Ars moriendi: The Experience of Van Niekerk and Van Zyl's *Memorandum*

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This article is a response to the challenges of reading Marlene van Niekerk and Adriaan van Zyl's extraordinary work Memorandum *(2006) in its Afrikaans original and in Michiel Heyns's translation. Building on a theory of the literary work as an event realised in the reader's experience rather than an object or the bearer of a message, it asks what it would mean to do justice to the work's combination of verbal and visual texts, its unusual formal structure, and its powerful ethical charge. Various reading strategies are considered – treating the work as a puzzle, following the four narrative strands, relating the paintings to the verbal text – and the reader's freedom to choose, and capacity to follow several threads at once, are emphasised. Each reading, it is argued, produces a new experience and thus a new work.*

1. Responding to *Memorandum*

What kind of reading is invited by Marlene van Niekerk and Adriaan van Zyl's *Memorandum: 'n Verhaal met skilderye*, translated into English by Michiel Heyns as *Memorandum: A Story with Paintings* (Van Niekerk & Van Zyl, 2006a, 2006b)? I mean this less as an issue of description – how actual readers have gone about meeting the novel's challenges, a question that might be answered by a survey – than as an issue of readerly responsibility: what would it mean to do full justice to this extraordinary work? I have been interested for some time in the question of the reader's experience of literary works, building on the tradition of phenomenology, the "reader response theory" of the 1960s and 1970s and, drawing on the philosophical thought of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, the related question of responsibility to the work as other.[1] I have argued that the literary work has its being not as an object but as an *event* and that reading a work as literature (rather than as a historical document, say, or a biographical revelation, or a moral treatise) involves approaching it with a combination of the application of acquired skills and an openness to being surprised and changed. *Memorandum*, therefore, with its highly original use of textual and visual materials, its unusual formal structure, and its powerful ethical charge, offers itself as a rich example for analysis. I have also argued that a responsible response to a work of literature involves doing justice to its singularity, inventiveness, and alterity, as experienced

in the event of reading. The article that follows is an attempt to do this, in a response to Van Niekerk and Van Zyl's remarkable work.

The book, beautifully produced by Human & Rousseau in both the original and the translated versions, presents challenges to the reader from the very start. It opens with a triptych of paintings by Van Zyl and continues with "Memorandum 3", identified at its head, as in an official document, as being by one J.F. Wiid, the "Director of Parks & Playgrounds, Sanitation and Maintenance (1988-2004)",[2] living at 17 Mimosa Flats in Parow (a somewhat cheerless Cape Town suburb[3]). Even the exact time is noted: "11 April 2006 19:20" (2006 being the year of publication of both the original and the translation). These meticulous details are followed by a heading in bold: "**To whom it may concern**" (6). This bureaucratic formalism at the outset of the work puts the reader on notice that generic expectations associated with the novel are not going to be fulfilled, as does the stilted, self-deprecatory tone with which Wiid begins his account, far from the vitality and vividness we might expect from a first-person narrator telling his story to an imagined audience.[4]

We quickly learn that the words we are reading are being written – within Van Niekerk's fiction – on the eve of Wiid's admission to Tygerberg Hospital (situated on the edge of Parow, and described by Van Niekerk as a "sort of culmination of the Parow-esque" [Britz, 2007: 23]) for a last attempt to save his life following the failure of both chemotherapy and radiotherapy to manage the cancer that has spread from his liver to his colon. Wiid, in his Parow flat with his suitcase packed, has decided to recount the events of his previous stay at Tygerberg a little over six months earlier, a single night with repercussions that have had a huge effect on his life and outlook. We also learn that Memoranda 1 and 2, which we can consult as "Addenda" at the back of the book, are in tabular rather than discursive form and that the account he is now writing is intended as an expansive explanation of these terse texts should the following day's intervention prove fatal – an outcome that is not unlikely. Memorandum 1 is a list of unusual words, both common and proper nouns, notated phonetically and then researched since the last hospital visit when he heard them spoken; Memorandum 2 consists of two tables setting out the conceivable futures that await Wiid the following day and beyond, the first assuming the operation will be the planned resectioning of the colon and the second that it will involve a colostomy – both of these futures holding out the hope of recovery as well as the possibility of death. The black humour that emerges in a few places in Memorandum 2 is all the more painfully funny in the context of the dry lists of facts entered under the headings "Time", "Place", "Action", "Agent", "Outcome positive" and "Outcome negative". In Table A, for example, the administering of anaesthetic produces as a positive outcome "J.F.W. passive

operational unit" whereas the negative outcome is given as "Hey, old Wiid. They beckon from the grave!" (Table A, 08:10). And there is the joking exclamation "Humbaba!" in the cell describing the "lower stomach incision" (Table A, 08:35) – Wiid's triumphant exploitation of his recently acquired knowledge of the Mesopotamian god of the entrails. The last item in the book (other than a list of Van Zyl's paintings) is a letter from Wiid to the Superintendent of Public Libraries in the Western Cape dated two months after the earlier hospital visit.

