

Mimesis, Memory, *Memorandum*

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Summary

Memorandum: A Story with Paintings (2006b) explores the complex relationship between memory and mimesis. Written in response to Adriaan van Zyl's photographic realism, Marlene van Niekerk's metafiction provokes thought about the affinities between writing and painting.

Opsomming

Memorandum: 'n Verhaal met skilderye (2006a) besin oor die ingewikkelde verhouding tussen herinnering en mimesis. Marlene van Niekerk se metafiksie, wat geskryf is as antwoord op Adriaan van Zyl se fotografiese realisme, lok gedagtes uit oor die verwantskap tussen die skryf- en die skilderkuns.

Ek was die stilte in die middel.

Memorandum (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006: 77)

Memory is at the crux of Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*. Lying on her deathbed, with *Agaat* reading to her from her diaries, Milla observes to herself that “[d]ie begin het jy nooit opgeskryf nie” (“[t]he beginning you never recorded”) (van Niekerk 2004: 677; 2006: 653). Acting cryptically through its repetition, that beginning energises the novel.¹ When *Agaat* forces Milla into recollection through her recitation of the written record, she discloses an operative absence or silence in the story of lives intertwined. The process may not make what is operative speak, or bring it into presence, but it may reveal how the story being told, with the events it brings to memory, covers for another story or set of events, which resists a coming into speech or writing. Like *Agaat*, van Niekerk's most recent work, the collaborative *Memorandum: 'n Verhaal met skilderye* (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006), draws into narration the meditations of one terminally ill in

1. See Sanders 2008 for an exploration of beginnings in *Agaat*.

order to record the unrecorded. In so doing it poses profound questions about the making of fiction itself.

The main section of *Memorandum* is a long memorandum composed in a single night by J.F. Wiid, former director of “Stadsverfraaiing, -reiniging en -instandhouding” (“Parks & Playgrounds, Sanitation and Maintenance”) with the Parow municipality (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 6; 2006b: 6). Suffering from liver cancer, Wiid faces surgery for secondary tumours in his colon at Tygerberg Hospital, where he is to be admitted the following morning. In his memorandum he reconstructs a conversation between two patients, which he overheard during a previous hospital stay. The conversation between X and Y is replete with, to him, obscure and unfamiliar philosophical, historical and ornithological references, and Wiid must rely on his memory to reproduce its exact words phonetically. Aided by a friendly public librarian, J.S. Buytendagh, who, without being made party to their provenance, helps him convert them into meaningful terms that will lead him to further investigations, the exchange between his fellow patients begins to gather coherence. Attached to his memorandum are Wiid’s original word list, which he has annotated, a letter to the superintendent of public libraries, and a pair of tables projecting divergent scenarios for his surgery and convalescence. The text also has several footnotes, the fruit of his researches, some of which refer to fictitious Afrikaans translations of Homer and songs by Bach. Van Niekerk’s story is interspersed with reproductions of photorealist paintings, most of them of the inside and outside of Tygerberg Hospital, by Adriaan van Zyl.

Unaccustomed to drafting anything other than official minutes and memoranda, Wiid must reinvent himself in order to write. Having spent the entire night at his typewriter, towards dawn J.F. Wiid reaches the realisation that

[a]lles moet bemiddel word, die grote deur die kleine, deur deelname en deur spieëling en vertaling. In die stad deur die sentrum, in die liggaam deur die lewer. Maar ’n deurvloeiypyp was my model vir alles, ’n aanvoerleegte waarvan mens die binnekant so oop en glad moes hou as moontlik. Sodat dinge kan vlot, ongehinderd soos ’n boodskap in gewone mensetaal. Miskien was dit die fout? Die kuns lê blykbaar in belemmering.

([e]verything must be mediated, the great by the small, by participation and by mirroring and by translation. In the city by the centre, in the body by the liver. But a conduit was my model for everything, a conveying emptiness of which one must keep the interior as open and smooth as possible. So that things can go smoothly, unimpeded like a message in ordinary human language. Perhaps that was the mistake. Apparently the art lies in impediment.)

(van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 97; 2006b: 96-97)

The passage can be read as a comment on his entire enterprise – of writing, but also of living. “[D]ie fout” to which Wiid refers may be the source of his disease – “Hoe het ek siek geword?” (“How did I get sick?”) (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 97; 2006b: 96) – but it also denotes intellectual error, a failure of the imagination. If there has been a “fout” it has been in the tendency to dissociate thought from the inner workings of the body. If the body requires the liver as its great metabolic organ, then, equally, a city or town is in need of a mediating centre. As his reflections unfold, however, the idea that his “deurvloeipyp ... model” (“conduit ... model”) was mistaken becomes more intricate. Having imagined unhindered flow as being “soos ’n boodskap in gewone mensetaal” (“like a message in ordinary human language”), now he entertains a “kuns” (“art”) that might have headed off the error. Not only does language mediate, he realises, using a word that van Niekerk uses to describe her own work,² it also obstructs or impedes (“belemmer”). And it is by that obstruction or impediment that thought, or matters for thought, emerge. If, for all of his life, Wiid’s figures of speech or thought have admitted error, now they can help him to correct it. Words do this and they do that. Which is why, as Wiid observes in a postscript to his memorandum, “[m]ens moet skryf ten einde uit te vind wat geskryf moet word” (“[o]ne has to write in order to discover what has to be written”) (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 121; 2006b: 120). If writing produces the imperative to write, producing its own reason for being, it also produces the “wat” of what is to be written. In the same way, in van Niekerk’s book, it is the memorandum typed by Wiid that determines what, if we hear the Latin echo, *is to be remembered*. Writing produces both a record of things and an imperative that produces the things themselves.

