

Arthur Nortje and the Unhomely¹

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Nortje has occupied literary consciousness in South Africa as an absent presence. His force and significance is recognised in the handful of poems that have circulated among poetry anthologies, but they present a tantalisingly incomplete portrait of the poet. This article aims at re-examining Nortje's significance in terms of a wider selection of poems than is currently available in print. It takes as point of departure Nortje's problematisation of the relationship between self and community. Such problematisation takes the form of an articulation of what Homi Bhabha (1994a:37) calls the 'third space' of difference, a space which, according to Bhabha

constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity.

In Nortje's poems identity refuses containment and is in a constant state of change. Although no single attempt at capturing identity suffices, the reiteration itself, the repeated return to the site of his positing as subject, is what is finally compelling. A characteristic pose is struck when Nortje avers, 'I am alone here now, here living / with shoals of fragments, a voice hoarse like rubble / shifted by currents' ('Hangover'). The image of a voice, an identity, which is like rubble shifted by currents is noteworthy. It aptly describes the tension that inheres in Nortje's poetry between an apprehension of self as a partial and ephemeral configuration and the psychic forces that threaten it.

The dominant motif in Nortje's poetry is that of lack or absence. This motif is frequently translated into images of the divided and fragmented body or images of exile. Often the personal and the political perspectives are linked. Berthoud (1984:5) draws attention to Nortje's use of figures that are 'simultaneously images of environment and notations of inner state', saying that the effect of such interpenetration of the private and the public is to indicate that 'the community and the self are involved in each other at the deepest level'. He relates Nortje's apprehension of loss to his alienation from his natural community, which has been destroyed by the racial typographies

¹ I am grateful to UNISA for permission to use their archival material on Nortje. All the poems quoted here have been sourced back to this material. Many exist in unfinished form in various notebooks Nortje kept.

of apartheid and by the exile of its militants and intellectuals. According to Berthoud (1984:83), the main thrust of Nortje's poetry is 'to make possible a community where a community was not'. But loss in Nortje's poetry goes deeper than this. Although Berthoud draws attention to disappointment in love as an important concern in Nortje's poetry, he does not follow the psychoanalytic path of inquiry into the loss of the primordial object of love. Separation from the object of love, and the sense of incompleteness, of division and isolation, to which such separation gives rise, is in fact a dominant theme in Nortje's poetry. Sense of personal loss predates Nortje's actual physical exile. One might say that loss of community and of self are not causally but dialectically related. Nortje's elegies of alienation articulate what Bhabha (1994b: 11) describes as the experience of the unhomely, which cannot be traced back to any single determinant but instead 'relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence'.

An early poem to explore the dialectic between the personal and the political in respect of the constitution of the subject as the site of division and loss is the poem 'My Vacant Self':

My vacant self confronts the window.
Day's rain slants its wires
of sad pathetic silence.
Above the bowed and huddled houses
manoeuvre the endless veils of cloud:
tissues that drift and fade but never surrender.

Gutter trickles gain attention
and fresh probes of the glass distort my view
of money traffic, Friday police, black people.
The raindrops grope and cling but cannot enter,
and where my breath is eager scenes are blurred.

My deepest life when rising to the throat
blows hard against dividing surfaces,
marring my love of gentle vibrant strings
because the cold makes vapour of what's vital.

Drizzle ceases and the evening wind
walks along windows clearing the drops,
the last few ones a streetlight diamonds.

For dusk has intervened: I draw the curtain
and shift my numb lumped loins across the parquet.

Who hears the dark drunk heart affirm the rhythm?

Nortje's meditative poems characteristically begin with a description of an everyday event (a train journey, watching rain through a window, hitchhiking, sitting in a park); often it is a depiction of the season or the weather. The event or memory of an event is then invested with strong emotion deriving from what turns out to be some sense of dissatisfaction, some apprehension of lack. Nortje reveals his method in the poem 'Teacher's Final' when he says:

What started as
the wide bay's boomerang curve,
a patch of sunlight on the velvet sea,
leapt alive in the blood's lyric:
some hunger flamed to tell
my meaning here, my going hence
to earn more purpose than this narrow world
affords its children.