The main body of the text – Memorandum 3 – consists of Wiid's account, written between 20:00 on 11 April and 07:15 the following morning, of his experiences on that October night in 2005.[5] It is presented as a memorial reconstruction, the only notes taken at the time (that is, on the following morning) being the aforementioned list of words.[6] Memorandum 3 also includes details of the research undertaken later in an attempt to make sense of the events of that night. Scholarly notes and references are added in footnotes, further complicating the reading process.[7] The memorandum ends with a short lyrical conclusion headed "Passacaglia (for JSB)". The experiences recounted in this memorandum – the Latin meaning of the term, "[a thing] to be remembered", is not far away – are largely a report on the conversation of the two equally bedridden patients between whom Wiid found himself situated on that night, men whom he refers to as X and Y and whose erudite vocabulary and wide-ranging knowledge have produced the list of words. X is a passionate birdwatcher whose feet are amputated and Y is a cynic, enthralled by cities and buildings, who has lost his eyes. Wiid calls them a "fanatical poet without feet, who chattered about birds and birds' nests" and a "blind mocker, who delivered one speech after another on antique building methods, the foundations of cities and on hospitals" (23). Van Zyl's paintings are interspersed throughout Wiid's text, which makes no specific reference to them.[8]

2. An ergodic text

Most works of fiction demand a linear reading from title to last word and, although the codex form of the modern book allows for easier checking backwards and forwards than the papyrus roll it supplanted and the e-book adds to this facility the capacity for searching by means of words or phrases, the basic assumption that governs the processing of fictional prose is that the text unfolds continuously from start to finish. However, from early in the novel's history there have been complications of this straightforward reading procedure, most obviously with the introduction of illustrations. Readers of European novels from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century (which were often first published in serial form) expected them to be illustrated, thus breaking the

continuous flow by inviting the reader to divert attention from text to image. If, as was often the case, the illustrations were on separate pages, this movement from one set of signs to another occurred at a moment determined not by the author or illustrator but by the reader. Although in the twentieth century the illustrated novel became associated with children's and young adult literature, various types of graphic supplement to novel texts continued to appear, such as W.G. Sebald's frequent use of photographs in *Austerlitz* (2001) and other works, Jennifer Egan's PowerPoint chapter in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and, in a different mode, the collaboration between the novelist Ivan Vladislavić and the photographer David Goldblatt in *TJ/Double Negative* (2010). And, of course, in the graphic novel, the visual dimension often plays a more important role in the reader's experience than the verbal.

Another type of separate formal element is the footnote or endnote, ranging across Issy's contributions to the "Nightlessons" chapter of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Samuel Beckett's devastating use of the footnote in *Watt* (1953), Flann O'Brien's mock scholarly apparatus in *The Third Policeman* (1967), David Foster Wallace's exploitation of the endnote in *Infinite Jest* (1996), and Mike McCormack's use of serial footnotes in *Notes from a Coma* (2005). B.S. Johnson uses side notes as running commentary in one section of *Albert Angelo* and a further development of visually simultaneous narrative threads occurs in J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), in which most pages are divided horizontally into three sections. An intriguing recent example of the use of a scholarly apparatus in a novel is Kirsty Gunn's *Caroline's Bikini* (2018), with its many footnotes referring the reader to sections at the back of the book on such topics as narrative technique, the personal history of the (fictional) writer of the novel, and literary background and context. Perhaps the fullest exploitation of the text-plus-notes format is Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), which offers a number of different reading experiences, depending on what route is chosen between the poem and its lengthy apparatus. The prize for the most extravagant play with visual layout, however, should probably go to Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), with its dizzying array of typefaces and spatial arrangements, footnotes and footnotes to footnotes, index, diagrams and photographs. And when we leave the category of the printed book for electronic media, we find a new universe of multiple plots, readerly choice and visual effects.

If a technical term is required to categorise all these modes of nonlinear reading, we may turn to Espen J. Aarseth (1997: 2), who, in a discussion of cybertexts, coined the term "ergodic literature" for texts, material or electronic, in which "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text". By contrast, traditional texts on paper or electronic texts which mimic paper, and which therefore require only "eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary

turning of pages", are "non-ergodic" (Aarseth, 1997: 1). In other words, in ergodic texts the reader is given a certain degree of freedom in negotiating the work, making explicit what is already implicit in all literary reading: that each reading is a unique experience. *Memorandum* offers no guidance on how to read it – or perhaps it offers too many suggestions.[9] Do we proceed page by page as in a conventional novel, enjoying the paintings when we reach them, taking in the footnotes when appropriate and only reading the list of words, the table, the letter to the Superintendent of Libraries, and the titles of the paintings when we reach the end? Or do we start with Memoranda 1 and 2, and then proceed to the explanatory Memorandum 3? Do we pass over the footnotes on a first reading, and only come back to them later? And how do we read the paintings themselves, both intimately connected to the text and yet ignored by it?[10]

3. Reading as puzzle-solving

One way of reading this book is to treat it like a crossword puzzle, following Wiid's own investigation of the enigmatic utterances he heard from X and Y, using the footnotes and the explanations of difficult words and phrases in Memorandum 1 to develop an account of the contrasting views of buildings and living spaces held by the two interlocutors.[11] If we choose to read the snatches of hermetic knowledge provided in the wordlist of Memorandum 1 in order, we find ourselves travelling erratically across the known universe; there is no apparent logic to the sequence, but the items are often entertaining and sometimes moving.[12] In each case, Wiid has written down a purely phonetic representation of what he heard, and only in consultation with the librarian in the Parow Public Library has he been able to track down the actual word. Thus, he notes down Y's reference to "*wiele-rooi en bog*" (to give the Afrikaans original), later to identify the phrase as "Villeroy & Boch", the glass and ceramics manufacturer.[13] And he adds, "Vaguely I remember a little glass bowl of my mother's, perhaps it's still in my chest, must have a look" (Van Niekerk, 2007: 135).[14] Wiid risks a lewd joke in investigating what he has written down as "*aars moer-antie*": "Elizabeth Taylor", he writes, before explicating it as, not quite correctly, "*artis bene moriendi*" (2007: 134).[15] (Heyns does well to find a translation with its own suggestion of indecency: "*arse moo-randy*".) The investigative reader is even given one item to track: Wiid has heard "boo-requi-poo" (2007: 96) but has been unable to work out what the word was, even with the librarian's help. "Something to do with knotting of strings or embroidery" is all he can find (2007: 136). Further research suggests that Y's phrase was "boere-quipu" – embroidery as the Afrikaners' equivalent of the knotted cords used by the Incas to record numbers.[16]

