

Self and Community in the Poetry of Arthur Nortje: A Symptomatic Reading

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Summary

Many studies of Arthur Nortje's poetry have commented on the prevalence in his work of images of alienation, seeing this as a function either of political conditions in South Africa in his lifetime or of Nortje's exile from his home country. In this paper, I maintain that Nortje's depictions of alienation are more fundamental than suggested by earlier studies, inasmuch as his depictions point to primordial loss as constitutive of identity. I argue that because identity is posited in relation to the other, it is inescapably a function of division and displacement, and suggest that as a result of his specific history, Nortje was more directly aware of this dynamic than most. Nortje's self-reflexive awareness of the paradoxes of identity formation emerges in what I identify as symptomatic forms of communication that cut across, and mutually implicate, the life and the work. In support of my argument, the paper uses as its material two poems, one written shortly before Nortje's departure from South Africa in 1965, the other written shortly before his death in exile in 1970.

Opsomming

Vele studies van Arthur Nortje se gedigte bespreek die voorkoms van beelde van vervreemding en sien dit as 'n funksie van óf die politieke toestande in Suid-Afrika gedurende Nortje se leeftyd, óf van sy uitgewekenheid uit sy vaderland. In hierdie artikel voer ek aan dat Nortje se uitbeeldings van vervreemding meer fundamenteel is as wat vroeëre studies suggereer, omdat hulle dui op fundamentele verlies as die wese van identiteit. Ek voer aan dat wyl identiteit gepostuleer word in verhouding tot die ander, is dit noodwendig 'n funksie van gespletenheid en ontworteling, en suggereer ek dat Nortje, as gevolg van sy spesifieke geskiedenis, meer direk bewus was van hierdie dinamiek as meeste ander. Nortje se bewustheid van die paradokse van identiteitsvorming kom na vore in wat ek identifiseer as simptomatiese vorms van kommunikasie wat die lewe en die werk weerspreek en wedersyds impliseer. Om my argument te staaf gebruik ek as stof twee gedigte van Nortje, een geskryf kort voor sy vertrek uit Suid-Afrika in 1965, en die ander kort voor sy dood as uitgewekene, in 1970.

As new biographical information about Arthur Nortje comes to light, I find myself returning to poems I have commented on before, reconsidering them in the context of more detailed knowledge of the circumstances of the life. In this paper, I seek to explore ways of relating knowledge of the life with a reading of the poems, in a manner that avoids either using the life as foundation of the work or using the work to make conclusive inferences about the life. As apprehended by biographical research, the life is a discursive event, and cannot serve as an extra-textual guarantor of the meaning of the work. Conversely, the work speaks about the life, but does so in terms of the structural imperatives of its form of expression, its chosen aesthetic. Neither the life nor the work discloses the absolute truth of the subject, for the truth of the subject lies not in privileging the one term of a binary opposition above the other, but in the dialectic itself.

The paper focuses on the way in which the poetry articulates the relation between self and community. It takes as axiomatic that the subject is relational and emerges by virtue of his separation from and identification with the image of the other, rendering him divided and displaced. Because he is divided and displaced, because he is not fully present to himself, the subject exhibits symptoms of his alienation and incompleteness. I argue that Nortje's repeated, even obsessive, deployment of images of absence and loss is symptomatic in this way, as is his death by an overdose of barbiturates. In analysing the significance of the symptom, I attend to a small body of work and a limited aspect of the life, trusting that this circumscribed area of investigation will assist in clarifying how the life and work in its entirety might be approached.