The speaker's need 'to tell' derives from a primordial 'hunger'. Whatever he says derives from this position of lack, is overdetermined by this constant presence of an absence, this permanent loss of that which would satisfy his hunger, the primordial object, the object of love, which because it is lost is relentlessly pursued. This is his 'blood's lyric', which through 'telling' of this loss, through symbolisation of that which is absent, invokes the lost object, albeit as an effect of difference rather than as a positive presence. Although the speaker has 'more purpose' than the quotidian 'narrow world/affords its children', the purpose is situated in the realm of the symbolic, the realm of language. Thus there is always a gap between expectation and fulfilment. As Nortje says in the poem 'Planning a Modus Vivendi in February': 'It is to you I come .../knowing one cannot ask love for love:/demands exceeds supply'.

'My Vacant Self' begins with a pervasive sense of loss, which has no apparent cause other than the dreariness of the mizzling weather. In the first stanza this vacancy of the self is associated with the 'sad pathetic silence' of the rain and the 'endless veils of cloud' above the 'bowed and huddled houses'. The rain and the cloud are seen respectively to impose silence and to conceal something, but it is not clear what. In the second and third stanzas attention is drawn to the dividing surface of the glass, which allows perception of what lies beyond, but in distorted form and without any actual physical contact. The speaker's gaze is blurred by the vapourising effect of his 'deepest life ... rising to the throat', which 'blows hard against dividing surfaces' but in so doing mars his 'love of gentle vibrant strings'. The 'deepest life' seeks contact but is denied it. The eager breath blurs the scenes. In some way, then, the self resists the very intimacy it desires.

What is blurred, distorted, is the speaker's 'view/of money traffic, Friday police, black people'. These are the sights outside, in the social world, which are visible through the window. The three scenes mentioned correspond with the three aspects of social existence that Nortje frequently targets for attack in his poetry. The first aspect comprises the fetishism of commodities and resultant reification and alienation that characterise bourgeois capitalism. It was in Canada, in particular, that Nortje expressed his greatest horror at the 'money traffic' that impoverishes life. The second aspect comprises the militarisation of everyday life, the use of armed force to impose laws and to control social behaviour. Nortje regarded such use of force as a strategy employed by the wealthy to maintain their privilege. The third aspect comprises the stigma of racial classification, the blood-curse that inflicts inferiority, discrimination and domination on certain race groups. In South Africa during the mid-1960s, these three aspects of social power had combined in such a way as to constitute a formidable system for the interpolation of subjects in the social formation. The speaker seeks to create communication and community with the world outside his window, and by a process of metonymic association, outside himself. Yet there is an ambivalence, a vapourising of this same world, in as much as what he perceives is essentially hostile to his desire for contact. He perceives out there a world of division ruled by force.

In the closing stanzas the speaker's response to his having failed to make contact with the social world is to 'draw the curtain' on the outside and to shift his 'numb lumped loins across the parquet', thus moving deeper into the house and into himself. This inward movement is accompanied by a question with which the poem concludes: 'Who hears the dark drunk heart affirm the rhythm?' What is discovered within may 'affirm' some kind of rhythm, but it also disturbs. The 'dark drunk heart' is an inscrutable god indeed, a Dionysus for whom destruction and creation are ambivalently related. Does the 'dark drunk heart' not, paradoxically, beat to the rhythm of death? This would account for the generalised tone of melancholic despair evident in the poem as a whole. Perhaps what the rain silences and the cloud veils is precisely this apprehension of death, absence, division, loss as the true ground of being, the negativity in terms of which identity is able to be posited at all.