We are alerted early on to two key texts in the contrast between the outlooks of X and Y, the books by the two bedsides, namely Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* (1957) and Joseph Rykwert's *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World* (1964), the former appealing to X's poetic appreciation of natural spaces (birds' nests in particular), the latter to Y's interest in the built environment. Wiid himself, of course, as Director of Parks & Playgrounds, Sanitation and Maintenance ("Direkteur Stadsverfraaiing, -reiniging en -instandhouding" in the original), is invested in these questions from a practical point of view. Numerous further references both to published works and to historical, literary, archaeological and ethnographic details augment the twin approaches to space and habitation. Although most of the references are authentic, Van Niekerk is not above the invention of convincing-sounding texts complete with spurious editors and publishers: specifically, Afrikaans translations of Homer's *Odyssey* (2006b: 55, note 16) and Bach's chorales (2006b: 69, note 19). In both cases, she takes the opportunity to satirise current Afrikaner concerns about the growing power of "the Afro-National State" and "Afro-centrists".

This scholarly approach, though it has its rewards, taps into only a small part of the book's offerings. There is no escaping from the feeling that all this expert knowledge is being presented with a smile and that the tracking down of obscure references does not, in the end, count for much against the realities of love and death that run through the novel. These realities emerge from the story of Wiid's discovery of new meanings and values in his life – not from the accumulation of learning, that is, but from narrative sequences.

4. Reading for narrative (1)

In opting to concentrate on narrative, however, the reader faces a challenge, as there are four interwoven stories to follow. Three of these are textual and all three reveal the manner in which Wiid's eyes have been opened to the limitations of his existence and the richness and beauty to which he has been blind.[17]

We may consider first the story of the night of 5 October 2005 in the Tygerberg Hospital Intensive Care Unit, from 17:00 when X and Y are brought in after surgery to the utterances of what are presumably their last words at some point during the night. (When Wiid wakes up in the morning, both beds are empty.) For all his bafflement at their abstruse and arcane utterances, Wiid is profoundly affected by the exchanges between his two roommates, as their physical conditions deteriorate. To start with, he is merely puzzled, and racks his brain to make sense of their words. They are constantly at loggerheads

with one another over issues of habitation, nature, the built environment and modes of perceiving and understanding the world. Furthermore, their style of utterance – at least as remembered by Wiid – is anything but colloquial. For example:

> *Without thinking of nests I cannot dream of habitation*, X mumbled, *space is in a tree, amongst reeds, in the grass, like honey in a comb. That is the thing above all with which poets and dreamers refresh themselves. Thoughts can meander at will.*
>
> Thereupon Mr Y chanted with shuddering breath: *This ward, my friend, is intensely unsweet and unrefreshing, it's time for criticism, not for bucolic nostalgia, and in any case, I can sharpen up your poetic intuition with pure mathematics.* (38)

Wiid wonders if they have been "booked into the wrong institution. And whether there was such a thing as a shared insanity" (2006b: 33).[18] Later he finds himself trying to make up his own sentences with the scattered words he hears (2006b: 61). Soon he is admitting, angrily, that they are "saddling an accidental listener for the rest of his life with impossible questions and unnecessary doubts" – laying a "cuckoo's egg" in his nest for which he has to take responsibility (2006b: 63). A little later he hears them singing the Bach chorale "O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden" and wishes he could sing along and, later, when a recording is lent to him, he is not able to listen to it for too long, "so terribly sad it made [him] and so much it made [him] miss X and Y, if miss is the right word" (2006b: 69). He finds that his passive listening is allowing him to absorb knowledge: at one point, he describes his companions as

> [a] pair of binoculars through which I could see that the universe is a peacock constantly displaying, that one glowing point on those wondrous plumes is a winking fractal of our earth, with inside it the crystals, the clouds, the drops, the snowflakes and the pinecone, the stipple on the guineafowl and the quills of the porcupine repeating the big pattern on a smaller scale all the way to the minuscule. (2006b: 94-96)

Wiid's positive response to the exchanges is not consistent – at one point he thinks, "What a lot of gush! Two old spoonbills!" (2006b: 110) – but his reaction to what might be the final moments of their lives is extremely moving:

> Wake up, I prayed, wake up and feed me, speak your nourishing sentences to each other so I can rejoice in you.
>
> And in the dark it truly came again, a soft fluttering in which I could distinguish single words. *Feather*, said one. *Stone*, said the other. *Breast*, the one. *Hand*, the other. (2006b: 115)

These final, barely heard words are followed by a long exchange that is not presented as being actually spoken at this moment but as Wiid's own gathering up "in a last cascade" the differing views on habitation held by X and Y, moving towards a concluding unity as they imagine living together in a reed hut like the Dioscuri.[19] We can take this final dialogue as Wiid's summing up of the understanding he reached that night, a dream of a "home beyond the Styx" (2006b: 117), as he recalls X putting it, that is both house and nest.

5. Reading for narrative (2)

A second narrative strand is the story of Wiid and Joop Buytendagh, the chief librarian of the Parow Public Library. It is a love story of sorts,[20] which begins when Wiid visits the library in December 2005 to carry out some research into the words he has written down after the night of X and Y's conversation. His initial response on encountering Buytendagh is spelt out in the letter that forms Addendum 3 (2006b: 138-140), in which he complains to the Superintendent about the loud Italian opera being played, the "dirty teacups and half-eaten sandwiches on the issue desk", the cartoons in the men's toilet, the skewed, gaudy hangings and above all the unprepossessing figure of the librarian himself. Buytendagh is "barefoot, clad in a faded T-shirt and low-slung jeans, with a ragged beard, unwashed hair in a ponytail, three shark's teeth on a thong around his neck, a match between his teeth, a collection of silver rings around his ankles, and not overly fresh as regards personal hygiene" (2006b: 139). A figure more distant from the correct, tidy civil servant could hardly be imagined and, yet, Wiid has to admit, he is "very well informed on his subject" and is able immediately to lay his hands on the desired facts (2006b: 140). (The letter was apparently not sent [2006b: 25].)

