted out as a cliché. Sometimes we question the validity of those words, and occasionally we recognize the substance of the thought. [Percy] Shelley on another occasion talked of poets as being the trumpets that sing the world to battle and he called them the unacknowledged legislators of

the world. And that's a good starting point when we talk of commitment, of the role of the writer.

Africans, I'm afraid, tend to be more prosaic and more down-to-earth in these matters, and I would point to [four] writers in Africa who have been major influences in the development of a literary culture in Africa in our own times.

One is a Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, probably the most widely read novelist in Africa and indeed probably across the world. He's been translated into at least 26 languages. Achebe said: "There is no such thing as an uncommitted literature, you are always committed to something." You may be committed to the status quo or you may be committed to change, but there is no uncommitted writer. The question is: To what are you committed?

The most powerful writing influence in Africa today probably is a Kenyan novelist, currently living in Britain probably for reasons of safety, who was previously a visiting professor at Northwestern University and whose place I took when he left. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan novelist, in a recent address in his collection of essays, "Writer in Politics," says "the difficulty of the African writer is the need to confront the fact that he must function as a cultural guerrilla, that there is a liberation war being waged across the continent of Africa and in that war the writer, the poet, the dramatist, must see himself as a cultural guerrilla whose pen is his weapon in fighting against the forces of neo-colonialism in Africa."

And then you turn to Amilcar Cabral who led the liberation movement in Guinea Bissau and who for many Africans to-

“ . . . the process of development entailed inevitably the development of one’s creative faculties . . . ”

day is probably the most important thinker, [the] most important exponent of the notion of a cultural liberation struggle and of the obligation of the writer to be part of that struggle. And Cabral . . . more than anyone else, has influenced [the] thought of young intellectuals in Africa in our times. (See *New Directions*, April 1975). But it is Frantz Fanon, particularly in his work, “The Wretched of the Earth,” which Cabral uses and builds on and funnels the notion that if you have not conquered the mind of a person then you have failed to conquer that person. On the other hand, the person whose mind is conquered is so completely enslaved that there is no need to use chains to keep that person in slavery. If you have enslaved the mind, there is no need for chains. (see *New Directions*, April 1979).

These then are the thoughts that are current in Africa, the non-Western thoughts that influence African writers . . . The African creator, whether musician, dramatist, poet, narrator, whether he functions in the griot tradition of West Africa on which Alex Haley leans so heavily or whether he functions as a . . . poet-myth-maker in Southern Africa, comes out of the tradition in which the artist is assumed to be a committed person, someone who draws his or her inspiration from the community and then gives the work back to the community in an act of sharing. So the notion of the isolated aesthete out there who somehow can only communicate with a very small clique is something alien and foreign to the African culture.

We work in a culture which assumes commitment, assumes an engaged writer, [where] the uncommitted writer is seen as a freak, a dilettante, an aberration in the culture. That may be worth bearing in mind.

I’d like to turn briefly to my own genesis as a writer and [briefly] indulge myself. This chapel, [Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel] in a curious way, brought together for me some of the influences that worked on me as a child . . . I see in the chapel a curious image, if I’m not mistaken, from Victorian England in [the] stained glass window, Sir Galahad, the knight pursuing the Holy Grail. And the relevance of that is that as a child growing up in the ghetto in South Africa, my mother, who was a school teacher teaching Black children in a missionary school in the ghetto, entertained us in the evening with stories of King Arthur and his knights and read us poetry (particularly of [Alfred] Tennyson’s “Maud,” Sir Lancelot and the Sir Galahad poems). In a marvelous way, it all comes together here. In fact when I spoke in Stockholm, shortly after I was exiled from South Africa, I was asked to write a piece reminiscing on my evolution as a writer and I began to look back . . . I recalled as a child reading in a picture book of the Knights of the Round Table [and] my mother spelling out the difficult words for me, and the [afternoon] sunlight falling across the room slanting from the window and illuminating the picture of the knight going through the dark forest in pursuit of the grail.