In the poem, the place of the other, which ensures the very possibility of identity through separation and division, is occupied by the figures of capitalism, the police-state, and the system of apartheid. These are the figures perceived by the self on the far side of the dividing window. Significantly, they are figures of society, indicating that it is within the sphere of the social that identity is determined. That the relation between self and societal others is in crisis is clear from the fact that the figures are invoked only to be vapourised. Identification is sought and then denied. What remains is the sterility of the 'numb lumped loins' and an uncertain apprehension of the 'dark drunk heart'. Death is immanent and there is no vital link, no affinity, with which it

may be resisted. Society has failed the self. Those who might have constituted a community of resistance are in prison or in exile. In the poem 'The Long Silence', the speaker mourns their absence, linking it with loss of communication, which is precisely a deprivation of that which defines the human community: 'The long silence speaks/of deaths and removals. /Restrictions, losses/have strangled utterance'.

Nortje frequently uses the image of the window as metaphor of the division between self and society. His use of this image is closely associated with his use of the image of the mirror as metaphor of the entrapment of self. The poem 'Discovery', written at more or less the same time as 'My Vacant Self', similarly uses the rainy weather as point of departure to muse over the self's alienation:

Misted and arid atmosphere parallels
intricate self-searching cerebral processes:
the dry mind with these wet thoughts driving
vapours over the walls of mirror.

The speaker goes on to say that however oppressive it may be, the mirror prison offers security against the 'freedom' of the 'insubstantial/mirrorless world':

Passing from this the secure
world to the insubstantial
mirrorless world my life moves
restless as waves in their surge for freedom.

The speaker seems to be suggesting that the self might not want freedom, however urgently freedom might press upon it, that it might prefer the security of enslavement, the blank nullity of death.

In the absence of community, personal love gains in importance as a form of resistance to death. But as in the case of society, community, or any other exclusive identification, love is alarmingly intimate with death. The relation between love and death is the focus of a later poem entitled 'Distinction':

What troubles the flesh leaves the bone
sorry. Is it heart's desire, or what? It is
loneliness, believe me, despite the attachment
of muscles, cling of tautened sinews.

Experience-greedy, I search continually
(say it is absurd if you have found it so)
for the bones of silence, the slenderly white
wing-fingers bleached in the rock-hollow

visited sometimes by the sea. To die in the air
is the noble thing, floating weakly to familiar
earth, and when the fire's put out
salt water can flame the veins no longer.
The eagle's wishbone on the mantelpiece
stirs in the fraternal wind and parodies
my oblique postures, my fleshly illusions
on the testing sites of the carnal jungle.

Medulla mushrooms on the nerve-stalk that bends
up from the dung-root. The spacecraft of the pelvis
has no nylon rope for your spacewalk,
you are spilled umbilically, cut off from the uterus.

The flesh wails, the numbness at the navel
will never console; the knot or the tumour
never exhibited in the museum of the soul
whose natural history poises the bare brontosaurus.

Let it be thus. The quality of ivory
along the gentle dent of face
this hand must be but poor remembrance to

when love shall dazzle these nerves again.
But violent are the harsh times
upon the headlands of waiting. The interval islands:
in the interior world of self no flowers
grow in the black earth that fills the inkwell.

Retinas, taste buds, nostrils are alcoholic
with hunger for your symmetries, with what has been
the savour and scent of your absence.
What troubles the flesh leaves the bone sorry.

The first stanza states the paradox that the 'heart's desire' might be for the 'loneliness' of bone rather than for the 'attachment' of flesh. The imagery of bone is developed further in subsequent stanzas through references to the bones of an eagle displayed on the mantelpiece. The eagle bones prompt the speaker to declare that his 'experience-greedy' search has been a search, again somewhat paradoxically, for 'silence'. He imagines the death of the eagle, its floating to 'familiar earth', as a 'noble thing', and asserts that the 'wishbone' of the eagle 'parodies' his own 'fleshly illusions'. The

poem then shifts focus, and invokes the experience of extreme physical deprivation occasioned by birth. The speaker uses the image of the astronaut who is attached to his spacecraft with a nylon rope when spacewalking to make the point that the reader, who has been 'spilled umbilically, cut off from the uterus', has no such security at birth. For the reader, the flesh 'wails'. Thoughts of separation at birth lead in the final stanzas to thoughts of separation from a loved one, a paramour, whose absence, like that of the experience of birth, is intensely felt at the level of physical deprivation. The poem concludes with a reiteration of the line, 'What troubles the flesh leaves the bone sorry'. This line is now informed by the musings on birth, love and death that have formed the body of the poem. These musings suggest that the images of flesh and bone represent opposing forces of the subject, a life force and a death force, eros and thanatos, and that these forces are dialectically interrelated rather than antithetical.