Writing and Painting

These and other signs show us how *Memorandum* addresses itself to the formidable enigmata of mimesis and memory, going some way even to unravelling or clarifying them. Learned disquisitions on mimesis can miss the obvious. Erich Auerbach, for instance, tells us in the postscript to *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, that his book was inspired by Plato’s discussion of imitation in Book 10 of *The Republic*: “mimesis ranking third after truth”. That text, along with Dante’s claim “that in the *Commedia* he presented true reality,” he explains, was “the

2. Speaking to Etienne Britz about how her words relate to van Zyl’s paintings, van Niekerk explains that “it was to be an accompaniment that at the same time had to mediate and ‘impede’ [‘belemmer’] the ‘song’ of the paintings” (van Niekerk 2007: 21). All translations are my own unless indicated otherwise.

original starting point” for his study (Auerbach 1953: 554). When one consults the relevant passages in Plato, however, one finds that the implications of Plato’s meditations have not become fully operative in Auerbach. An important dimension is missing. In the process of banishing the mimetic poet from the city, Plato, as is well known, devotes a great deal of energy to identifying and defining imitation at a third remove. If God makes things, and the carpenter makes a couch after the idea of a couch, then the artist who paints pictures of the things made by God or by the carpenter produces third-order representations: “he is the imitator [*mimetes*] of the thing which those others produce ... the producer of the product three removes from nature you call the imitator” (Plato 1937: 597e). Indeed, when the painter paints the couch, by imitating its appearance to perception, he produces an imitation not of the truth but of a “phantasm” (Plato 1937: 598b). In passages in Book 3 of *The Republic*, which Auerbach does not invoke, but which anticipate the discussion of mimesis in Book 10, Plato censures Homer for failing to distinguish clearly between his own narration and the speech of his characters: “But when he delivers a speech as if he were someone else, shall we not say that he then assimilates thereby his own diction as far as possible to that of the person whom he announces as about to speak? In such case then, it appears, he and the other poets effect their narration through imitation [*dia mimeseos ten diegesin poiountai*]” (Plato 1937: 393c-d). By producing speech as it appears to the senses, mimesis of speech is thus as much of a phantasm as the painter’s mimesis of a couch. For Plato, the poet’s words and phrases are like unto the colours employed by the painter.³ When Auerbach addresses himself to the “representation of reality” in Western literature, he misses what is perhaps the most interesting aspect of mimesis addressed by Plato. It is clear that, for Plato writing about Homer in Book 3 of *The Republic*, the poet does not simply imitate reality, but imitates language. And, as Plato evidently takes for granted when, alluding to passages of narration through imitation, he criticises Homer for having his heroes lament in ways that nobody would pride themselves on doing (Plato 1937: 606c-d), when language imitates language it alters it.

To develop that insight was the great achievement of Mikhail Bakhtin, who, working at virtually the same time as Auerbach but in obscurity in the Soviet Union, revolutionised our understanding of narrative fiction. For Bakhtin, all language, or discourse, is implicated in what he terms “social heteroglossia”. Words address their objects in dialogue with other words: “On all its various routes toward the object ... the word encounters an alien word and cannot help encountering in it a living, tension-filled interaction

3. “[W]e shall say that the poet himself, knowing nothing but how to imitate, lays on with words and phrases the colours of the several arts in such fashion that others equally ignorant, who see things only through words, will deem his words most excellent, whether he speak in rhythm, metre and harmony about cobbling or generalship or anything whatever” (Plato 1937: 601a-b).

.... The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object” (Bakhtin 1981: 279). The novel, more than any other literary form, exploits this dialogic double-voicedness:

Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is *another’s speech in another’s language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author.

(Bakhtin 1981: 324)

In the process of representing speech (or writing), a novel therefore also represents the act of speaking (or writing). A simpler way of saying this is to observe that fictional narration is, a priori, from a point of view. There is no narration without a narrator or implied author – no Agamemnon without Homer (see Plato 1937: 393e). The unqualified assumption that literary discourse represents “reality” or constitutes “represented reality” (*dargestellte Wirklichkeit*) may explain why, despite its formidable range and the perspicacity of its readings of the great works of the West, Auerbach’s *Mimesis* can be a dull book. It circles around the real point about mimesis and language without ever getting to it – or getting back to it. It never returns to illuminate its own point of departure in Plato. Although he puts his finger on what eluded Auerbach, Bakhtin does not insist on what appears to have troubled Plato most – namely that acts of imitation, or at least those of the third order, cannot, strictly speaking, be said to represent things, or *simply* to represent things. In fact, by imitating what Plato classifies as perceptual “phantasmata”, they bring into existence things that do not exist, or never did exist. The act of imitation produces the thing. Or it produces the thing said (or written), along with the act of its being said (or written).

