Death, Resistance and Liberation in Peter Horn's "The Plumstead Elegies"

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Summary

The article focuses on the notions of death, resistance and liberation in Peter Horn's sequence of poems "The Plumstead Elegies". It argues that the process of radical personal and social transformation described in the poems is rendered problematical by employing a conceptual framework that is at once psychoanalytic and Marxist. The dilemma posed by the process of transformation described in the poems is seen to arise from a disjunction between the psychoanalytic view of an inevitable division within the psyche, which suggests that the subject can never fully embrace his or her freedom, and the teleological logic of a Marxism requiring that domination be followed by the singular event of a deliverance.

Opsomming

Die begrippe dood, weerstand en bevryding soos dit in Peter Horn se opeenvolgende gedigte "The Plumstead Elegies" voorkom, word in hierdie artikel in oënskou geneem. Daar word konstateer dat die proses van radikale persoonlike en sosiale transformasie soos in die gedigte beskryf, bemoeilik word deur die gebruik van 'n konseptuele raamwerk wat tegelyk psigoanalities sowel as Marxisties is. Die transformasieproses, soos in die gedigte beskryf, se dilemma spruit oënskynlik uit 'n disjunksie tussen die psigoanalitiese siening van 'n onvermydelike tweespalt binne die psige wat veroorsaak dat die subjek hom- of haarself nooit ten volle met vryheid kan vereenselwig nie, en die teleologiese logika van 'n Marxisme wat vereis dat oorheersing deur 'n enkele bevrydingsgebeurtenis uitgewis moet word.

> Yes, I said: today is the day. Yet today has passed and I have not gone through with what I promised. For as long as the trail of words continues, you know with certainty that I have not gone through with it .... Death may indeed be the last great foe of writing, but writing is also the foe of death. Therefore, writing, holding death at arm's length, let me tell you that I meant to go through with it, began to go through with it, did not go through with it.
>
> (J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron*)

> All I can do is tell the truth. No, that isn't so - I have missed it. There is no truth that, in passing through awareness, does not lie. But one runs after it all the same.
>
> (Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge describes the elegy as "the form of poetry natural to the reflective mind" (Shipley 1970: 95). If, etymologically speaking, to reflect is to turn back (*flectare*, to bend), then one might say that death, as the condition of possibility of the elegy, makes us think again. In doubling thought, returning it to itself, in expediting reflection, death functions as a mirror, itself blank but casting back an image enabling thought to recognise itself as an object, as distinct, as articulated. Reflection may then be seen to constitute an eternal return, a structural repetition of the moment of objectification of thought, and as such may be said to contain within itself the very pulse of death.[1] It is this eternal return of thought - a return not to an originary unity but to an inaugural split, to a displacement, to a play of mirrors - that is celebrated by the elegy.

The elegy both acknowledges and resists death. While mourning the loss brought about by death, the elegist defies death by immortalising the dead or asserting the possibility of regeneration. The very act of writing about death, of finding words for the loss, of filling the void which absence leaves behind, suggests an attempted transcendence of death. But death can only be said to have been eluded if deliverance is a singular event, which it is not. In the elegy, as in all art, there is no permanent release, no romantic escape, there is only the reiteration of the word. Repetition and return may therefore be said to be constitutive of the elegy in respect not only of its reflective properties but also of its formal properties. As a poetic practice, an art form, the elegy is conventional, stylised and ritualistic. It is an observance. Like all repetitional behaviour, the elegy is compelled to affirm what it seeks to deny: and what it seeks to deny, but cannot avoid affirming, is death.

The article will focus on the notions of death, resistance and liberation in Peter Horn's sequence of poems "The Plumstead Elegies" (1991). Modelled on Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (1960), Horns poems similarly seek to find meaning amid the destruction of war. But whereas Rilke locates his elegies within a metaphysical framework of redemption, Horn locates his elegies within a Marxist/psychoanalytic framework of radical social and personal transformation. Horn attempts, one might say, to secularise Rilke in an act of literary revisionism, while relying substantially on Rilke's poetic form, on his cadences and even his actual formulations.[2] Horn's elegies are thus a return of yet another kind: a rewriting of Rilke from a displaced conceptual base. It will be one of the functions of this article to determine how radical a displacement Horn manages to effect.