The respect that glimmers through the irritation in this letter grows as Wiid keeps returning to the library. Much of the information provided in the book is the product of Buytendagh's research, but the librarian's assistance goes well beyond providing information; his hearty, generous, loud personality – diametrically opposed to Wiid's – works on the shy visitor to continue the unsettling of the latter's fixed ideas and habits that had begun during the night spent between X and Y. We learn early on that he has lent Wiid a CD – Bach's *Passacaglia in C Minor* – and that this was not the first time he has provided something from his personal collection (2006b: 8). One important function the librarian performs in Wiid's progress is introducing music into his life: there is always music playing in the library (once, memorably for Wiid, Keith Jarrett's Cologne concert (2006b: 98),[21] and when Buytendagh lends Wiid a CD of Schubert lieder so he can recapture

the experience of Y's singing, the latter learns "Du bist die Ruh" and, touchingly, sings it while doing the dishes (2006b: 105). Although a teetotaller, Wiid starts drinking one of the bottles of sweet wine Buytendagh has given him while writing his memorandum, which no doubt has much to do with the increasing boldness and lyricism of his text.

A significant stage in the relationship is reached when Wiid suffers a three-day slump after receiving the news that he might have to live with a colostomy bag. He is brought out of it by a phone call from Buytendagh offering new information and the opportunity to sample some raisins from Upington. (Wiid seems unaware that this gesture is almost certainly a sign of Buytendagh's concern during the three-day absence.) The raisins are "[s]o sweet and so crackling" that Wiid is "undone emotionally" and has to retire to the toilet to recover himself (2006b: 49).[22]

After a number of visits to the library, Wiid realises that the librarian revels in the research he is doing for him – in this case, finding poems in Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* that deal with wardrobes and cupboards (2006b: 50).[23] When Buytendagh suggests that he call him "Joop", he is filled with a "peculiar feeling of belonging" (2006b: 52).[24] Another moment of intimacy occurs when Buytendagh rests his hand on Wiid's shoulder on hearing the latter talk of dying; Wiid regards this as "[e]xtremely forward", but has to go home "because after that [he] could not concentrate any more" (2006b: 90). Buytendagh's solicitude becomes evident again when he offers Wiid "Rooibos without milk", because of Wiid's comment the day before that the tannin in the Five Roses – strong black tea – the librarian had been providing was bad for him (2006b: 103). Writing his memorandum, he finds he has no desire to sleep, and at 03:40 the rather extraordinary thought occurs to him: "Perhaps I should phone Joop". However, this is quickly qualified: "Not that I've ever had the thought of phoning anybody. Least of all quarter to four in the morning" (2006b: 91).

On a later visit, Wiid relates a dream to Buytendagh – a dream X had told Y – as if it were his own. The feelings bubbling under the surface almost emerge when Buytendagh declares that it sounds like a dream of yearning, explaining to an *almost* comprehending Wiid that the yearning in question was that encapsulated in the Old Dutch fragment, "hebban olla vogala nestas …" – "All birds have started building nests except you and me, why are we waiting?" (2006b: 104). Buytendagh, for the first time, shows some embarrassment at his own veiled confession. The culmination of the growing intimacy may not seem much, but for a man like Wiid it is a great deal: he writes a three-page Postscript in which he visualises going to the library the following day to pick up the Rykwerk book, accepting, as usual, Buytendagh's invitation to have tea (Rooibos for him) in the

little kitchen, and then, boldly, imagines inviting Buytendagh over one evening for a meal. The whole passage is shot through with Wiid's cautious and tentative – but also thrilling – admission to himself of what, in the context, we can only call love. Here, for instance, he moves from thoughts of the meal he would provide to his need for support after the efforts of the night, during which the writing of his memorandum has been more excruciating than an incision in the abdomen by the surgeon Snyman:

> Perhaps a green-fig preserve for his dessert. A man with a sweet tooth. He will certainly get more from my memorandum than the little Snyman chap. Would be able to provide better aftercare after tonight's operation – worse than a laparotomy! On a Remington! (2006b: 122)

Wiid's dream of affectionate closeness is all the more moving for its minimal nature.

6. Reading for narrative (3)

The conclusion of this narrative is also the conclusion of the third narrative, upon which the first two are woven: the story of the night of writing, as Wiid recounts on paper, by means of his Remington typewriter, the experiences of the earlier night and the subsequent research, as well as memories of his past triggered by those experiences, all the while facing the possibility that he will not live beyond the next day. Wiid starts by describing his preparations, including the composition of the two tables of Memorandum 2 and the annotation of the word list of Memorandum 1, then moves on to the main business: the composition of Memorandum 3. His stated intention is to bring "music" into the description of the night of 5 October 2005, unlike the dry earlier memoranda: he would like to create "a piece of music, of which beginning and ending would open and close like the gates of paradise" (2006b: 9). (In a gesture we soon learn is typical, Wiid adds, "Not that I have ever beheld such gates in my dreams or think that heaven consists of cascades of organ music".) To help him in this endeavour – and, as he admits, to put off starting – he has listened to Bach's *Passacaglia in C minor* sixteen times.[25] He marks the start of the memorandum proper with the time, 20:00, and, as his writing progresses, scrupulously notes the time at varying intervals thereafter.