Nortje started writing poetry in the early 1960s, during a decisive period of twentieth-century South African history. The liberation struggle initiated by the Freedom Charter of 1955 had, by the mid-1960s, been successfully contained by the South African State, and would remain dormant inside South Africa for more than a decade. Between 1960 and 1965, the Sharpeville shootings, the Rivonia trial, and the widespread banning and imprisonment of political opponents had driven the liberation movement into exile. In this environment of repression, fear, and despair, Arthur Nortje, twenty-two years old and a graduate of the University College of the Western Cape, began, along with many of his compatriots, to look for ways of fleeing his home country. In the end, he managed to leave South Africa legally by obtaining a scholarship to study at Jesus College, Oxford, where he graduated two years later with a BA degree in English. On completion of his degree, at twenty-four years of age, he left England and went to Canada as a landed immigrant, where he taught for three years, returning to England towards the end of 1970 to take a BPhil degree in Nineteenth-Century English Literature. He died shortly afterwards in Oxford, one week before his twenty-eighth birthday, leaving behind almost four hundred poems. He had been away from South Africa for

five years.

Nortje was never a political activist, as he liked to portray himself to his Jesus College friends, but had nevertheless always been deeply implicated in the political exigencies of his time. Born of a Jewish father who had disowned him and a coloured mother who struggled to make a living as a domestic worker, he bore in his person, as someone who was racially mixed and culturally hybrid, the contradictions of South Africa's racial and cultural politics. His life and work embody these contradictions, presenting, as this paper will attempt to show, what one might call symptoms of his interpolation as subject. The paper offers a reading of two poems, from different periods of Nortje's writings, both of which deploy figures of division, separation and loss. Because of the way in which these figures are repeated in his poetry and configure his life, they conform, I would suggest, to what is understood by the psychoanalytic notion of the symptom.

As I have pointed out in an earlier article (Klopper 1998: 166-167), Jacques Berthoud attributes Nortje's characteristic figures of alienation to his estrangement from his natural community, which he sees as having been destroyed by the racial typographies of apartheid and by the exile of its militants and intellectuals. He argues that these figures are exemplary because, being "simultaneously images of environment and notations of inner state" (Berthoud 1984: 5), they indicate that "the community and the self are involved in each other at the deepest level" (ibid.). Although the poetry exhibits, through its figures of alienation, the disruption of the relationship between self and community, it nevertheless seeks, says Berthoud, by the nature of its engagement, "to make possible a community where a community was not" (p. 83).

Of interest is the paradoxical implication that the figure of alienation aims to cure. It is in this very respect that the figure functions as a symptom. According to Slavoj Žižek, symptom formation is a strategy employed by the subject to avoid madness. By developing a symptom, says Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), the subject chooses "something" instead of "nothing", the symptom rather than radical psychotic withdrawal (Žižek 1989: 75). He describes the symptom as a "communication by other means" (p. 73), speaking the language of the unconscious, giving voice to what has been silenced. Being the language of the unconscious, it is ambivalent, and employs figures that both register the distance between the psychic and the social and seek to bridge the gap. From this perspective, what Berthoud calls Nortje's "ontological nausea" may be said to be symptomatic, because, as Berthoud maintains, it is more than "a matter of moral weakness or individual neurosis", constituting, rather, "a kind of plummet measuring the depth of his engagement in South African history" (Berthoud 1984: 83).

The fact that Nortje's use of figures of division, separation, and loss

precedes his actual exile should caution us against seeing exile, as Berthoud tends to do, as the chief source of Nortje's alienation. If exile precipitated a crisis, it was also, in itself, a response to a crisis, an attempted resolution not only of the crisis of apartheid, but also, more generally, of the lifelong crisis of the subject. Nortje's figures of alienation articulate what Homi Bhabha describes in "Locations of Culture" (1994a) as the experience of the unhomely, which cannot be traced back to any single determinant, but "relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (Bhabha 1994a: 11).

Nortje's poetry deals with the crisis of identity in a complex way, as different forms of failed identification between self and community. An early poem to explore this dialectic by projecting the subject as the site of division and loss is the poem "My Vacant Self", written six months before Nortje's departure from South Africa in late 1965. By this stage Nortje's plans to leave South Africa were well advanced. As far back as 1963, the year he completed his BA degree at the University College of the Western Cape, he had begun to talk about leaving the country, as is evident in his correspondence with James Davidson, his former primary school teacher and mentor:

What I mean is that I have reached an impasse: do I or do I not start planning a departure from the dear old motherland. On the outcome of this deadlock depends my value as a human being who can stimulate and be stimulated by what Eliot calls "the horror and the boredom and the glory" of a fruitful life.