Horn's use of a Marxist/psychoanalytic frame of reference enables him to conceive of death as a necessary stage in the pursuit of both personal freedom and political freedom, which are portrayed as dialectically linked.

At the political level, the context of Horn's "Elegies" is the Western Cape in the 1970s, where, as in other areas of South Africa, a low-intensity war was being waged in the townships and squatter camps. The poems are prompted by the death of a comrade, and attempt to create from this and other political deaths a liberatory purpose, defined as the overthrow of the political order through collective will and action. The poems are an open call to arms, and are thus poems of resistance in the sense employed by Barbara Harlow in *Resistance Literature* (1987).

But aside from the overt political purpose of the poems - shadowing, as it were, the political - is revealed the struggle of the subject, through a metaphoric passage of death and resistance, for personal liberation. In the psychoanalytic language of Jacques Lacan, the imaginary identifications which define and confine the ego, establishing its phantasmic limits as an autonomous and selfidentical entity, are opposed by a force of "unbinding" which, although threatening the fixity of the ego, frees the subject to emerge in new forms in the symbolic order.[3] The psychical agency that ensures the dissolution of imaginary identifications is the death drive. Psychoanalysis claims that although the ego attempts to frustrate this process, it is possible, through an analysis of resistances, to achieve a partial dismantling of the objects of the ego's fantasy relations and, in so doing, liberate the subject from its captivation by the imaginary. Such liberation leads to the assumption by the subject of its radical decenterment from the ego, the imaginary self-image.

Horn's elegies follow a trajectory of self-emancipation analogous to the above account, employing a conceptual apparatus that is distinctly psychoanalytical. But the narrative of personal liberation is, from a psychoanalytical point of view, rendered problematical by being dialectically linked to the parallel narrative of political liberation. Typical of the revisionary Marxism of the Frankfurt School, which enjoyed a certain eminence in South Africa in the 1970s, Horn identifies psychic liberation from instinctual repression with political liberation from capitalist oppression. This conjunction results in the creation of a utopian fantasy of total freedom and autonomy, which is driven by the teleological logic of a linear chronology which requires that domination be followed by the singular event of a deliverance.

Both Sigmund Freud and Lacan intimate, however, that analysis is interminable. In Lacan's terms, there can be no final cure for psychic division and the imaginary captivations to which such division gives rise, as these processes are constitutive of our symbolic nature as such. We can never be one with our desire for unity and autonomy; we can never fully embrace our freedom. Psychoanalysis does not posit a singular revolutionary event. Rather than envision a miraculous transformation, it anticipates an inter-

mittent and partial "advent of authentic speech" (Felman 1987: 131) whereby the subject, in an ongoing pursuit of truth, assumes and names its history and its destiny.

An analysis of resistances in Horn's poems on death might begin, appropriately, with a paradox, claiming that, from a political perspective, resistance acts as an agent of change, whereas from a psychoanalytical perspective resistance acts as a defence against change. The poems suggest that in order to participate effectively in resistance in the political sense, resistance in the psychoanalytical sense must first be overcome. Yet the poems may, inescapably, assume the form of resistance in the psychoanalytical sense by constituting a "prison-house" of language even at the moment of espousing political resistance and freedom. In other words, the poems may seek to contain as much as to enable the onslaught against the ego,[4] and may therefore participate simultaneously in both forms of resistance. This ambivalence suggests that despite their ideological conviction and liberatory force, the poems may, in fact, dramatise a divided purpose.

I shall argue that such division, or contradiction, is evident everywhere in the poems, and may be regarded as symptomatic of the impossibility of their theoretical (Marxist/psychoanalytical) enterprise. According to Leo Bersani "Psychoanalysis is an unprecedented attempt to give a theoretical account of precisely those forces which obstruct, undermine, play havoc with theoretical accounts themselves" (1986: 4). In as much as my own reading of Horn seeks to account for moments of obfuscation and slippage in his texts, it is itself informed by a psychoanalytic perspective. Bersani goes on to maintain that from such a perspective the oppositions set up by a theoretical system

> both reveal and disguise an antagonism internal to thought itself. In other words, they betray strategic moves within consciousness by which a threatened rationality formulates the process of its own inevitable collapse as a[n] ... ontologically reassuring conflict between imagination and reality, or between the subject and the object, or, in the broadest possible terms, between the individual and civilization. (Bersani 1986: 49)

One might add that such a threatened collapse, brought about by "an antagonism internal to thought itself", may also be formulated, projected outwards, as a conflict between the individual and the state.