Introducing his long explication of a text by Mallarmé in “The Double Session”, Jacques Derrida analyses some more of Plato’s texts on mimesis. There he relates mimesis to memory, observing that in Plato’s *Philebus*, writing and painting, by their common structure, “both partake of *mneme* and *mimesis*, of *mneme* precisely by dint of participating in *mimesis*. Within the movement of *mimēsthai*, the relation of the mime to the mimed, of the reproducer to the reproduced, is always a relation to a *past present*”. When “Socrates wonders whether it would be out of the question to think that *grammata* and *zographemata* might have a relation to the future,” Derrida continues, “[t]he difficulty lies in conceiving that what is imitated could be still to come with respect to what imitates, that the image can precede the model, that the double can come before the simple” (Derrida 1981: 190). On the other hand, with the Mime in Mallarmé’s fragment, “Mimique”, Derrida

observes, “[t]here is no imitation. The Mime imitates nothing. And to begin with, he doesn’t imitate. There is nothing prior to the writing of his gestures. Nothing is prescribed for him The Mime mimes reference. He is not an imitator; he mimes imitation” (Derrida 1981: 194, 219).

Memorandum finds itself in the same neck of the woods. Ostensibly a faithful recorder, when he begins to write, J.F. Wiid is somewhat more like Mallarmé’s Mime. Even if he works diligently from memory, it is clear that his memorandum (or rather memoranda, for Memorandum 1, his list of words recalled from hospital and phonetically rendered, demonstrates this most dramatically) comes before the story that it tells, before the things that are to be remembered. Like the Mime, he too, as he must, mimes reference and imitation.

Marlene van Niekerk and Adriaan van Zyl (who died in 2006) tacitly explore the Platonic assumption that the poet – or writer – does as the painter does. Their collaboration, first proposed by van Zyl to van Niekerk in 2005,⁴ is reciprocal. As Lien van der Leij (2007) observes of the book, “[i]mage is attuned to text and vice versa. The one is not an illustration of the other; they comment on one another.”⁵ In *Memorandum*, painter and writer together produce a terrain for contemplation in which mimesis and memory, although they appear to depend on what has been – on what Derrida calls a “past present” – they actually bring things into being. They even open to what is “to come”.

As a photorealist or hyperrealist painter, van Zyl plays with mimesis. When the term “photorealism” was first coined in the United States in the late 1960s, it referred to the works of artists who painted paintings of photographs. Using the techniques of oil and watercolour painting to recreate the photographs in minute detail, the original photorealists – who

4. Van Niekerk quoted in Britz (2007: 12). It lies beyond the scope of my essay to consider van Niekerk’s more recent “Mass for the Painter”, her striking essay and poem written in response to a watercolour by Marlene Dumas entitled “The Painter” (van Niekerk 2008).

5. In the same interview with Britz from which I quoted above, van Niekerk relates:

Adriaan and I decided from the beginning that the text ought not to deliver a direct commentary on, or “explicate”, the paintings, and that the paintings should also not be illustrations for the text. Rather, the relationship between text and paintings was to be poetically suggestive ([B]ecause the paintings were finished first, and were arranged in a particular fixed narrative sequence by the painter, and the text was written just afterwards, I wanted to devise an accompaniment to the paintings, an accompaniment from the perspective of a character, namely Wiid. The accompaniment had, as far as I was concerned, to work in the same way as the piano accompaniment to a song by Schubert.)

(van Niekerk 2007: 21)

included Chuck Close, Richard Estes, Audrey Flack and Ralph Goings – simulated printing techniques used in those days for reproducing photographs in magazine illustrations and advertising, and, of course, for the reproduction of photographs of artworks in gallery catalogues and other printed matter (Battcock 1989: 9).

If, by virtue of being a photochemical process, a photograph is supposed to represent the real in unmediated fashion, by reproducing photographs in highly mediated fashion, the photorealist painter represents representation. Writers documenting the artistic movement have tended to restrict the applicability of the term “photorealist” to artists who paint from a projected image or use other “mechanical or semimechanical means to transfer the information to the canvas” from the photograph, such as the grid system (Meisel 1989: 14).⁶ Van Zyl worked from photographs, evidently using a grid to enlarge the images in oil on canvas. Guided by classical norms of composition, however, he produced painted images in which the colours markedly differed from those of the photographs.⁷ According to Claire Wolf Krantz (2005), “[van Zyl’s] works are highly realistic, yet they differ from the photographs he uses as source material by means of their evocative color relationships and carefully worked surfaces”. Yet for the play of photograph and painting to have its effect it may be all the same whether van Zyl or another artist in fact worked with a mechanical aid, or whether the painter dissimulates that fact by making it appear to the viewer that he or she did so. One could say that when the photorealist painter adjusts the image as he or she reproduces it, the technique is capable of bestowing on objects and human beings the “aura” that Walter Benjamin, writing in the late 1930s, took to have been lost by the work of art in an age of mechanical reproducibility. And if photorealism produces a texture or “aura”, it in effect thereby produces the objects for the viewer. It also produces the act of production. There is nothing like photorealism, which demands an unusual degree of technical skill in an artist, to demonstrate the artifice of painting.