The writing proceeds steadily as Wiid reports on his admission to Tygerberg and his two strange fellow sufferers, summarising too his visits to Parow Public Library in consequence of that night. Just before 21:50 he opens one of the bottles Buytendagh had given him and at 23:05 he pours himself a second glass.[26]

At this later time, and recalling X and Y's debates about architecture and nesting, he begins to reassess his own living quarters, "this bare, unembellished bachelor home, a refreshment station for a pen-pusher, twenty-four years of backup copies of minutes in files" (2006b: 48). At 00:15 he undergoes a small crisis – "The mere thought, dear reader, that this business is robbing me for a second time of a night's important sleep, makes me want to tear my hair" (2006b: 63) – and has to rinse his face in the bathroom, and then open a window and stand before it. Back at his typewriter he composes a sentence that, as he says, he would never have written had it not been for "that first strange night": "The shabby stone pine with lengths of lamp post, a portion of pavement, lights of Cape Town and southern stars in its branches, the furniture of its dream" (2006b: 64).[27] What follows is even more unlike Wiid the pen-pusher and hints at a potential that, until now, had remained unfulfilled: allusions to Jesus in Gethsemane, memories of his parents putting a stop to his storytelling as a child, and reflections on the early death of his twin brother and his father. In the middle of these thoughts he pours himself a jug of water, has a shower and renews the udder ointment on his hands.

At 02:30 Wiid writes a short paragraph about his parents, including a moving reference to his father's singing a second voice to his mother's lullaby: "He's singing for my departed brother, I thought then, and held tight to my part of the melody" (2006b: 74). Once more, there is the sense that Wiid's late discovery of the arts is not entirely without precedent in his life. Spurred on by his recollections of X and Y's poetic utterances, his writing becomes less and less that of the memorandum compiler; soon he can write a passage as flamboyant as the following:

> Must I play the necromancer to revive them?[28] With my little glass of Welgevonden? Flutter up! Ravens from the churchyard gates! Shall I draw a skull on my countenance, with Brylcreem and brikettes, shall I wiggle-waggle here on my table until they emerge from their holes and give me a hand? Hey, old Wiid, let's snuggle our knucklebones in between your fingers and honky-tonk it further! (2006b: 77)

After a crisis during which Wiid considers throwing himself from his balcony, he returns to the writing of lively prose: "Crack a whip crack a whip cancer man, write me a book as quick as you can. Ting goes the bell. Zirrr goes the carriage. Line by line I plough the furrow on the white paper" (2006b: 91).[29] At 04:20 he returns from a walk round a few blocks, at the conclusion of which he had looked up at his flat and pondered its future without him. At 05:15 he hears "the last of the night sounds" and records a memory of his parents' unexpected softness. Six o' clock (06:00) brings despair and more suicidal thoughts, but he goes on writing, culminating in the (invented?) dialogue between X and Y mentioned above.

The 06:40 Postscript, written as the morning light makes itself felt,[30] records a decision that arises from the process of thinking, remembering and writing of the previous ten hours. "One has to write", as Wiid says, "to discover what has to be written" (2006b: 120). He will not go back to the hospital; he will permanently cancel the operation. There follows the account of his plans for the day to come, during which he will visit the library and, perhaps, invite Buytendagh to join him for a simple meal. He will then give Buytendagh the memorandum. The final entry is made at 07:15, which, thinking again no doubt of Bach's organ music, he calls a "voluntary" (2006b: 123). (The original "naspel" [2006a: 124] is more precise, since a voluntary can be played before or during a service as well as after it.) In the Afrikaans original, his words are "Snel daag die lig!" (2006a: 124). Heyns chooses to quote from the hymn "Abide with me": "Heaven's morning breaks!" (2006b: 123).[31]

The memorandum closes with the extraordinary page-long "Passacaglia" imagining a walk through Parow (Wiid has discovered that the musical term comes from "passer", "to walk", and "calle", "street"[2006b: 8]),[32] written in a rhythmic, heightened style as far removed as possible from bureaucratic prose.[33] This passage serves as a conclusion to all three of the textual narrative strands: the debates about housing and care, the broadening of sympathies through the relationship with Buytendagh, and the many hours of writing and thought that have produced the memorandum. It is headed "(for JSB)" and it is not clear whether the ambiguity (does it refer to Johann Sebastian Bach or Jeroen Sterrenberg Buytendagh?) is Wiid's or only Van Niekerk's. Wiid, the erstwhile city planner, promises himself that he will walk his city's streets, drinking in all the details he sees, consecrating the boulevards, sanctifying the barbed wire and grey cement and unmaking in his heart what is inhospitable. With Mania, the goddess of the dead, and X and Y, he will traverse the squares and walkways of Parow until nightfall. The passage ends with an assertion of the hospitality that has been at the centre of much of the preceding book, Wiid's utilitarian home has now become a nest, its name conflated with that of the "sensitive plant", the Mimosa tree, and the urban/natural opposition collapsed:

> 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. (2006b: 124)

The idea of "comfort", "troos", plays a central role in the work's concern with buildings, nests, the function of the hospital and the importance of hospitality. (Wiid had realised earlier that his home of thirty years is "troosteloos".[34]) The

final reference to the hymn "Abide with me" (2006b: 124) in Heyns's translation adds a dimension to the simpler original, "tot die einde by hom bly" (2006a: 125) – a clause which echoes Wiid's own hope, expressed on the previous page, that after dinner Buytendagh will stay with him ("by my bly" [2006a: 124]).