In "The Plumstead Elegies", political resistance takes on two related forms. In the first place, such resistance is construed as a refusal to be dominated by the capitalist bosses. The speaker urges workers to "Retain and hand on the hundred ways of saying no, / each useful in a hundred different situations" ("The Third Elegy" 1991: 86). But the poems go

further in seeing in political resistance the collapse of all the old structures of governance. Thus the speaker invites the reader to "imagine chaos, /confusion, the end of law and order" ("The Fourth Elegy" 1991: 88). The old ways are portrayed as oppressive and impoverishing in as much as they delimit, isolate and paralyse different orders of social and personal existence.

From the opening lines of "The First Elegy" it becomes clear that the poems launch their appeal from within one of the penal colonies, one of the ghettos of experience. The speaker projects himself as a fellow captive:

> Even if I scream, who listens?
> My voice re-echoes from concrete garden walls
> surrounding my high comfort prison: will its last muted
> reverberation reach those I address? Or is
> the sound-proofing
> between ghettos impermeable? and even if
> my voice, muffled by laws and by threats, reaches and
> stirs the mind of men,
> will they, chained to repetitive chores and abject poverty,
> will they have time to listen, and will they understand?
>
> (Horn 1991: 80)

These lines gesture towards, but do not fully confront the speaker's ambivalent assumption, in the South African context, of the discourse of political resistance. The speaker concedes that his speech may not reach his intended audience, and that those whom he addresses may not have the time to listen, nor even the competence to understand. It is in this last respect that the speaker's ability to communicate with those oppressed by "repetitive chores and abject poverty" is most questionable. As he acknowledges, he is one of the privileged subsequently mentioned, one of those who are "trained to understand" poetry, in contrast with workers who do not read poetry but sing freedom songs. But he fails to recognise that in many different ways his social position situates him closer to the bosses than to the workers: he is educated, white, and operates within a European language. Instead of seeing himself as interpellated in specific ways within the social formation, the speaker goes on to describe himself as existing outside common social categories:

> Should I then write
> only for those, homeless like me, outsiders,
> who are building utopias out of twisted and
> charred dreams,

who gather around the lonely flame of their lamps
apparitions as mascots against the descending night?

(1991: 80)

Paradoxically, the outsider is a cardinal creation of the very liberal humanist tradition that Horn's Marxist psychoanalytic frame of reference is intended to subvert. He is the lonely rebel who affirms, when confronted with the contradictions of the social formation, his faith in a transcendental unity of being. The speaker himself claims to be an outsider on the basis of his romantic idealism: he is one of those who seek to transform broken dreams into flawless utopias. This attitude amounts, however, to no more than wishful thinking, akin to superstitious belief in the efficacy of fetishistic objects (the "mascots" referred to by the speaker). To be an outsider is to retain an infantile faith that the world approximates, or can be made to approximate, one's demand. It is to believe in an ultimate plenitude, which is infantile as it constitutes a disavowal of castration, a resistance to what Julia Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984: 43-51) calls the thetic phase, which she defines as the constitutive break of signification, the founding separation between signifier and signified, self and objects. To be an outsider is to refuse to inhabit a social symbolic order of divided positions and differential meanings. It is to lose oneself in a dreamland of narcissistic closure. The epitome of such romantic delirium, according to the speaker, is a certain kind of poetry which obscures truth and denies death:

Long enough have I spoken muted words,
which nobody could understand. Long enough my breath
was the salt, the sea, the word, the wind,
beautiful symbols,
and a stinking darkness
belching from the cave of my conscience.
Long enough this dismal multiplicity of intoxication.

I've wrapped truth in sweet sounding phrases
and aluminium foil, packaged and truncated for
poetry books.
But the reality behind lies is death.
The understanding of tears is pain.