(4 November 1963, Unisa Archive)

In the course of 1964, while he was pursuing his University Education Diploma, he was talking seriously about emigration: "I wanted to reply immediately to tell you ... I have decided now to move to Canada" (15 July 1964, Unisa Archive). Davidson had left some time before and was residing in British Columbia, one of many in Nortje's social circle who had found conditions in South Africa intolerable and had relocated to a foreign country.

It is clear from the correspondence that the political context is relevant to Nortje's decision. Nevertheless, his dissatisfaction, at least overtly, is described in terms of the dearth of cultural satisfaction in South Africa. For him, it is not so much a question of feeling politically oppressed as of feeling intellectually and emotionally unfulfilled, and he refers in this regard to "my hunger for experience and my artistic isolation" (15 July 1964). Thus, although the two experiences are not treated entirely separately, the emphasis in the letters to Davidson is on the inward experience rather than on the external circumstance.

In the poetry, however, Nortje deploys devices, or mobilises the available generic devices, that enable apprehension of the external and the internal as co-existent. "My Vacant Self" which I have analysed previously (Klopper 1998:

167-170), correlates the external and the internal by drawing attention, paradoxically, to their simultaneous differentiation and relation. The key image is that of the glass pane, which both separates and links the domains of inside and outside:

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 2000: 123)

In relating the life and the work, a salient concern is the status of the speaker in the poetry, the extent to which the speaker is to be identified with Nortje himself. The distinction insisted upon, by variations of formalist criticism, between the poet and the speaker, is both useful and misleading. It is useful inasmuch as it indicates that the subject of the utterance who has written the poem (the poet) is not identical with the subject of the statement who is present in the poem (the speaker), but it is misleading inasmuch as it treats literary pronouncements as a special case, leading to the supposition that in other types of pronouncements, coincidence of the subject of the utterance and the subject of the statement is in fact possible. In *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), Umberto Eco cites Emile Benveniste and, among others, Jacques Lacan, in arguing that

this is not the case, that there is always a splitting and disjunction of the subject in his utterance, whatever the discourse (Eco 1976: 314). Literary discourse might exploit and play with this distinction, but does not initiate it.

Michael Chapman observes, in his essay "Arthur Nortje: Poet of Exile" (1979), that Nortje's poetry contains "a strong confessional element" (Chapman 1979: 65), suggesting that Nortje writes directly from personal experience. Clearly, the speaker in "My Vacant Self" is, in some sense, an autobiographical "I", one who, we might infer, has actually had the experience described here of looking out the window at the rain and passing traffic, and who has interpreted this experience in the way presented in the poem. Nevertheless, using the distinction to which Eco refers, the autobiographical subject is no more than the subject of the statement, and is to be distinguished from the subject of the utterance. In other words, even the autobiographical subject is a function of the differentiation of language. Whether autobiographical, biographical, or fictional, the subject comes into existence only on the basis of a split between he who speaks and he who is spoken.

The split subject of language means that the relation between the life and the work is necessarily dialectical. Work emanates from but also defines the life. The process operates in both directions. We know a subject through his statements, but he is never fully present in these statements, which depend on selection of detail and formal arrangement. Likewise, the language available to the subject will determine how he presents himself to others, though there is always a remainder that is not assimilated into the subject's self-representation. That which is not fully present in the statement, and which constitutes the unassimilated remainder, returns as the symptom. It might be argued that the dialectic is underpinned by the symptom, which, I have indicated, both perpetuates the subject's alienation from himself and seeks to cure this alienation. Writing as such may be the most compelling figure we have for the paradoxical nature of the symptom. This applies most obviously, though of course not exclusively, to literary writing, which seeks relations through metaphors, parallelisms, repetitions, but succeeds only in reiterating difference.