One of the seminal poems in my own work takes off on that image: the notion of the poet as troubadour, one who makes music and fights, and makes poetry of the struggle and engages in this quest for truth and beauty and freedom. I’m sure that the seeds of those notions and image were planted in me as a boy growing up in a ghetto in South Africa. Indeed, the poem ends with the acceptance that ultimately, as part of my

quest, I will end up in prison and I will end up in exile, cast off from my own land . . .

I turn briefly to the influence of Afro-America on me when I was growing up in South Africa, again, in the ghetto outside of Port Elizabeth, a little town on the east coast. There were very few gramophones around. Anybody who owned a gramophone was really very rich and was envied. And there was one woman in the village who did have one of those old-fashioned gramophones. (You know you had to wind them up and they had [a] big speaker, a horn where the sound came out of.) As a special treat, once a week we would be allowed to go over there to listen to music. And the music we heard on the scratchy gramophone record was the music of Ma Rainey. The blues was being played in South Africa in the ghetto. We heard also some of Bessie Smith. This is what we grew up with. You see, in a strange way, by sheer accident right there in the ghetto, we were being exposed to the music of Afro-America. Later on I heard the music of Paul Robeson. He became one of those I admired. Later I learned the music of Marian Anderson and knew of her achievements. And so one [in South Africa] saw that elsewhere in the world people were able to succeed in spite of their color . . .

We all had rather fond illusions about the United States as a country of marvelous opportunity where no Black person was ever discriminated against, where there were no hungry Blacks and no homeless Blacks and no unemployed Blacks. I had to discover the reality of that later on. But the illusion we had was of a country where Blacks were given the opportunity to develop their potential and to achieve their full dignity as human beings.

28 We understood that the process of development entailed inevitably the development of one's creative faculties, creative ability, and that if one could not grow in that way then one was doomed to be stultified and stunted and reduced to a semi-human or a sub-human.

The Pretoria government, the apartheid government, was telling us that we were less than human and it was because we were less than human that we were, for instance, not allowed to vote. Only human beings could vote. By implication we were not humans. The signs outside the library said, "Public Library," but the public was people and we were not people and so the library was not for us. The signs outside the park said "Public Park" and below that, "Dogs and Non-Europeans Not Allowed." And so we knew in which category we belonged. We were not with the humans.

In a sense, for me this became most clearly focused when I received from the South African government — more correctly the Pretoria government [because] there is no South African government — my fourth or my fifth ban, maybe even my sixth. I forget, but I got a series of bans. The first one made it a crime for me to teach. I was told that if I taught anybody I would go to prison, or even [if I] tutored a single student at home . . . I was given an order which made it a crime for me to write anything for publication, and any editor who published me would go to prison as well. I received others, one of which confined me to a particular town so that if I left that town it was a criminal act.

Later, after I [left] prison, I was arrested for going to a meeting of the Olympic Committee. That was another crime because it was illegal for me to attend a

sports meeting or to go to the cinema or to church. All these became criminal acts. The ultimate one was when my house became my prison and I was served with a banning order that for five years [made it] illegal for me to leave the house . . . And yet of them all, the one that perhaps focused the whole situation most sharply for me was the order that made it a crime for me to write or publish poetry. Prior to that, I guess I was pretty mad about what they were doing to me, but this one, which attacked my right to be creative, seemed to go to the very essence of my personality as a human being: the denial of the right to create.

I had written poetry for the entertainment of my friends or my students or my various girlfriends as a teenager, as most of us do. But to be told that it was a criminal act to write and publish poetry made me so angry that from that point onwards I began to publish poetry, under a false name of course, because to publish under my own name would have meant going to prison. I published under various pseudonyms — whatever came to hand — off a ketchup bottle if it happened to be handy, whatever. There are many poems I don't recognize as my own [because] I've forgotten the pseudonyms that I used. As you may know, my work has since been circulated [underground] in South Africa. It is a crime for people to read it, a crime to own a book of my poetry, and a crime to quote my poetry in a review. But, one continues to be creative . . .

The situation has not changed in South Africa. If anything, since I left, it has become enormously worse. There is now more repression, more jailing, more denial of freedom and honor, and on a more massive, more organized, more systematic scale than there was in my

time. I'll touch on just two examples.