7. Reading the paintings

Then there are the sixteen paintings telling their own story, which the reader is invited to relate in some way to the other narratives.[35] They lead us from hospital entrance to waiting room, then from "The Night Before" to the anaesthesia room and on to the operating theatre, and from there to the recovery room.[36] (The titles are given in the list at the back of the book.) The series ends with another waiting room, as if the process is going to begin again.[37] The paintings provide us with stark images of hospital architecture, décor and equipment. In their utilitarian sparseness, muted colours and lack of human presences, the paintings speak of the kind of functional but cold environment for living beings opposed both by X in his discourses on nests and by the retired urban administrator Wiid at the end of his days. Wiid's description of the interior of the hospital chimes closely with these images: "To one side in another wing of the building there were a few green-lit windows, closer by the plastic bubbles filled with liquids, on which the light from the passage reflected, and further the lights of the instrument panels casting red glows on the railings of the beds" (2006b: 114). The formal, almost photorealist,[38] style in which walls, beds, cupboards and instruments are represented contributes to the atmosphere of efficiency and detachment, while the presence of mysterious objects behind glass doors adds to the sense of unfathomable processes. Wiid's text, without being an interpretation of the paintings, is greatly enhanced by these depictions of chilly, inscrutable hospital spaces; Van Niekerk's own suggestion about its relation to the images is that it is like the piano accompaniment in a Schubert song: it should not only mediate, but provoke, foretell, desire and even impede.[39] She remarks that for her what was most important was to preserve the enigmatic quality of the paintings and therefore to let Wiid write something that bewilders him to the end, both as regards the content and the writing process (Britz, 2007: 21). In another interview, she provides a somewhat different account of the relationship: "[T]he story consoles the paintings with intimations of friendship, care and sympathy, while the paintings remind the story of the grim and lonely business of bodily pain and suffering, the loneliness of facing death" (Steyn, 2016).

This story is complicated, however, by three of the paintings: two diptychs and a triptych in which hospital scenes are conjoined with outdoor scenes. Two of

these, "Hospital Triptych II" and "Hospital Diptych III", show images of the sea, picking up the colours of the adjoining hospital images – brownish grey in the first case and leaden green in the second – to create a startling contrast of mood and atmosphere. Next to the rigid lines and angles of the hospital buildings, the wind-blown sea suggests liberty of movement and escape from confines; and next to the ward's stilled machinery of linen and metal, the rising swell speaks of the endless shifting of watery expanses. These marine images might be representations of dying patients' dreams of escape from the confines of hospital or of their memories of lost physical freedom; there is no way of closing down interpretation. The third outdoor image is of a nondescript urban landscape (Parow?) seen from a height at dawn or dusk, the sky's orange glow echoing the glow of the single lamp above the hospital bed in its partner painting. We may be looking through a hospital window on an upper floor (there is a suggestion of light falling on a window pane), a view that, unlike the artificial time of the ward, permits diurnal changes to be seen and felt. In every painting, the immense care that has been lavished on the objects depicted – an attentiveness inherited from the long tradition of the still life – suggests that, despite the lack of a human presence, they are humanly of great importance, whether as instruments of recovery or focal points of fear.

We might guess, and a little research will confirm, that the paintings are of Tygerberg Hospital, based on photographs made when Van Zyl was being treated for cancer in that very hospital not long before his untimely death. There is perhaps a clue within the text, in the picture book Wiid likes to look at when he visits Parow Public Library: a gathering of Manet's last sixteen paintings (the number is significant), still lives made when his life was ending. Manet, like Van Zyl, died at the age of 49; the latter in 2006, the same year as the publication of the book.[40]

8. The experience of *Memorandum*

To return to my opening question, how are we to read these multiple interwoven narratives and the large amount of scholarly detail that buttresses them in an attempt to do justice to the composite work? The answer must be that there is no optimal approach. A reading which proceeds from page 1 to page 140, taking in the footnotes when they occur, is feasible, allowing the paintings to come as a series of surprises as the pages are turned, and ending with the wordlist, the tables and, as something of an anticlimax, Wiid's letter to the Superintendent of Libraries.[41] More likely, the mention of Memoranda 1 and 2 at the start will prompt the reader to check them out at once, though at that stage they are likely

to be more puzzling than revealing and will need to be returned to frequently. (That Memorandum 2 precedes Memorandum 1 adds to the complication of the process.) A reading that follows this pattern will end, satisfyingly, at the "Passacaglia". Similarly, each time a word in bold comes up in the text, the temptation is to turn to the list for elucidation. There is also much to be said for enjoying the series of paintings as a separate encounter – though here again, the reader may want to flip to the list of titles at the back from time to time. (The paintings and the list of titles are the only elements in the book not to form part of the fiction – unless we imagine Joop Buytendagh splicing them into Wiid's text for publication.) Each of these multiple possibilities will produce a different reading experience or, to put it more strongly, will bring into being a different literary work.[42] As with any ergodic work, *Memorandum* reminds us that all texts are nothing but inert sets of signs until the reader turns them into works of literature and that each reading – even of the most linear, non-ergodic, text – produces a new experience and thus a new work.

Readers of literary works are capable of immensely complex feats of comprehension. Although I have separated out the scholarly details and the four narrative strands in this work, we are capable of holding them all in mind as we read, emphasising now one, now another.[43] They do, of course, relate closely to one another: to trace the importance of birds, for instance, one would be alert to all the references to the "janfrederik" or Cape robin, which shares its name with Johannes Frederikus Wiid (whose parents called him "Polly") and is to be heard at dusk and dawn outside Mimosa Flats, to the repeated evocation of ornithological detail in the conversations of X and Y, to Buytendagh's provision of Afrikaans poems on birds and berries, and to Wiid's memory of his parents' concern for the chicks of a white-browed coucal. Similar networks could be traced in relation to buildings and to music, and of course these three topics closely connect with one another to create a complex web.