"My Vacant Self" begins with a pervasive sense of loss, the speaker standing at a window gazing out at the desultory weather. Although he is divided from the outside by the intervening glass, his "vacant self" finds correspondence with the "sad pathetic silence" of the rain. There is separation between inside and outside, but also a bridging sympathy, an identification, albeit in respect of a negativity. ("Vacancy" finds identification in "silence".) The houses have a "bowed and huddled" appearance, under clouds that "manoeuvre" and "never surrender", with the military connotations of "manoeuvre" and "surrender" pointing to a political meaning, a veiled reference to the liberation struggle against a regime that seeks to intimidate and to oppress. From the outset, therefore, self, world and politics are interwoven in a tissue of metaphoric

relations.

The poem proceeds to focus on the dividing surface of the glass, which allows perception of what lies beyond, but in distorted form, and without physical contact. The speaker's gaze is blurred by the vapourising affect of his "deepest life ... rising to the throat", which "blows hard against dividing surfaces". Because of the intervening glass, the eager breath at the window obscures the scenes beheld by the eye. The perceptual disturbance results not only from the surface of the window, but also from the breathing action of the speaker, implying that although the speaker desires contact and communion with the outside world, he is frustrated in the attempt, partly by his own actions. The self is divided against itself. What has been blurred is the speaker's "view / of money traffic, Friday police, black people". These are the sights outside, in the social world, visible through the window. The scenes correspond with what were, at the time, determinant aspects of social existence in South Africa: capitalism, militarism and racism. These aspects of social power had combined in such a way as to constitute a formidable system for the interpolation of the subject as a subject of apartheid ideology. In referring specifically to money, police and black people, in selecting these particular details, the speaker evinces an awareness of his own ideological interpolation, and though he responds with a certain intensity ("where my breath is eager"), he feels debilitated ("scenes are blurred").

Drawing the curtain and shifting his "numb lumped loins across the parquet", the speaker shuts out the world and moves deeper into the house and into himself. The movement from inside to outside has been reversed as the speaker returns, as it were, to himself and his own lack of meaningful response, a lack that is now given libidinal overtones in the image of "numb ... loins". By virtue of this shift from outside to inside, failure of community and relationship is portrayed not only as a political failure but also as a personal failure. Structurally, then, the two forms of failure are mutually implicated.

The concluding question links outside and inside, the political and the personal, in an image that recalls the concerns of the opening lines. "Who hears the dark drunk heart affirm the rhythm?" asks the speaker. Describing the heart, the affective self, as "dark" and "drunk", beating to the rhythms of the body and the instinctual life, suggests a Dionysian lawlessness, the pursuit of pleasures located outside the control of the rational self, the commanding "I", the subject of the statement, the identity that is assimilated into the prevailing symbolic order. In the context of the poem, these pleasures are both libidinal and revolutionary, affirmed as much by the measure of war drums as by the heartbeat. Returning to his earlier evocation of political struggle, the speaker implies that he is unable to participate. Thus, in respect both of the political and the libidinal, he fails to hear the affirming rhythm, and cannot lose himself in communalistic orgiastic activity. He is cut off both from social involvement

and from his own vital life. Failure of external relation corresponds with inner alienation.

The “dark drunk heart” seeking communality with others is offered as a life-affirming alternative to sterile division. Such communality leads, however, to loss of distinctiveness and individuality, and loss of self in an oceanic feeling of intoxicated oneness is itself a kind of death. Death is inescapable, then, and most evident, perhaps, when life is most actively pursued. To make a mark, to constitute a difference, to assume an identity, is to encounter death, to calculate a positive value via its negative, its dialectical other. It is to these darker reflections that the poem leads, directed by a general tone of melancholy and despair. What the rain both silences and articulates, the cloud both veils and unveils, is precisely this apprehension of death, division, loss as the ground of being, the negativity in terms of which identity is able to be posited at all.