Typically, the photorealist breaks up the image into its constitutive elements – none of which means anything in isolation from the image as a whole. What would the equivalent be for a writer? And what questions would an analogous experiment by a writer raise about mimesis and memory? *Memorandum* suggests some answers when it has J.F. Wiid assemble syllables of – to him at the time – meaningless sound, which he

6. Van Niekerk is aware of the techniques of hyperrealism, which make their appearance in her short story, “Kanonbaai”, where they are employed by the artist Dieter van Keulen: “After taking photos of him, Dieter projected the image with an epidiascope and traced it – all in order to eliminate the subjective element” (van Niekerk 1992: 19).

7. For their observations on Adriaan van Zyl’s technique, I thank Marlene van Niekerk and Lize van Robbroeck.

records phonetically, and then subsequently assembles or reassembles first as a list of words and their meanings (Memorandum 1), and then as an extended account of the conversation of X and Y as he overheard it (Memorandum 3), which, in turn, brings forth further stories. This parallels the way in which a photorealist painter uses pigment to render isolated units of colour, which, for the viewer of the completed work, together constitute themselves into a picture. The difference, in Wiid's case, is that, since he does not have access to the "original" whole of the conversation, what he remembers cannot strictly speaking be regarded as a "reconstruction" of it. Although Wiid's memory is close to photographic, he is not a tape recorder. By introducing the dimension of memorial reconstruction, with all of the tricks that it can play, Marlene van Niekerk complicates any idea that the photorealist simply *reproduces* a photographic original. By being what van Niekerk calls a "poetically suggestive" accompaniment to the paintings that, by being arranged in a sequence by Adriaan van Zyl, offered an initial narrative, her story also complicates the memorandum's own status, and *Memorandum's* status, as a work of mimesis.

It is significant that in a recent film about Chuck Close (Cajori 2007) the term "photorealism" is never used. Presumably this is because photorealism may be regarded as one manifestation of a larger concept – the idea that a representational image is brought into being by the combination of a vast number of tiny pieces, each of which is representationally inert except in relation to the other pieces with which it combines, according to specific rules. In Close's later work, which is not recognisably photorealist, it becomes clear that those rules relate to the mixing of pigments as well as the optical effects of placing certain colours adjacent to one another. As Close is shown saying in the film, a brick may be used to build a cathedral or a gas station; there is nothing about the brick that determines what building will be built. According to the composer Philip Glass, who is also interviewed in the film, this idea is also applicable to his music. In order to make the process of musical or artistic composition plain to the listener or viewer, the process has to be reduced; it cannot be presented in all of its fullness. In other words, in order to make artifice visible, the artist produces the illusion of unmediated access to the machinery of artifice. He or she makes believe that artifice is the outcome of the laws of acoustics, or of chemistry and optics.

Accordingly, when verbal artifice is made visible by van Niekerk, the glimpses the reader gets are partial. Although Wiid recalls insignificant syllables, which resolve themselves into words and phrases (except for one instance), these syllables do not constitute themselves into a text by themselves. For that, reconstruction is on occasion required if Wiid's memory fails to reproduce an entire passage. In any case, as Wiid tells us, syntactic arrangement – "voegwoorde" or "styl" or "diskoers" ("conjunctions" or "style" or "discourse") (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 7; 2006b: 7) – is necessary for the full realisation of the work. He wonders over and

over whether his official's Afrikaans is up to the task, and finds himself drawing on resources of which he was unaware, becoming a conduit for the figurative language to which he refers as "sulke taal" ("such language") (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 20-22; 2006b: 20). By drawing our attention to Wiid's struggles with language, van Niekerk distracts us just enough from her own artifice; it defies belief, for instance, that Wiid could have composed the entire memorandum (along with footnotes) in a single night. The reader must forget the frame. If Wiid's productions or reproductions provoke similar questions to those raised by photorealism and other related methods of painting,⁸ revealing artifice in a relatively limited way, the text of the "memorandum" in which they are embedded adverts for the most part to its own artifices only by implicitly inviting the reader to compare Wiid's capacities and activities as mimic and memoriser to what it must have taken van Niekerk to create the text in which he appears.