Over three million people in South Africa have been declared superfluous surplus unproductive labor, and they've been loaded on trucks and taken out of the cities and dumped in barren and desolate areas that are called the dumping grounds . . . They consist, largely, of course, of old people, sick people, children who cannot work. They're loaded on trucks and driven into the dumping grounds and left there to die, where there's very little water, bad soil so that very little grows, no hospitals, no medical care . . . It is the nearest thing in our times to the kind of genocide that [was] practiced by Hitler in Nazi Germany. And that's one piece of evidence. There's one other that may even be more damaging.

Over the last couple of years, more than five million South Africans — born there, growing up there, working there — have been declared aliens . . . [put in] enclaves called Bantustans, satellite client states . . . They become reservoirs of cheap labor.

South Africa, under the apartheid policy, which simply means apartness, has divided the country into a white area and a Black area. And the white area, with 18% of the population, has 87% of the land. White South Africa has 87% of the land and the non-white population 13%. But, in addition, that 13% is divided into 10 little states separated by white corridors. In each of these 10 little states, Pretoria creates a Black puppet, a stooge, an Uncle Tom, who rules on behalf of Pretoria and who is often even more ruthless and more repressive than the regime, (He needs an armed bodyguard to protect him from his own people) . . .

Political organizations (the African National Congress, the Pan-African Congress) are illegal. [So] the writers, the playwrights, the poets, the musicians have filled that vacuum, have become the mouthpiece of the anger, the resentment, and especially the resistance of the people and [have] become the focal point around which resistance is articulated.

One can be very proud of the artist in South Africa who has the courage to take on the system. It often means imprisonment, sometimes death (for people like Steve Biko), for many others in exile

But the writer and artist [continues to] make a major contribution to the struggle for freedom and articulate that stubborn will, that stubborn demand for freedom.

In that context I have to introduce one more somber note: that the apartheid system, the whole process of oppression by a minority of 18% over an 82% majority at the point of a gun, is held in power by outside support. Of the countries supporting the regime, there is no country more important than the United States. This country makes the greatest contribution to the preservation and the maintenance of that apartheid regime in Pretoria.

Three facts, simply, for lack of time, on the United States involvement in South Africa:

There are 350 American corporations operating in South Africa and they all use cheap, Black labor.

The United States has \$14.6 billion invested in the apartheid system, including about 70% of the oil industry and more than 70% of the electronics industry in South Africa.

Under the Reagan administration, \$28 million worth of military and military-related goods were sold to Pretoria, in violation of a decision taken by the United States voting at the United Nations for a resolution calling for an embargo on the supply of military and military-related goods to Pretoria . . . I should add that the goods sold to Pretoria included 2,500 cattle prods, each with a 3,000 voltage. And in South Africa cattle prods are not used to control cattle. They're used for crowd control . . .

You see, there is a very real sense in which the government of the United States and by extension, unfortunately, the people of the United States, are involved in our oppression and our exploitation. Unless, of course, one claims that the formula "government of the people, for the people and by the people" is meaningless, if indeed the United States government acts in spite of the wishes of its people. Otherwise, one must say there is complicity. I'm afraid there is . . . It is something that I think writers especially should address because if there is one sin in this country that one could convict many people of, it would be of ignorance of the nature of the apartheid system in South Africa and of the degree of complicity of the United States in that system . . .

This country, this year, will either choose the road of continuing support for racism and repression, what the Reagan administration calls "constructive engagement," which means supplying more arms to Pretoria. Or the people of this country must create for themselves a government which expresses their concern and their compassion and their commitment to justice, and their commitment to freedom and their commit-

ment to democracy. Perhaps we will not see it. But it is something we must hope for . . .

This country can choose a new direction, can turn away from this support it gives across the globe, in Africa, in Asia, in Central America, to repression and murder and torture. The people of this country can bring about that change. It is in their hands. And that means the fate of my country and the fate of the people of my country is in very large measure in the hands of the people of the United States. □

Professor Dennis Brutus currently teaches at Northwestern University.