It would be tempting to point out that those who might have constituted a community of identification, and thus of resistance, are in prison or in exile, and to argue that the speaker’s problem of identification is therefore, in the main, a political problem. But this would be to overlook the fact that identity, as such, constitutes the problem. Identity formation passes through a complex process of differentiation. Self simultaneously separates from and identifies with the other, with what is not the self. This displacement of self, its location elsewhere, outside of itself, is symbolised in language, which is external to and precedes the subject, but where the subject nevertheless assumes his identity on the basis of a split between the subject who speaks (the subject of the utterance) and the subject who is spoken (the subject of the statement). The subject who is represented in speech is not identical with the subject who seeks self-representation, and yet the only way in which the subject is able to come into existence at all is through language, by means of which he is represented, though only ever partially.

Yearning for an immediate correspondence, a total identification between self and other, the speaker seeks to heal the wound of being and return to an undifferentiated state of primary narcissism. Sustainable community requires, however, the interruption of the narcissistic circle by the law of language, which, as Jacques Lacan has argued in “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”, is the social law (Lacan 1977: 62-84). The imaginary community founded on a fantasy of unity is to give way to the symbolic community founded on a dialectic of difference. When Bhabha speaks in “Dissemination” (Bhabha 1994b) of the “homogenization of experience” as a strategy of “containment and closure” (p. 163), a strategy, in other words, of repression, he has the imaginary community in mind, the renunciation of which is the condition, he claims, for “remembering the nation, peopling it anew, imagining the possibility of other contending and liberating forms of cultural identification” (p. 161).

Nortje's relationship with the liberation struggle, and with those in whose name it was conducted, the poor under-classes and disenfranchised African majority, had always been problematic. Having grown up in poverty in the townships of Port Elizabeth, he vacillated between affirming solidarity with the underprivileged and sought to rise above the material and cultural deprivation of his upbringing. His friend Raymond Leitch recounts in an audio-letter how Nortje was ashamed to introduce university friends from Cape Town to his home in Port Elizabeth (14 October 1979, Unisa Archive). Although he lived among Africans in Kortsens, Port Elizabeth, and supported the African-led liberation struggle, he nevertheless saw himself as culturally other. In a letter to his mentor Davidson, written as a student at the University College of the Western Cape, he signals his difference from what he calls the "primitive" races, identifying himself with European settler culture and its civilising mission (4 November 1963, Unisa Archive). It is only later that he overtly acknowledges a commonality in the black experience, but even then not without ambivalence. What the poetry registers, in fact, is the shifting loyalties and identifications within the broader coloured community of the 1960s, as its intellectual classes in particular began to assimilate a black consciousness perspective, articulated not only by the Africanist movement, which had a strong presence in the Eastern Cape, but also by the Black Power movement in America.

Between 1965, when he left South Africa to study at Oxford University, and 1970, the year of his death, Nortje lived abroad, his time divided almost equally between England and Canada. In England he had found the intellectual and cultural stimulation for which he had yearned, and his circle of friends was extensive and supportive of his poetic aspirations. In Canada, however, he had felt isolated and depressed in the small town of Hope in British Columbia, a state of mind that his move to Toronto had not cured. In fact, he suffered a nervous breakdown in Toronto, and was forced to take sick leave from teaching. He had anticipated that his return to Oxford in 1970 to continue with postgraduate study would restore his good spirits, but it seemed not to. His Oxford friends had meanwhile dispersed, got married, and begun their careers as lawyers, doctors, journalists and academics. By December 1970, judging from the poetry and from the opinion of close friends such as Leitch, Nortje was as isolated and depressed as he had been in Hope, despite the fact that his career as poet seemed to be taking off. The sombre mood of the last poems, the extreme state of mind some of them describe, reveal Nortje turning his hypersensitive responses into a poetry that seems not only to feed off but to augment the dark reflections. It is as if the writing sustains and even creates the mood from which more writing becomes possible. Again, it is necessary to insist, though, that the speaker in the poems is a construct, a function of the stylistics of self-representation, presenting not suffering as such, which lies

beyond representation, but the poetics of suffering. The existential life is not offered in an unmediated form. It is scripted, and, in Nortje's case, scripted by one conscious of its inscription, conscious that the life is the written life. Life and writing are mutually interrelated in this script, this system of signification.