Examined more closely, the work bears signs of the minute care in which van Niekerk has produced J.F. Wiid. Those who have read *Agaat* with its encyclopedic assemblage of Afrikaans idiom and specialist vocabularies, or *Triomf* with its version of Johannesburg white-working-class Afrikaans, will not be surprised to find Wiid's thoughts struggling to find expression in the vocabulary and syntax of the town planner and civil servant. He contemplates, but does not adopt, the official's synthetic, hypotactic style (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 7-8; 2006b: 7-8). Yet, the words he does find tend to reveal his struggle in its minutiae. When, in the passage that I quoted at the beginning of my essay, Wiid grapples to find the right "model" for the life of the town and the body, it is the terms "deurvloeipyp" and "aanvoerleegte" on which his transformation turns. These terms are unusual less because they are standard Afrikaans technical terms (which they may not be) than because they are terms devised to suggest a technician cobbling together thing ("pyp" [pipe], "leegte" [void]) and function ("deurvloei" [flow through], "aanvoer" [convey]) in order to form metaphors and think abstractly. They are, if we apply the terms of Jean-Paul Sartre, what have the potential to convert Wiid from a "technician of practical knowledge" into an "intellectual" (Sartre 1974: 232); and, indeed, he is not a distant relative of *Nausea's* Roquentin, or his double, the melancholy "autodidact" who frequents the town's public library.

8. Reading *Memorandum* as alluding also to the techniques of mosaic would further help define how Wiid's verbal constructions parallel the way that a vast number of representationally inert coloured fragments can become a picture through careful composition (see van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 101 n31; 2006b: 100 n31). I owe the thought-provoking hint toward mosaic to Marthinus Beukes.

Luistervink

If it leads us to believe that it is simply about memory, the doubling by *Memorandum* of Wiid's memorandum is a ruse, albeit one perpetrated in plain sight. From the first few words of the book we find ourselves in the land of mimesis. J.F. Wiid resides in a block of flats called "Mimosa-woonstelle", and, as he reminds us from time to time, his given names Johannes Frederikus identify him with the janfrederik, or Cape robin, that calls from the hedgerow beneath his window, and has the capacity to mimic the calls of twenty other bird species (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 6, 10; 2006b: 6, 10). Much in *Memorandum* comes clear when the reader pursues figures of speech relating to birds.

It is essential that J.F. Wiid not understand, or not fully understand, the words that he overhears. They are, at first, strings of recorded sound. Their meaning, and what is to be remembered, comes afterwards. If one were to choose an example, one would find a great deal to consider in "elke keer as X tydens hierdie gesprek na dié Illich verwys het, het ék naamlik verstaan hy sê vir Y: *U lieg!*" (each time that X referred to this Illich during this conversation, I understood him to be saying to Y: *You allege!*) (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 60).⁹ The exclamation at the end of the sentence turns out to be the name of the thinker Ivan Illich. "*Illich verbatim!*" X interjects, as Y discourses about how, in the history of the West, "hospitality" has been displaced by "care" (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 60, 59; 2006b: 60, 58-59). Modern hospitals are, Y emphasises in a passage of conversation that Wiid reconstructs, the ultimate symbol of this displacement: "In hierdie institusies was daar min oor van die oorspronklike gasvryheid" ("In these institutions little remained of the original hospitality") (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 59; 2006b: 58-59). Wiid, who finds Illich's writings "[h]oogs aanvegbaar" ("[h]ighly contentious") and their use by X and Y a carping ingratitude by patients "bevoorreg genoeg om Eerstewêreldse mediese dienste in Afrika te kan bekostig" ("privileged enough to afford First World medical services in Africa") (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 60, 63; 2006b: 59, 62), is nevertheless sufficiently captivated by the theme of hospitality that he will change his mind and make it his own, eventually linking it to questions of city space and habitat, of humans as well as birds. But at this pass, the motif of hospitality has been introduced under the sign of the lie.

9. I depart here from Michiel Heyns's translation, which exchanges the lie ("lieg") that in Afrikaans is homophonic with the second syllable of the name of the philosopher "lich" for a different play on its first syllable: "[E]very time that X referred to this Illich, I'd understood him to be referring to some illness" (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006b: 59). Admittedly, in English "You allege" for "Illich" does not have the near-perfect phonic economy that "U lieg" for "Illich" has in Afrikaans. Nor, of course, is the impeachment implicit in "You allege" quite as strong as saying "U lieg!" (You lie!).

The echo of the cryptic clue will not go away: whatever Wiid has heard, and makes sense of through his “agtermekaarsit” (“reconstruct[ion]”) (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 59; 2006b: 58), will maintain an ambiguous relationship to truth. Mimesis of reported speech is unverifiable and double-voiced. “*U lieg!*” (*You lie!*) stands, ever ready to accuse and impeach, at the verbal artificer’s shoulder. It thus also stands over his *Wißtrieb*, his “begeerte om meer te wete te kom” (“desire to get to know more”), which, having kept him listening in on X and Y, drives him to reconstruct their conversation (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 63, 48; 2006b: 62, 47) and subsequently to produce his narrative.

But what is it, beyond his “begeerte om meer te wete te kom”, that makes him listen in? What draws and holds his interest? Like Milla in *Agaat*, J.F. Wiid repeatedly endeavours to fathom his own motives, as he finds himself changed from “’n noodgedwonge, selfs onwillige toehoorder” (“an involuntary, even unwilling listener”) into something else: “Toe hulle aanvanklik die algemene saal binnegekome het, het ek gevoel ek moet gasheer speel, in die intensiewesorgeenheid het ek ’n luistervink geword” (“When they had first arrived in the general ward, I had felt that I should play the host, in the Intensive Care Unit I had become an eavesdropper”) (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 20; 2006b: 20). His reflections reach a dead end, however, when he realises that he is not simply remembering what he overheard but fabricating or fabulating:

Wat ek, soos ek nou hier sit, naamlik onverklaarbaar vind, is hoe ek in godsnaam daartoe verlei kon word om ’n sogenaamde “memorandum” oor andermansleed te wil skryf. Dis hulle werk wat ek hier doen! Dat ek in die proses my geheue moet verkrag en die waarheid geweld moet aandoen ten einde van die een sin tot by die volgende te kom, maak my naer op my maag, en, glo my, daarvan het ek wel teen hierdie tyd die wêreld se ervaring.