There are two moments in the poem that are worth exploring in more detail for the way in which they extend the thematic range of the issues under consideration. The first moment occurs as an interlude between recollection of the absent beloved, the 'quality of ivory/along the gentle dent of face/this hand must be but poor remembrance to', and anticipation of a future reunion. In the penultimate stanza it is stated that 'violence' characterises the 'headlands of waiting' on the 'interval islands' of absence. During this period of limbo, says the speaker, 'in the interior world of self no flowers/grow in the black earth that fills the inkwell'. The image of the inkwell filled with black earth in which flowers fail to grow suggests that a natural fecundity of words is wanting. The pen that is dipped into the inkwell does not propagate poesy. A correspondence is suggested, therefore, between writing and generation.

Absence of the beloved is depicted as a condition of general sterility. Yet this sterility is belied by the existence of the poem. It is in fact absence, which fills the inkwell with remembrance, that is the impetus for writing. If remembrance is the very substance of the poem, why does the 'black earth' specifically fail to produce flowers? Perhaps 'black' has racial overtones. A direct racial reference is made when the speaker invokes the 'quality of ivory/along the gentle dent of face' of the absent beloved. Assuming 'black' also has a racial reference, does the fact that the beloved is white induce a sense of guilt, a sense of betrayal of the speaker's blackness, his race, his mother (country)? Nortje at times feels disgust at what he refers to in the poem 'Questions and Answers' as 'White trash/coursing through my blood'. Many poems return to the issue of Nortje's loyalty to his black countrymen and to the cause of African liberation. Increasingly, the poems project a strong sense of guilt and betrayal. The poem 'From the Way I Live Now', written shortly before his death, concludes with the words, 'O under the broiling sun/convict me for my once burning ideals/my brothers'.

Nortje uses the colour black, and the notion of blackness, in interesting ways. The poem 'Sunset Period' states that 'Black residue remains when the mind clangs

shut / against these autumn visions which disturb'. 'Black residue' may be interpreted as the remainder, in the psychoanalytical sense, between the demand for love and its partial obtainment, the dream of freedom and the actuality of repression, the yearning for wholeness and the discovery of lack. The remainder is the memory trace of that which would satisfy the need. As testified by 'Poem: South African', the remainder as mark of difference is the black word on the white page:

the wind guillotines
your correspondences
but these broken sentences
stumble to heaven on the hill despite
the man with the whip who beats my
emaciated words back

They die but
at last
get us all together as a vision
incontrovertible, take me as evidence.

The only way in which the speaker is able to unite with the absent beloved or with the lost community is on the page. The only evidence there is of 'us all together as a vision' is the evidence of the word, the semantic and syntactical coherence of the assertion itself, a coherence that is attenuated by the way in which the sentences are disseminated across the page ('but these broken sentences'). What holds it together—the vision, the word—is the work of resistance performed by the poem, and the work performed by the poem in overcoming resistance. The poem 'Asseverations' describes the labour of writing poetry as a nocturnal search for 'truths in rhythms' through struggle with 'the hardship of rhyme'. It describes the death of the liberators 'whose recipes are now illegible' and concludes:

Out of such haze, such loss, the luck of birth
must be fashioned never questionably,
strength of seed and courage of decision.
There is never work without resistance.