Written at the end of November 1970, a few weeks before Nortje's death in mid-December, the poem "All Hungers Pass Away" provides noteworthy comparison with "My Vacant Self". Describing withdrawal from the world in terms, similarly, of a differentiation between inside and outside, and using, similarly, the metaphor of the room, the later poem repeats, albeit under different circumstances, and with a slightly different frame of reference, the images (room and rain) and concerns (division and alienation) of the earlier poem. Nevertheless, the speaker is now faced, in addition, with guilt about the intervening years between his departure from South Africa and the present, which he feels he has wasted by enjoying luxuries of mind and body while his countrymen back home have suffered. The speaker's pursuit of satisfaction, such as Nortje had felt he was denied back home in South Africa, has brought no fulfilment. The poem registers a loss that cannot fully, or finally, be recuperated. Having wagered all on exile from the home country, there is a realisation that what has been gained by way of learning and good living ultimately means nothing, with the speaker as empty of positive being as was the speaker in the earlier poem. His consumption of the commodities of the Western world has left him merely with a sense of guilt and self-disgust:

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.

JLS/TLW

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.

(Nortje 2000: 398)

Parallels between the earlier poem and the later poem include the speaker alone in a room, aware of the rain falling outside, the movement of consciousness from inside to outside and back, from self to what is not self and returning to self, and the shift from political reflection to libidinal awareness. Within this structural similarity, however, there are significant inversions and displacements. It is evening in the earlier poem and pre-dawn in the later poem. In the earlier poem, the speaker watches the silent rain as he stands before the window; in the later poem, he listens to the rain as he lies in bed. The sense of withdrawal from the outside world is more acute, one might say, in the later poem, with the world more distant, invisibly external to the room. It is not seen but heard, and the gap between self and world is filled by memory. Rather than look out the window, as in the earlier poem, the speaker gets out of bed and looks in the mirror. His “dream-puffed eyes” are directed not towards another but at himself as he observes his reflection looking back at him.

Given these similarities and dissimilarities, the two poems are suggestive of the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity of the self, continuity as a function, that is, of repetition rather than development, of repetition with a difference. The consciousness operative in each poem, evident in the selection and presentation of the details of room and rain, the patterns and rhythms of the versification, is comparable yet distinct. Even though the alienation is more acute in the later poem, the poem itself is, paradoxically, more carefully structured and complex, more accomplished artistically (evident, for example, in the controlled use of the quatrain, the self-deflating deployment of irony, the subtle elaboration of the extended metaphor). It might be observed that as the measure of the verse has become more sophisticated, so the insistence of symptom has become more marked. The very control, the refinement, the laboured production of the highly wrought artefact, the objectification of

impulse and feeling in the autonomous work of art, is suggestive of the obsessive nature of the symptom. Though the speaker is constructed as vulnerable, turning in on himself away from the world, his construction is carefully elaborated. The speaker as construct is the very epitome of the self as construct, the determinate subject of the statement as opposed to the indeterminate subject of the utterance.