(What I, as I’m sitting here, find inexplicable is how in God’s name I could have been enticed to write a so-called “memorandum” about another man’s sorrows. It’s théir work I’m doing here! It sickens me to the stomach that I have in the process to rape my own memory and violate the truth in order to get from one sentence to the next, and, believe me, of sickness to the stomach I have by this time a whole world of experience.)

(van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 63-64; 2006b: 63)

We learn that, even if Wiid’s motives are obscure, and inexplicable to him, eavesdropping is a habit he recalls developing as a child, when he would listen in on his parents (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 17, 88, 109-110; 2006b: 17, 87, 108-109). Thus does his memorandum of the conversation between X and Y lead him back to his childhood, particularly to those times when he was sick. “Die vreemde ding was dat as [X en Y] stilgebly het, ek oorstrom is deur beelde van my eie verlede” (“The strange thing was that when [X and Y] fell silent I was flooded with images of my own past”) (van

Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 88; 2006b: 87). Before him comes a scene of jealousy. X and Y bring to mind father and mother, but also father and his twin brother who died in infancy. J.F. is left out. His brother is the “vrolike vinkie” (“chatter-finch”), while he, the melancholic, remains the “luister-vink” (“eavesdropper”, but literally “listen-finch”) or, for his parents, “Slim Pollie, ons papegaaitjie in pajamas” (“Clever Polly, our little parrot in pyjamas”) (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 88, 31, cf. 68; 2006b: 87, 31, cf. 67). He can mimic but he never participates. As an adult, he keeps to himself – he is a “vrygesel” (“bachelor”) without a “metgesel” (“companion”) (see van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 86, 116; 2006b: 84, 115). He is, as van Niekerk’s exquisitely placed switchword has it, the “geheelonthouer” (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 86; 2006b: 84) – the one who remembers everything but partakes of nothing.¹⁰ He is, as another pun has it, the “stille bootsman” (“silent boatman”) (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 120; 2006b: 117), who imitates only in order to convey.¹¹ So runs his obituary, a parody he writes with a glass of Allesverloren beside his typewriter. He gives the lie to his record of total abstinence, and cup of total loss, as his port’s aroma, first evoked by the tea served to him in hospital, is the aide-memoire that draws him back to his childhood home.

Increasingly it is the friendship of X and Y that attracts Wiid’s attention. As the man in the middle, he knows from his boyhood experience that if he is perceived to be listening, the tone of the conversation he overhears will change. When, hours after having secretly overheard them talking about a “vleiloerie” or coucal’s nest that they discover in their garden, his mother and father tell him about it, Wiid recalls: “Ek het gewens hulle wou met my praat op die toon wat ek die oggend gehoor het” (“I wished they would talk to me in the tone I had overheard that morning”) (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 110; 2006b: 109). This is the irony of jealousy. Perfect jealousy can be sustained only on condition that the jealous one never be discovered. The pair – X and Y, father and mother, father and brother – must remain unmolested in their love or friendship. The secret onlooker or eavesdropper must be discreet. However much he desires it, he or she must not become a third, or else jealousy turns into rivalry.¹² As Wiid realises, thinking about

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10. Heyns correctly translates “geheelonthouer” as “teetotaller” (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006b: 84); literally the one who abstains completely. In a cryptic translation, however, “geheelonthouer”, with “onthou” being heard as “remember”, could also be “total recaller”.
 11. Heyns’s translation, inevitably, drops the element of mimicry that lies in the “boots” of “bootsman”, which can be heard as cognate with the verb “naboots” (imitate, simulate, mimic).
 12. The potential for the jealous eavesdropper to become a rival is also manifest in N.P. van Wyk Louw’s fragment from the 1940s, “In die bus afgeluister” (van Wyk Louw 2006), which, like *Memorandum*, is an attempt by a writer

the conversation of X and Y, “[e]k sou die hele ding bederf het as ek tóé ingemeng het” (“I would have spoiled the whole thing if I’d intervened then”) (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 77; 2006b: 76). As if sensing this possibility, the hospital authorities decline, as a matter of policy, to provide Wiid with X and Y’s names. Accordingly, having listened and observed, he reconstructs in his imagination the story of X and Y, who, he learns, met in the waiting room – here the last painting by van Zyl in the book, of a stark hospital waiting room devoid of human presence – underlines the importance of this initiatory moment (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 103, 127; 2006b: 102, 127). But Wiid is also telling his own story, the story of his friendship with J.S. Buytendagh – the one whose name, literally, could be heard as placing him apart from memory or thought, there yet out of mind.