Van Niekerk's other two novels, *Triomf* (1994) and *Agaat* (2004), have received a great deal of critical attention, but *Memorandum* has, by contrast, been the subject of only a handful of essays. Part of the reason for this relative lack of critical attention may be its appearance as a forbidding, even byzantine, text, replete with academic trappings like footnotes and addenda, teeming with fragments of arcane knowledge, and for most of its length written in a style that eschews poetic richness and lyrical grace. There is also the task of relating the paintings to the text. Yet, it is an immensely rewarding and moving book, even if its rewards only become fully evident with rereading, or better, many rereadings, each of which brings into being a different, and differently challenging and fulfilling, work. Its singularity as a unique configuration of inherited cultural materials is not in doubt – there is no

other work like it – and its alterity is registered in its resistance to easy assimilation. As for inventiveness, the third of the three terms that have been central to my thinking about the literary, I would argue that *Memorandum* is truly inventive in the way it introduces into the cultural field an unprecedented verbal-visual form that opens up new possibilities for the writers and painters of the future.

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Notes

1. See, for instance, Attridge, 2010, 2017a and b, and, for a historical account, Attridge, 2019. I don't draw directly on these theoretical sources in this essay, but they form the background of my thinking about the literary.
2. Van Niekerk and Van Zyl (2006b: 6). I quote from Heyns's translation, referring to the Afrikaans original where appropriate. Further references will be given in the text. The pagination of the translation follows that of the original quite closely, usually no more than one page different.
3. Van Niekerk, in an interview with Etienne Britz, refers to the "troostelose boustyle" ("comfortless building styles") of Parow (Britz, 2007: 23).
4. Van Niekerk speaks of a "verdunning" ("attenuating") of language in Wiid's style (in contrast to the "verryking" ("enriching") of her second novel, *Agaat*, and the "vervuiling" ("dirtying") of her first novel, *Triomf* (Burger, 2009: 154).
5. Van Vuuren (2014: 518), in an essay that makes strenuous claims for the work's intertextual references to Walter Benjamin, puzzlingly suggests that the time indications refer to the night in hospital, even though the text makes it clear that they refer to the sleepless night during

which "Memorandum 3" is written. This is not to deny the possibility that the time span of writing corresponds to the time span being described – the entry written at 03:20, for instance, includes a mention of the fact that the time being referred to was "long after three o'clock in the morning" (2006b: 87).

6. Wiid is very proud of his highly trained memory, though no amount of training could make it possible for someone in his position to recall these elaborate, reference-strewn and often technical speeches verbatim. As Joan Hambidge (2007: n.p.) says, the reader's "suspension of disbelief" is tested to the limit. We have to take the reproduction of the speeches as a given – call it magic realism, if you like.
7. Not all quotations are acknowledged, however; for instance, Goethe's "Wandrers Nachtlied II" is quoted, with slight amendments (either as translated by Y or as recalled by Wiid) (2007b: 47). Van Niekerk, in a conversation with Britz (2007: 25) (in Afrikaans), said that she would have liked the book to have large white spaces at the foot of each page for readers to enter further notes and thus make the text endless.
8. Van Niekerk explains that she and Van Zyl decided from the beginning that the text would not comment on or interpret the paintings and that the paintings would not function as illustrations of the text (Britz, 2007: 21).
9. Roux (2009: 22) suggests that the reader proceeds both horizontally – following the narrative of Wiid's composition of Memorandum 3 – and vertically, relating the narrative text to the several other texts it points to.
10. To say the text "ignores" the paintings is to assume they are primary; this is in fact true of the process by which the book came into being, Van Zyl having proposed to Van Niekerk that she write a text to accompany his hospital paintings (Britz, 2007: 12) – though I also mean it to suggest that at no point does the text acknowledge that it is being interrupted by images. But perhaps the number of times Wiid listens to the Bach Passacaglia – sixteen (why is he counting?) – alludes to the sixteen paintings.
11. The content of the bizarre exchanges between X and Y has received relatively little comment by critics and reviewers in comparison with Wiid's own account of his experiences, no doubt because of their obscurity. Van Niekerk makes no attempt to create a realistic representation of conversation, which is larded with allusions and rhetorical flourishes.
12. Loots (2017) discusses this global inheritance that Wiid discovers in the hospital and notes that it forms a departure from the question of local inheritances so significant in Van Niekerk's *Triomf* and *Agaat.*
13. Heyns "translates" the phonetic transcription as "*Veal-roy and bock*" (2006b: 135).
14. Heyns refrains from duplicating the many abbreviations in Wiid's notes, rendering them less note-like but more readable; thus, in this example, "van my ma" is written as "v. my ma" in the original. In the explanation of "Fillotaksis" the original includes the intriguing speculation that "Musikale fillotaksis = d. rangskikking v. note om d. beste voordeel uit d. stilte te trek?" (2006a: 134); in the translation, "phyllotaxis" gives rise to the thought, "Musical phyllotaxis =

arrangement of notes to derive best benefit from the silence?" (2006b: 134).