Resistance in the psychoanalytical sense is a refusal of castration and a concomitant attachment to imaginary plenitude and disavowal of difference. It is the fetishisation of the phallic. This notion brings us to the other moment of interest in the poem 'Distinction': the allusion to the penis in the middle stanza. The positioning of this allusion suggests that this is the fulcrum around which the poem revolves, the hinge upon

which it is articulated. In as much as allusion is a rhetorical figure of erasure, in that what is alluded to is concealed at the very moment of disclosure, the allusion to the phallus may be said to constitute the poem's absent centre. The speaker has just referred to the way in which the eagle bones on the mantelpiece parody his 'fleshy illusions/on the testing sites of the carnal jungle', when he observes: 'Medulla mushrooms on the nerve-stalk that bends / up from the dung-root'. What he seems to describe is an erection, seen from the top as a mushrooming of the body's inner vitality, its pitch, on a bent nerve-stalk. The speaker thus directs his gaze at his penis, fetishisation of which occurs in 'the carnal jungle'. Subsequently he will turn his gaze to his navel and see himself as 'spilled umbilically', disseminated.

Captivation by the penis and/or the navel can be likened to captivation by the mirror image of the self. This is the perfect symmetry, the exact correspondence, for which the speaker yearns. He seeks himself in the other, or that which would call back his self, recall his soul, re-member him, heal the wound of memory. Such mirror imaging may constitute a necessary initial identification, but the narcissistic circle must be broken, the umbilical cord must be cut, there must be a forgetfulness, for love to emerge. As Lacan (1968:26) puts it, 'the realization of perfect love ... [is] an inter-subjective accord imposing its harmony on the torn and riven nature which supports it'. It can only be intersubjective if it follows the logic of the symbolic, of desire, which acknowledges, and operates within, difference. The same applies to the social. The imaginary community, the narcissistic community based on self-identifications, must be placed under erasure for the new community to emerge. Bhabha (1994c:163) talks of the 'homogenization of experience' which he sees as a major strategy of 'containment and closure in modern bourgeois ideology'. He says that:

Being obliged to forget becomes the basis for remembering the nation, peopling it anew, imagining the possibility of other contending and liberating forms of cultural identification (Bhabha 1994c:161).

The imaginary self/community must die if the new self/community is to emerge. One of the last poems that Nortje wrote, 'All Hungers Pass Away', uses many familiar images. Like other poems, it contains strong intimations of death. In this poem, however, there is little hope of renewal. Sexual hunger leaves the speaker wasted, in no better condition than the starving farm workers of the Transvaal, whom he has betrayed with his acquired bourgeois tastes:

All hungers pass away,
we lose track of their dates:
desires arise like births,
reign for a time like potentates.

I lie and listen to the rain
hours before full dawn brings
forward a further day and winter sun
here in a land where rhythm fails.

Warily I shake off sleep,
stare in the mirror with dream-puffed eyes:
drag my shrunken corpulence
among the tables of rich libraries.

Fat hardened in the mouth,
famous viands tasted like ash:
the mornings after a sweet escape
ended over bangers and mash.

I gave those pleasures up,
the sherry circuit, arms of some bland girl.
Drakensberg lies swathed in gloom.
Starvation stalks the farms of the Transvaal.

What consolation comes
drips away as bitterness.
Blithe footfalls pass my door
as I recover from the wasted years.

The rain abates. Face-down
I lie, thin arms folded, half-aware
of skin that tightens over pelvis.
Pathetic, this, the dark posture.

Despite the fact that the inquest into Nortje's death returned an open verdict, Nortje is widely, and according to Hedy Davis (1983) erroneously, believed to have committed suicide. The fiction of suicide fits the image of the despairing poet and is likely to persist until further research can bring to light, if at all, the precise events of the last few days of Nortje's life. It would suit my argument to conclude by saying that if Nortje did indeed commit suicide, it may have been a last desperate attempt to free himself from his posturing self, and that his refusal of the social roles and rules defined by the European usurper left him unhomely, vulnerable to the unconscious drives whose allegiance is to death as much as it is to life. But such closure is denied us.

However one may wish to construe Nortje's death, there is a life that emerges from it, the living testimony of the poems themselves, which renew the resources of

language in an endeavour to find love, to establish community, where there is only the condition of homelessness. As Nortje says in the poem 'White Xmas', we have to 'choose which/transportation it is to be'.

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