Wiid’s placement of the pages on the *amicus moriendi* (deciphered from “army-kis-mors-iets”), after he recalls Buytendagh showing him a picture of a mosaic of Dionysus, “die jong god poedelnaak, ondersteun deur ’n ewe kaal knaap, dronk teen ’n skuinste” (“the young god stark naked, supported by an equally naked lad, drunk against a slope”) (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 102ff, 101; 2006b: 102ff, 101), suggests that when he is thinking about X and Y he is also thinking about the younger librarian and himself. After initially being an object of Wiid’s disapprobation (see Addendum 3), it is Buytendagh – eventually Joop to him – who feeds and stimulates Wiid’s *Wißtrieb*, the drive to knowledge that impels him to reconstruct X and Y’s conversation and to undertake further research into the subjects that they broached. When he mentions Joop’s gesture of intimacy, a hand placed on his shoulder (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 91; 2006b: 90), he is telling us what, presumably, he does not tell Joop: that he loves him, and what remains of his life will, he imagines, include him. In the library he succeeds in finding the love that in *Nausea* Sartre’s autodidact so disastrously sought in his. And, indeed, the tables setting out what might happen after his surgery assume that Joop will be there – on the telephone, or with him at his flat feeding and learning perfectly to imitate the janfrederik: “J.F.W. & gevleuelde naamgenoot & JSB” (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 129, 131; 2006b: 129, 131). If they might be two birds building a nest (see van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 104-105; 2006b: 104), their imagined pairing also recovers the companionship with his twin brother in death that he would fantasise about when he was a boy sick in bed: “... saam met my tweeling onder sy granietblad lê. Johannes Frederikus en Gerhardus Stephanus. Papegaai en Vinkie” (“... with my twin under the granite cover. Johannes Frederikus and Gerhardus Stephanus. Parrot and Finch”) (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 88; 2006b: 87). Under the sign of research, the

to come to terms with life in a changing city. For a discussion of van Wyk Louw’s fragment, see Sanders 2006.

perfect pair is remade or made, and, as the “luistervink” Janfrederik, fittingly, becomes his brother’s double. If he is unable to tell Buytendagh about X and Y, he certainly will say nothing about how the two of them will have reconstituted the fraternal and hence parental pair. Everything that he writes is filtered through this unspoken family drama, which like the “sprokie, eenmaal deur ’n kind gehoor, sal aanhou groei, tot dit vol agter die kortrib lê soos ’n ekstra lewer, waar dit voortaan alles wat gelees word, sal filtreer” (“fairy tale, once heard by a child, will continue to grow, until it lies nestled behind the short rib like an extra liver, where thenceforth it will filter everything that’s read” (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 97; 2006b: 96). This filter is also the obstruction (“belemmering”) where art lies. Wiid’s motivating “begeerte” is to preserve the pair intact. He thus never addresses X or Y, and, although he feels he is deceiving Buytendagh, he never adverts to their presence behind the inquiries with which the librarian assists him. By displaying how his mimetic activity involves the painstaking assembly and composition of fragments of sound and word before meaningful narrative can emerge, Wiid’s memorandum strongly evokes the technique and resonates with conceptual implications of the photorealist paintings that punctuate it. The implications are far-reaching, in that it is on the priority of mimesis that the Platonic endeavour to free diegesis from mimesis will inevitably founder. If Wiid’s memorandum has produced things to be remembered rather than simply recording them, it has, along with those memoranda, also generated a silence or secret. As in *Agaat*, that silence or secret is not, strictly speaking, what the narrative *represents*. Rather it is what *authors* it.

Stadsverfraaiing

The final movement of J.F. Wiid’s memorandum, which follows the postscript, is a “Passacaglia (vir JSB)” (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 124; 2006b: 123). The identification, made more than once, of the librarian with the great composer is deliberate. Joop had given Wiid a compact disc with a performance of Bach’s organ fugues – which had begun to alter his sense of how he inhabits space; he walks up and down the passageway in his flat, listening to it over and over (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 8; 2006b: 8).

In addition to exploring memory and mimesis, *Memorandum* meditates on the transformation of urban space. When Wiid attempts to fathom how he became sick he asks: “Is dit my huis se skuld? My stad?” (“Is my house to blame? My city?”) (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 97; 2006b: 96). A re-enchantment of the city has been necessary (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 124; 2006b: 124) – and those who know Parow are likely to nod their

heads.¹³ There is also a political dimension, as Wiid undertakes reparation of his disenchantment with the metamorphoses of urban space that have followed the end of apartheid:

My laaste hoofpyn voordat ek siek geword het, was die middestads-verloedering. Woekerende informele handel op sypaadjies in die sentrale besigheidsdistrik, wat netjiese straathoeke in markplekke verander het Mens kon selfs te voet later nie daar met 'n doelgerigte pas beweeg nie.

(My last headache before I got ill was the decline of the inner city. Rampant informal trading on the pavements in the central business district, transforming neat street corners into marketplaces Even on foot one could later not move there with purposeful tread.)