15. Y has referred to "the age-old *ars moriendi*" (2006b: 134), that is, art of dying. The longer form comes from the title of the medieval work, "*Tractatus artis bene moriendi*", "Tractate on the art of dying well". Wiid's pedantry is catching.
16. See van Vuuren (2014: 507-508).
17. Interestingly, another highly inventive Afrikaans novel about the awakening of an inhibited, buttoned-up administrator when exposed to the wider world of cultural and human experience was published two years later: Etienne van Heerden's *30 nagte in Amsterdam* (2008).
18. Van Niekerk (2006a: 34) writes "tweekoppige waansin", a somewhat more colourful expression.
19. Van Niekerk refers to this sequence as a fantasy of Wiid's, a dream of both twinhood and dwelling representing the achievement of an intimacy he lacks (Britz, 2007: 24). It is possible to mark the two (imagined) speakers in this sequence, but the absence of such markers on the page suggests that each might well have spoken what the other did.
20. Van Niekerk herself observes that it is "perhaps" a love story (Britz, 2007: 24). Sanders (2009: 118-19) treats this topic with tact and insight.
21. The misspelling of "Jarrett" as "Jarret" is no doubt Wiid's. At one point he spells "Rimbaud" "Rimbou" (5), noting that his spelling is under correction.
22. "So soet en so krakerig" (2006a: 50): the second word seems an odd description for raisins. Perhaps "crunchy" would be a more accurate translation.
23. Buytendagh has found a copy of the English translation of Bachelard's book, so the poems – one by Breton (unacknowledged in the text) and one by Rimbaud – are in English and have been translated by him into Afrikaans. This, of course, poses a translation problem for Heyns, who provides his own re-translation into English of the Afrikaans translation of the primary English translation of the original French. An entire article could be written on the challenges *Memorandum* poses for the translator.
24. Loots (2017: 62-63) makes the interesting argument that Buytendagh, along with X and Y, form for Wiid an alternative family to his own. Buxbaum (2011: 39-41) relates Wiid's discovery of human connection to his new sense of place.
25. Van Niekerk herself discloses that she listened "over and over and over" to this piece to achieve the right emotional openness (Britz, 2007: 22).
26. As Rossman (2014: 62) notes, in pursuing the importance of the Dionysiac dimension of the work, "Joop not only stimulates in Wiid a drive to intellectual and spiritual knowledge, but is also responsible for Wiid's initiation into sensual pleasures, particularly those related to the god of wine and ecstasy".
27. "Die verweerde kroonden met lengtes lamppaal, 'n stuk sypaadjie, Kaapse ligte en suidersterre in sy takke asof dit sy eie droom se huisraad is" (2006a: 66).
28. "Moet ek glasie speel om hulle op te wek?" (2006a: 78). There is no way the translation can keep the connection between spirit communication on a Ouija board ("glasie speel") and the glass of port Wiid is drinking.

29. Van Niekerk (2006a: 92) has Wiid recite an Afrikaans rhyme, "Al wieker al wakker al oor die akker, die dooies hou die lewende wakker", and adds, "Of is dit andersom?". Heyns does not attempt to translate the rhyme but substitutes what I take to be his own little ditty.
30. Sunrise in the Western Cape on 12 April 2006 was at 07:03.
31. Heyns introduces the idea of Wiid's familiarity with this hymn at the very start of the novel; where the Afrikaans is "terwyl die skemer reeds begin te daal" (2006a: 6), the English is the quotation, "as darkness deepens" (2006b: 6).
32. He is not quite right: the Spanish word from which the first part of the Italian *passacaglia* derives is "pasar", "pass".
33. Van Vuuren demonstrates the regular alternating rhythm of much of the writing of the "Passacaglia" (2014: 514). Heyns preserves the rhythmic regularity in his translation.
34. Heyns translates this word as "cheerless", though "comfortless" would have the advantage of looking forward to the ending of the "Passacaglia". See the comment by Van Niekerk on the "troostelose" building styles of Parow in note 3 above.
35. For discussion of the relationship between the paintings and the verbal text, see Crous (2011) and the MA thesis by Roux (2009).
36. Who arranged the paintings in this order? Van Niekerk states that they were placed in a narrative order by the painter (Britz, 2007: 21). Yet, the fact that "Hospital Triptych II" begins the series and "Hospital Triptych I" occurs as the fourth painting suggests that Van Zyl envisaged a different order – or the numbering may simply reflect the order in which they were painted. The numbering of the other paintings is consistently sequential.
37. Van Niekerk makes this point in her conversation with Britz (2007: 22).
38. For a discussion of Van Zyl's use of photorealist techniques, see Sanders (2009: 111-114). Sanders (2009: 114) makes the interesting suggestion that Wiid's memorial reconstructions evoke the technique of photorealism.
39. "[D]it moes 'n begeleiding wees wat die 'lied' van die skilderye terselfdertyd moes bemiddel en 'belemmer', wat dit moes 'uitlok' en 'voorspel' en 'begeer'" (Britz, 2007: 21). Sanders (2009: 107-108) relates this to Wiid's own discovery that "the art lies in impediment" ("belemmering") (2006b: 97).
40. Van Vuuren (2014: 505).
41. A question from Britz about the placing of this letter elicits from Van Niekerk what amounts to a brilliant short essay on the task of the writer and the role of the reader (Britz, 2007: 25-26). She begins by noting her dislike of neat beginnings and endings and her desire to problematise these in *Memorandum*: the text ends with something that is pointed to at the beginning (Wiid's original discomfort with the librarian) and if we read it at the end we do so after the "passacaglia to Buytendagh", which tells a very different story. Both writer and reader find themselves following a circular movement, with beginning and ending muddled ("deurmekaar"). What is more, this refusal of a "rounding off" chimes with the last painting, which is both an unfinished work and a depiction of a waiting room. Van Niekerk ends this disquisition with some reflections on

the unfathomable nature of the world and of the writing process that attempts to capture that unfathomability: a making clear that is also a making dark – "'n Verheldering te skryf wat ook 'n verduistering is" (26).

42. Van Niekerk's own intention was to achieve an "adequate parallel" to the many-faceted quality of the paintings, the reader's eye being made to leap from place to place in the text as it does from painting to painting (notably in the diptychs and triptychs) and across the many levels of meaning within each painting (Britz, 2007: 22).
43. Van Niekerk refers to the "dynamic reading experience" demanded by *Memorandum* (Steyn, 2016).