(Horn 1991: 81)

Emanating from within the intoxicating beauty of the lyrical voice, issuing from within the hollow (the "cave") of the word, is the odour of death. The speaker informs us that conscience brings about the awareness of the darkness within. Conscience, in fact, actually seems to constitute the darkness,

for conscience itself is the cave. How, then, does conscience arise? Psychoanalysis accounts for conscience as a function of the super-ego, which develops from the internalisation (introjection) of parental prohibition during the resolution of the oedipal complex. In other words, conscience comes into existence through the realisation that one cannot be the narcissistic object of the mother's desire, that one cannot be the phallus of the mother. Acceptance of castration leads to the assumption of desire within the symbolic order, where it is perpetually displaced and deferred.

The speaker, however, appears to renounce the plenitude of the romantic word only to embrace the plenitude of the people's word. He thereby substitutes one fallacy for another, for there is no univocal voice of the people. "The Second Elegy" begins with the speaker meditating on the meaning of the death of a comrade and friend. He claims that because he himself is alive, he is compelled to write until he is torn from his desk and thrown into prison, so that he may "see / what eyes are forbidden to see", and "know what this is: the freedom of the people" (1991: 84). So he writes, foreshadowing his identification with the forces of political resistance, anticipating his commandeering of the voice of the masses:

> In this silence I write, make comparisons, invent symbols
> of that which I do not yet know. And what I write
> is spoken,
> spoken by many, then sung by the nameless, stammering
> at first,
> without understanding, then stronger, a hymn,
> the knowledge
> of victory suffuses the lament for the victims,
> it lifts from the pages,
> distils certainty out of the doubt of the writer,
> the poem, no longer the poet's becomes
> the voice of the masses,
> its words dive into a chorus of drums and shouting voices,
> and yet, the poem remains the voice
> of this living moment.
>
> (1991: 84)

The transitional "and yet" signals an indecision, indicating that the distillation of "certainty out of the doubt of the writer" may not be complete. The heterogeneous "living moment" fractures the unity of the speaker's voice, whose temporality is the disjunctive "as if" of the future conditional.[5] Such is the split site of his enunciation. The question is whether the speaker simply perpetuates a puerile mode of wishful thinking by dreaming of what is to come, or whether he locates himself within the

founding rupture of his constitution as subject in order to rewrite himself, thereby taking on the role of the artist as the bearer of death. As Kristeva (1984: 84) explains, the artist is one who makes "a descent into the most archaic stage of his positing" in order to sketch out "a kind of second birth" (p. 70). By this she does not mean that it is a singular event, imposed once and for all in a theological sense. She does not have in mind a teleology of redemption in which an end is already known and predetermined through a linear logic. She means instead, that the artist is always at risk, inhabiting as he does a liminal space of becoming.

The opening lines of "The Fourth Elegy" reveal that the disruptive break signalling the miraculous rebirth, is yet to occur:

> Men of this town, why are we winter sad?
> Have we not, like migrating birds,
> communicated our intention? In the lateness of this hour
> are we not prepared to take wing?
> To rise from the stagnant pools of white feathers?
> Do we not scent, long before we arrive,
> the rain-drenched
> flowering of our destination? What are riot vans
> and squad cars against our purpose?
>
> (1991: 88)

What is required for the liberating flight apart from the intention to do so? Having resolved on a course of political resistance, what catalyst will effect appropriate action? And will group solidarity automatically lead to the accomplishment of freedom? "The Fifth Elegy" suggests that the visionary minority, the "aliens" among us, show the way, because they "see / the road open into the future", whereas "our eyes / are turned backward" (1991: 90). It is the fearless few who face the full horror of death:

> They bear the bitter curse of terror,
> which goes naked: looked at, deciphered, destroyed.
> They hear voices pronounce:
> desolate is the morning of life,
> desolate is the evening of death.
> The moon does not brighten their darkness,
> nor the sun shine on their despair.
>
> (1991: 90)

Although the key to revolutionary action is seen to be the vision of a liberated future, no future can exist without a constitutive past, even though this past cannot be recaptured. The speaker proceeds to erase the distinction

that he has drawn between the visionary few and the rest on the basis of their respective orientation to future and past. Revolution turns out to be not so much a radical break with the past as a return to the past, albeit a past which is displaced into the future:

> Even they cannot escape what overwhelms us all
> - memory.
> As if all that which they are driven to create
> had been nearer, long ago, in their childhood.
> But their first freedom,
> which they lost one morning at four, recedes,
> while they walk, silent,
> amongst the friendly and the violent.
> The truants will rule the world in their hour:
> the masters of chaos will step forth from the undergrowth
> in workaday clothes to celebrate the festival:
> once again childhood, where all thoughts are
> the unending veld and the dark eye of the dreaming vlei,
> school holidays, balloons popping, the long penis of a
> church swinging in the joyous rhythm of laughter.
>
> (1991: 91)

The speaker has sought to resolve his own paralysing alienation, firstly, in the voice of masses and, secondly, in the example of the solitary and visionary revolutionary. But just as the notion of an undifferentiated communal voice is problematised by the text itself, so the idea of a purely forward-looking individual is ultimately held to be untenable. The liberated future is seen to be a function of childhood loss. It is said to be born out of the disappearance of the "first freedom ... one morning at four". The phrase "one morning at four" is ambiguous. In one sense, it could refer to clock time. In this context, however, it is more likely to refer to age, to what the speaker referred to earlier as "the morning of life". The speaker seems to be suggesting that what is sought in the future is what was lost in the past, at the age of four.

In psychoanalytic theory, this age corresponds, of course, with the phallic stage of development. The loss experienced by the child at this time concerns loss of a narcissistic relation with the mother and with the phallus. The phallic stage is surmounted at the resolution of the oedipal complex: when, under threat of castration, the child accepts the father's prohibition against possession of the mother, and subordinates his imaginary demand for absolute satisfaction to the symbolic imperative of displaced and deferred desire. Castration, to my mind, is both avoided (the child's claim to the mother is relinquished) and accepted (the child gives up his demand for

plenitude of being when his desire is inscribed in the differential network of the social symbolic order). To cling to the phallus when threatened with castration would simply be to fetishise demand by investing it in a substitutive imaginary object.[6]

The speaker recreates childhood as a time when the phallus, rather than being the instrument of a division, is enshrined in a condition of innocent and abundant pleasure ("the long penis of a / church swinging in the joyous rhythm of laughter"). It is a carnivalesque time of misrule and disorder, when the world is governed by "truants" and celebrated by "the masters of chaos", when pleasure is polymorphously perverse. What the revolutionaries seek, the speaker tells us, is this "once again childhood ...".

The gap between the plenitude imagined to have existed in childhood, and the reality of oppression, poverty and hunger encountered in the daily struggle for survival, drives some to sacrifice their lives to a liberating and redeeming vision that seeks to recapture what is believed to have been lost. "The Sixth Elegy" intimates that this vision has to be reclaimed from beyond the frontiers of what is currently known, from the margins or borders of existing structures and paradigms:

> There are many now who are driven so strongly to act
> that they flower ripe and glowing in the fullness
> of their heart,
> heroes perhaps and those destined to die early.
> These storm ahead, hoping to draw others along to follow
> to the place where the road drowns and water wells up
> below the pacing steps measuring imaginary frontiers,
> where the legions of a crumbling empire, the last
> dismembered fragments,
> repudiated by the metropolis, hold their heads
> stiffly above
> the swirling flood: floating debris of murderous courage.
>
> (1991: 92)

The exiles (a metaphoric extension of the outsiders, the homeless and the aliens already mentioned), those who have risked more than others, displacing themselves in the hope of finding their true selves, are discovered pacing the "imaginary frontiers" of the "crumbling empire", where "dismembered fragments" of debris float "stiffly above / the swirling flood".

That the boundaries of the empire are also the boundaries of the subject is intimated in the choice of the word "dismembered", which evokes images of the mutilated body (the *corps morcele*). The metaphoric link between empire and subject is spelt out clearly in "The Seventh Elegy". This elegy accounts for the transfiguring action of death by relating it to the transcen-

dental time of the moment of sacrifice. Through the passage of the wound, the secular is linked with the divine as the outside opens inwards:

> Strange how the young hero is transfigured by the threat
> of death: his sudden enthusiastic fate
> sings him along on the storm rushing
> towards the mountains
> and dense forests. Endurance for us is only duration:
> the empty ticking of a clock adding up grey moments.
> But his life is for ever enshrined in the present moment
> of his deed, which changes the world.
> And when he blows up the stone pillars, he blows up
> the bars of our cage: only we know it not, and we weep
> in anguish, as blood spills on the sand. We are frightened
> by the goat-song, when the butcher's knife is near.
> But nearer to death you no longer see death,
> understanding
> opens one vista behind the other, the experience
> of change ....
>
> (1991: 94)

Childhood, it is now clear, has been invoked not as an end in itself, but as an experience that leads to the moment of rupture when the subject, in a ceremony of sacrificial death, assumes an identity, a significance. The poem goes on to describe how the whole of psychic life converges on this "enshrined" moment of the eternal present: "The heart's surplus invested in many tomorrows becomes / an astonishing today" (1991: 95).

In "The Eighth Elegy", the defeat of "the isolated ego" is imagined as a fragmentation. Dismemberment accompanies the remembrance of childhood which stitches past and future together in the making of the present. The speaker evokes the unity of purpose of the revolutionary only to find that his own experience cannot be arranged in any meaningful order. His own life is seen to lack such mythical design. He has still to learn that if his own existence is to achieve significance, if he is to enter the social symbolic order meaningfully, he cannot remain a spectator idealising, or idolising, the other. He is called upon to relinquish his own imaginary identifications, his own narcissistic investments in images and objects. He is required to surrender up his own ego as sacrificial victim. Kristeva maintains that sacrifice reproduces the process of producing the symbolic, which "emerges out of material continuity through a violent and unmotivated leap" (1984: 78). In other words, the practice of sacrifice institutes representation as such: "what is violent is the irruption of the symbol, killing substance to make it signify" (p. 75). Only through sacrifice, then, will the speaker be

in a position to construct himself and his world anew:

> I: a spectator,
> turned towards you, try to order experience, but
> fragmented it collapses into dust.
> Until I realise: this is a new kind of reality,
> not to be contemplated, but to be made.
> The echo nesting in the crags of Table Mountain,
> cars rolling down the corridors of time,
> the sadness of time, misused dreams,
> the deserted beaches with their beer tins,
> nothing but defeats of the isolated ego.
>
> (Horn 1991: 96-97)

But, as he puts it in "The Ninth Elegy", the speaker holds back leaping "into the unsayable". Resistance is construed as building "barricades" and remembering "childhood hideouts". It is still primarily defensive, although preparation is made for the offensive:

> But this is a time to plan where to build barricades,
> how to take over radio stations, how to control the
> telephone exchange.
> It is a time to study the maps of the cities,
> and the intricacies of the stock market,
> a time to write pamphlets,
> a time to be wide awake.
> A time to remember the childhood hideouts
> on the mountains,
> and the location of springs.
>
> (1991: 97)

When the speaker does renounce his ego, when he casts off his childhood, his very name, he experiences what he describes in the closing poem "The Tenth Elegy" as a "new perspective" on life:

> Yet, it is strange, to live on earth no longer,
> as we had known it from birth, to have to forget
> the rituals
> of competition and egoism: to become healed and whole
> is a strange ache in the heart. What I was,
> held by fearful hands, I can no longer be, even my name,
> that hallmark of my self, has to be left behind.
> What we valued, broken playthings of childhood.
> Strange, not to go on wishing the wishes of yesterday,

strange to see all that was solid wing through space,
trying to find a new perspective ....

(1991: 100)

Again the temporality is indeterminate, hovering somewhere between an achieved event and one yet to occur ("to have to", "has to be"). Has the speaker, or has he not, attained the "new perspective", the libratory position, that he claims to have attained? Does the "I" fuse quite as unproblematically with the "you" as the rhetoric would wish us to believe?

"The Tenth Elegy" does not seem to recognise its own limits, its own resistances, when the miraculous rebirth is proclaimed. As a result, enunciation threatens to collapse into annunciation. The grammar persists, however, in checking this demand for closure. The poem continues:

And we walk light-footed through the wide landscape
of jubilation,
amongst the ruins of forts where the overlords
ruled unwisely
across to factories, silent on this day, but soon to sing
a new sound
looking at our heritage, built by the workers of yesterday
for the workers of today, built in slavery to be used
in freedom.
Is *this* not a miracle? Amazed, we will guide
our own destiny,
we, men, tell it to all to come, we were able to do this ....