(van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 76; 2006b: 74)

As an effort of the imagination to be at home in a new order that, he believes, has made people like him redundant, his memorandum and passacaglia are rivalled in melancholy in South African fiction perhaps only by Aubrey Tearle's "Proofreader's Derby" in Ivan Vladislavic's *The Restless Supermarket* (2001). And the emphasis of his passacaglia – which literally means a walk in the street – on re-enchantment through walking parallels Vladislavic's *Portrait with Keys* (2006). Along with the films and drawings of William Kentridge, the work of these writers consoles the imagination striving to be at home in a place that, all of a sudden, is no longer the familiar place it once was.

It is here that one finds evidence that one of the most learned passages of conversation between X and Y has begun to influence Wiid's sense of the deeper relationship between thought and urban space. If it is perhaps the fault of his city that he is sick, or has erred in thought, X and Y suggest to him a remedy, in which he, the "stadsverfraaier" ("beautifier") and "reiniger" ("cleanser"), will, at least in his heart, undo all that he has had a role in building:

My broers, as ek dit oor kon doen Die heilige rondte sal ek ambuleer, ek, stadsverfraaier van weleer, en alles wat ongasvry lyk en gedisoriënteer, ongedaan maak in my hart, alles weer hertower met betekenis, alles kontempler en van voor af saamdink met die sterre ... alles sal ek heil.

13. "The entire suburban conglomeration and the cheerless architecture that one encounters [in Parow], along with the alienating colossus of the hospital", van Niekerk tells Britz, who calls Tygerberg "a kind of culmination of the Parow-esque", "was a good starting point for the arguments concerning the building of cities and care for the sick that are developed in *Memorandum*" (van Niekerk 2007: 23-24).

MIMESIS, MEMORY, MEMORANDUM

(Brethren mine, were it given me to do it all again The sacred round I shall ambulate, erstwhile beautifier, and in my heart unmake what seems inhospitable and out of place. I'll re-enchant it all with meaning, contemplate it, and think it with the stars from scratch ... all of it shall I sanctify.)

(van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 124-25; 2006b: 125; translation modified)

With the aid of Joseph Rykwert's *The Idea of a Town*, he, like X and Y, has understood the links between modern words for thought – such as “contemplate” and “consider” – and the Etruscan and Roman consecration of towns (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 33 n11; 2006b: 32 n11). Overheard, deciphered, set in syntax, and set to work, these words transform his vocation, and his writing thereby becomes something like a “holy memorandum” (van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 117 n39; 2006b: 117 n39).

A corresponding re-enchantment might take place, he appears to imagine, if the brotherly love that develops between him and Joop as his *amicus moriendi*, as mimesis takes him back to repair that love's conditions of possibility in childhood, is spread abroad. If the hospital represents an aberration in the history of hospitality and friendship, then he will proclaim:

Vreemdeling, wees welkom in hierdie plek! Die dood is hier herstel! En as ek dalk 'n buitebergie sien, voor die laaste rondgang, wat net soos ek behoefte het aan troos, sal ek sy vriend en hospies wees en hom saamvat na Mimosa, na my nes reeds vir hom voorberei as erfenis, en tot die einde by hom bly.

(Stranger, be welcome to this place! Death has here been restored! And if I should by chance see a lonely tramp, before the last circuit, who like me has need of comfort, I shall be his friend and hospice and take him to Mimosa, to my nest already prepared for him as bequest, and to the end with him abide.)

(van Niekerk & van Zyl 2006a: 125; 2006b: 124)

With this passacaglia, van Niekerk turns the Coetzee of *Age of Iron* around, or around again: the householder is the one who is host to the one living on the out and out. Echoing the name of “Buytendagh”, and adding the cryptic “berg” (“store”), “buitebergie” (“tramp”) helps to make it uncertain who is host, and who the guest. If in *Age of Iron*, the derelict Vercueil is imagined as the one to remain with a dying Elizabeth Curren, then in *Memorandum* it is the dying one himself who, as friend to the dying as well as the friend who is dying, is *amicus moriendi*, and, restoring and repairing the city and death itself, serves the other's greater need.

To have taken on the collaboration with the painter that the writer has in *Memorandum* is to have taken on the challenge of discovering what if anything painter and writer have in common in the basic nature of their art. Writer follows painter, and the common element turns out to be mimesis – but mimesis not in the sense of the imitation of something that already exists, or of a record of past events retained by memory. Van Niekerk

profoundly comprehends the implications of photorealism and related methods of painting for a theory of mimesis. The thing represented comes after, and not before, the representation. It is made up of fragments of colour or sound or the written word. A language is learned, and meaning comes later. So does memory, after one writes the memorandum. The remarkable thing is that, having set out to write one story – as Wiid did when he reconstructed the conversation between X and Y but delved into his own isolation and its roots in early life – one may write another story and then another. The same might apply to the space one inhabits. Plato may have banished the mimetic poet from his *polis*. But seeing one's city, or writing about it, in particular ways, or indeed infusing it with music, has perhaps the capacity to alter it for the better for those who live in it, no matter the error that may have been committed when one's house or city was first designed and built.

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