The poem begins by describing loss of desire as a loss of hunger, of appetite for life, in the country of exile, which, although wealthy and well-provisioned, is “a land where rhythm fails”, and therefore does not find harmony with the speaker, with his physical and imaginative needs. Desires, once linked to historical time, have now passed away into memory (“we lose track of their dates”). Arising “like births” and reigning “like potentates”, they had dominated the speaker’s life. Of interest is the way in which desire is seen to arise biologically and involuntarily, and yet to exercise its will politically and purposefully. There is a suggestion of the instinctive articulating itself socially, and of this very articulation producing the symptom. To what purpose, after all, has desire reigned supreme if hunger “among the tables of rich libraries” has left the speaker with “shrunk corpulence”, and appetite has left him with a taste in the mouth “like ash”? The hunger described here is intellectual, gastronomic, and sexual. It is located in the life of the mind and of the passions as much as in the life of the body. The logic of metaphor constitutes these as simultaneous, conceptually distinct yet linguistically linked. Academic pursuits have left the speaker emaciated; sexual pleasures have proved bland; satiation appears obscene when juxtaposed with the poverty and famine of black families back home.

The relation between self and world is presented in a striking image when the speaker invokes the “blithe footfalls” that pass his door as he recovers from “the wasted years”. A sharp contrast is created between a vibrant life out there, the “blithe footfalls” passing the door, and the malady within, a gloomy malaise, an unease that is also a disease, one that leaves the self depleted and listless, wasting away. Nevertheless, there is a suggestion of some kind of recuperation, however meagre. To recover “from” the wasted years is also to “recover” the wasted years, to reclaim them, reintegrate the waste, the remainder. Clearly, the poem seeks to constitute such a recovery. What has been forgotten – presented here as the political struggle in the home country, and all this implies of alternative forms of identification superseded by the gratification of the moment – is remembered. If assimilated, recollection might cure the ennui, if not assimilated, it could exacerbate the ennui, resulting instead in a dismembering, a coming apart rather than a coming together.

For some time, Nortje’s life had been unravelling. On his return to England, it was evident that his alcohol dependency was excessive, and so, it seems, was his dependency on tranquillisers, which he had been taking since at least 1968.

Heavy drinking, alternating with periods of sobriety and discipline, had characterised Nortje's life since his student days in the Western Cape. By 1970, it is clear that alcohol abuse, formerly confined to weekend bingeing, had become a major problem. Nortje's bouts of heavy drinking were notorious. Whereas his friends might accommodate him, the exile community, especially those involved directly in the liberation struggle, was less likely to do so, particularly if he seemed also to be indifferent to the revolutionary cause. He was expected to use his opportunities for study to improve not only his own position but also that of his people, deprived as they were of similar privileges. Required to contribute in a tangible way, his life of the bohemian artist, on the margins of respectability, introspective and brooding, ironic, mordant and erratic, seemed self-indulgent and dissipated. Yet it was through his writing that he was making a contribution, and if his writing emanated from the life, it also, as I have suggested, provided the script for it. The problem for Nortje was that increasingly his poetic script failed to accord with the script of revolution, which demanded unambiguous positions and simple, direct conceptualisations. Such, for example, is the view adopted by R.N. Egedu in *Modern African Poetry and the African Predicament* (1978).

Although the speaker appears to make amends for what he regards as his betrayal of the struggle, and to recover a sense of a communal black identity, he is also aware that this, too, may be merely another self-deception, another imaginary pleasure. Lying face down on the bed, he is "half-aware / of skin that tightens over pelvis", feeling what seems to be a stir of desire. "Pathetic, this, the dark posture", he says. But what does he mean? Is he mocking his attempt at reclaiming a black identity, or mocking the reassertion of desire at the very moment that desire has been renounced? Such moments in the poetry foreground the double voice, the disjunction of the subject, the split between one meaning and another. The metaphoric layers and allusions enable a multiplicity of positions and significances while holding these disparate elements together in a formal coherence. Self-division is figured as self-irony.