(1991: 101)

Although the metrical and phonetic appeal of the text seduces the reader into sharing the jubilation of walking "light-footed through the wide landscape", the truth is that the miracle is still to come ("but soon to sing / a new sound"). The present of "this day" is characterised by a non-signifying silence. The joy, therefore, has no basis other than its denial of the actuality of continued subjection: first, to an identity going by the name of Peter Horn, and, second, to a politics of power, whatever form it might take. The poem concludes the sequence with an exhortation in which the imperative mood masks the absence of a present tense, an insufficiency presents itself as an abundance, and the space of the word receives the ghost message of an event that has not yet occurred:

sing it, for now there is something to sing about, because
my voice
unassisted by other voices, is insufficient to sing this

praise song,
lift it on the wings of music, of thousand,
of million voices,
to fill the space with this message:
man is free, not a slave to fate.

(1991: 101)

Implicated in the imperatives on either side of it, the subjunctive weakens the certainties upon which these imperatives are predicated ("because / my voice / unassisted by other voices, is insufficient to sing this / praise song"). But then the song is an impossible one to have sung alone, this song that says: "man is free, not a slave to fate". Neither, I would venture to say, can it be sung by a collective voice which the poem deems possible. In as much as there is always a history, there is always necessity. As Jacques Lacan points out: "Events are engendered in a primary historization .... History is already producing itself on the stage where it will be played out once it has been written down, both within the subject and outside him" (1968: 23). Given this understanding of the event, freedom and fate are not simply in a binary opposition to each other. Lacan sees them in a different kind of relation when he says: "The game is already played, the dice are already thrown, with this one exception, that we can take them once more in our hand and throw them once again" (1968: 26). Although the possibility of freedom is always present, it is the freedom of a game of chance, played from a position that has itself been determined by prior games of chance. There is always the possibility of another turn at the dice, a return, but there is no new beginning.

As I pointed out at the start, the idea of a new beginning which can be teleologically grasped from the perspective of the present, prefigured by the present as a narratological inevitability, is not a tenet of psychoanalysis. But it is not a tenet of a rigorous Marxism either, for which events are also historically, and not teleologically, determined. The idea of a new beginning, of a predetermined wiping clean of the slate, is, in fact, a tenet of Christianity. It would appear that Horn has not so much rewritten the redemptive scheme of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (1960) as reinscribed it. Accordingly, he fails to provide a truly radical alternative to the idealist aesthetics which he intentionally attempts to subvert.

As Kristeva points out, art is *not* sacrifice: it is *not* theology. Rather "art takes from ritual space what theology conceals: trans-symbolic jouissance, the irruption of the motility threatening the unity of the social realm and the subject" (1984: 80). Although Horn may be said to disrupt successfully the unities of self and society in respect of the order that is dying, or rather to articulate the disruptions that he witnesses and reads about and experiences,

he too easily names a new order, posits new unities of self and society, lays claim to a new fixed and undifferentiated identity. Consequently, it is difficult to decide just which form of resistance Horn's elegies ultimately endorse.

Notes

1. As J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis explain, the repetition compulsion is related to the "tendency towards absolute discharge which is implied by the notion of the death instinct" (1985: 80).

2. The verbal echoes are extensive. For example, compare the following extract from Rilke's "First Elegy" with the extract from Horn's "The Tenth Elegy" quoted on page 182:

   True, it is strange to inhabit the earth no longer,
   to use no longer customs scarcely acquired,
   not to interpret roses, and other things
   that promise so much, in terms of a human future;
   to be no longer all that one used to be
   in endlessly anxious hands, and to lay aside
   even one's proper name like a broken toy.
   Strange, not to go on wishing one's wishes.

   (1960: 226)

3. See Jacques Lacan (1968: 13): "I have been this only in order to become what I can be".

4. See Julia Kristeva (1984: 49): "That language is a defensive construction reveals its ambiguity - the death drive underlying it".

5. For a discussion of the notion of a disjunctive temporality see Homi Bhabha, "Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation" (1994).

6. Laplanche and Pontalis quote Freud as saying that in antiquity "the erect phallus symbolised sovereign power, magically or supernaturally transcendent virility ...." (1985: 313).

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