Admittedly, the evidence is anecdotal and literary, but at least one acquaintance is convinced that Nortje was an alcoholic at the time of his death, and that he had been one for a while. If this is indeed the case, a resolution such as the one found in the poem, the renunciation of self-indulgent pleasure, would not have been sufficient. According to George Bateson in "The Cybernetics of 'Self': A Theory of Alcoholism" (1972), resistance is symptomatic of the problem itself of alcoholism, which, he maintains, is precisely a problem of self. As long as the alcoholic resists alcohol, asserting the will and affirming the self as ego, he subscribes to an untenable construct, and has not yet hit rock bottom. The prognosis, in these instances, is poor. To overcome his addiction, the alcoholic must acknowledge the fallacy of the autonomous and unitary self, an acknowledgement that comes only with total defeat. Surrendering to his

addiction, he comes to realise that the mode of his sobriety is no defence, as the sobriety itself contains the pathogenic source of his intoxication. Being sober, the alcoholic seeks to be drunk. The real problem, then, of which drunkenness is symptomatic, is the mode of sobriety. What is it about being sober that is unbearable? Bateson argues that what is unbearable is the self as an ego-formation. In his depictions of the evacuation of self in the two poems under consideration, Nortje evinces an awareness of the problematic construction of self, undoing its certainties, yet the poetry also constitutes an attempt at preserving that which it seeks to undo.

Nortje died after a night out during which he had consumed a large number of Newcastle Brown Ales won in a wager on the Mohamed Ali and Oscar Bonavina fight broadcast on TV, a fight which Mohamed Ali, champion of black rights, had won in a fifteenth-round knockout. Before going to The White Horse Pub in Broad Street, he had attended an earlier dinner engagement, where he had probably also been drinking. When, later, he returned to his room in a terrace house on Walton Street, he got into bed, ingested approximately twenty-five barbiturate tablets, sank into a coma, retched, choked, and died. The memorial service was attended by many friends, but not by any relatives. Olga Reed, who had adopted him into her family after his nervous breakdown in Canada, where she had nursed him, trying to keep him off alcohol and tranquillisers, had flown over and taken charge. Looking at Nortje lying in the coffin, she said, "You've really gone and done it this time, haven't you", indicating that there had been other, less fatal, occasions.

Although there is no evidence that Nortje had committed suicide, his life had, in a sense, become self-destructive. Nevertheless, he was writing poetry, reading and discussing his work at public gatherings, impressing new acquaintances, organising his studies, planning the future. But something was awry. In the opinion of friends from his earlier years at Oxford University, the old sparkle had been extinguished, though others, new acquaintances mostly, who responded to flashes of the remaining wit and verve, saw only the amiable sociability that allowed no glimpse into the dread evident in the poetry. In addition to appearing withdrawn to his old friends, the new mood of black militancy against white rule in South Africa seemed to trouble him. Never comfortable with organised politics, he felt estranged by the demand for solidarity but also guilty that he could not commit himself fully in this way. He was due to read his poems at a Human Rights Day gathering in London the week he died, and, as intimated by Donald Arthur, a friend in Oxford, he was apprehensive about the confrontation that was likely to arise (1973: 17). He seemed to have been placed under increasing pressure to act as propagandist against the South African regime, a pressure that he resisted. He explains in a letter to Olga Reed that he opposed the use of violence by the liberation movement (27 November 1970, Unisa Archive). For purposes of rallying

behind a political cause, the introspection and complex subtlety of his verse, its shifting perspectives and self-questioning irony, was inappropriate.

At twenty-seven, having sought intellectual and cultural fulfilment outside South Africa, in England and Canada, Nortje felt as unappeased as he had ever felt himself to be in the townships of Port Elizabeth. He had not discovered out there, elsewhere in the world, what might satisfy the lack, though he had studied, made friends, travelled and written poetry. Then, one night, he overdosed on alcohol and tranquillisers, fell asleep, and died, becoming the nothing that, in his most bleak moments, he had experienced himself to be. The writing had given voice to loss, had been predicated on loss, but had nevertheless endeavoured to overcome loss. It had been the means by which loss was to be overcome through establishing a relation, a communication, acknowledging division in the act itself of seeking relation. Such writing occupies the very space of contradiction and dialectical irresolution.

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SELF AND COMMUNITY IN THE POETRY OF ARTHUR NORTJE: A SYMPTOMATIC READING

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