

**Orion, Ram's-horn and Labyrinth: Quest and Creativity in
Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*, *Agaat* and *Memorandum***

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Declaration

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Graduate Programme in English Studies (School of Arts) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, Jean Rossmann, declare that

1. The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
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Prof. Cheryl Stobie

Date

Date

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Abstract

This study of Marlene Van Niekerk's three novels, *Triomf*, *Agaat*, and *Memorandum*, explores the motifs of quest and creativity, and their association with the spiritual and numinous. Notions of self-creation, the imaginative re-creation of reality and the relationship between creativity, self-awakening and revelation are explored in an analysis of Van Niekerk's novels. This thesis considers the encounter with alterity as a catalyst for undoing the boundaries of the self that leads to "profane illumination" and transformation. Van Niekerk's characters confront alterity on numerous levels: their own abjection, death, the racial other, and the experience of alterity in artistic creation. It is worth noting that the characters who form the focus of this study – Mol, Treppie, Agaat, Milla, Jakkie and Wiid – are story-tellers and myth-makers, and that their creative use of symbol, myth and metaphor stimulate self-transformation.

This study illuminates the relatively unexplored domain of the mystical and spiritual in Van Niekerk's novels. This focus emerges within the context of a renewed interest in the spiritual within the humanities. Van Niekerk's writing resonates with an integralist conception of spirituality that includes aesthetic experience, magic, and a sense of the sacred as embodied and demotic. The concern with immanence and non-dualism in Van Niekerk's novels is typical of postmodern spirituality, and resonates with Friedrich Nietzsche's writings on art and the Dionysian worldview. For Nietzsche art is spiritual, turning the individual into a creator and "transfigurer" of existence. Through the lens of Nietzsche's writings on the artist-philosopher, I explore the motif of a spiritual-ethical and aesthetic quest toward a greater openness to alterity, to the world, and toward cosmic interconnectedness.

Chapter One offers a reading of *Triomf*, focussing on the antithetical perspectives of Treppie and Mol, and their ontological quests. I explore Mol's abjection in terms of Luce Irigaray's writings on female mysticism, looking at Mol as a burlesque Mary/Martha figure. I explore Mol's mystical quest, her compassion, and her affinity with alterity, which allows her to become the creator of her own cosmology. Conversely, I explore Treppie's quest toward becoming an artist-philosopher. In the conclusion to this chapter I examine the implications of Treppie's and Mol's cosmic gaze and their different ontological outlooks.

Chapter Two, which offers an analysis of *Agaat*, begins by exploring Milla's presentation as the *pharmakon* (sickness and cure) and her quest for incorporation into a new social order. In this chapter the quest motif is framed in terms of the Lacanian *la traversée du fantasme* (traversing the fundamental fantasy), a circuitous journey into the unconscious that reveals the fantasy that underpins and structures our reality. I argue that *Agaat* figures simultaneously as Milla's "fantasy" and her guide, assisting Milla to open her eyes and acknowledge her paradoxical abjection and idealisation of *Agaat*. Chapter Two concludes by exploring the interrogative function of the frame narrative, in which the frame narrator summons the reader, with his *Wunderhorn* and allusions to poetic inspiration, on a quest of creative production.

Chapter Three foregrounds the labyrinthine structure of *Memorandum* and how this correlates with the quest motif. I also explore *Memorandum*'s allusions to the *nekylia* (the Homeric term for the descent into Hades) and its association as a metaphor for *poiesis*, the processes of creative production. I further relate Wiid's *nekylia* to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885). Wiid's quest, like Zarathustra's "going under," is a twofold quest for his true self and a *creative* language of his own. I argue that Wiid's embrace of "Mania" (goddess of death and figure of absolute alterity, a feminine evocation of Nietzsche's Dionysus and a creative-intuitive ontology), leads to Wiid's transformation and apotheosis as an artist. Finally, through the lens of Gaston Bachelard's writings on the creation of poetry and Nietzsche's writings on art, I discuss how Wiid's poetic reverie makes self-reflexive comments on the act of reading and writing, and challenges conventional understandings of love and connection.

In conclusion, I explore the open dialectic of Van Niekerk's novels and consider the ethical imperative in Van Niekerk's narrative quests: the art of thinking and quest/ining – *poetically*.

Key words: Marlene van Niekerk, *Triomf*, *Agaat*, *Memorandum*, *poiesis*, Nietzsche, Dionysian, quest, creativity, spirituality, dialectic, abjection.

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Introduction

The South African writer, Marlene van Niekerk, is a true polymath. She is a student of philosophy, languages and cultural anthropology; a teacher of creative writing; and a poet, dramatist, critic, short-story writer and novelist. Her first published works were two collections of poetry: *Sprokkelster* (1977) and *Groenstaar* (1983). However, it was her first novel, *Triomf* (1999 [1994]; trans. Leon de Kock), published in Afrikaans in the year of the first democratic elections in South Africa, that brought her into the literary and public limelight. Van Niekerk's second novel, *Agaat* (2006a [2004]; trans. Michiel Heyns), has been compared to J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and described as presenting a new turning point in South African fiction (De Kock 2005; Flanery 2007). With the publication of *Agaat*, Van Niekerk has received increasing local and international acclaim. She has set a precedent in being the first Afrikaans author, together with her translator, Michiel Heyns, to be awarded the prestigious Sunday Times Fiction Prize in 2007. Van Niekerk's entrance into the local and international domain of English literature is not only marked by the latter prize, but also by the accolades she has received in the American and British press for the Little Brown edition of *Agaat* (Flanery 2007; Hill 2007; Chew 2008). *Agaat*, or *The Way of the Women*, as it has been renamed by Little Brown, was shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize (Tonkin 2008). Van Niekerk's stylistic innovation is evident in the dual-medium novella, *Memorandum: A Story with Paintings* (2006b; trans. Michiel Heyns, released simultaneously with the Afrikaans version, *Memorandum: 'n Verhaal met Prente*). In the latter, Van Niekerk's narrative is accompanied by paintings of hospital scenes by Adriaan van Zyl. In 2010 she published a collection of short stories, *Die Sneuslaper*. Her most recent publication is a collection of poetry, titled *Kaar* (2013).

This study focuses on the English translations of Van Niekerk's novels. While these will not be treated as originals, and it is not my intention to erase the translator's position, I will foreground the translator's role as cultural mediator. André Lefevere states that writers will have to "share the limelight with re-writers, since they share the responsibility for the evolution of a literature, and to no small extent" (2006 [1985]: 436). Leon de Kock, an acclaimed literary critic, and Michiel Heyns, an award-winning South African writer himself, play a leading role in Van Niekerk's assimilation into the broader South African literary canon. Van Niekerk's writing is not only lauded locally, but, as already mentioned, has

received acclaim abroad. The universal issues raised in Van Niekerk's writing and the originality of her style (carefully conserved by her translators) were noted at her appearance on the 'world stage' of writers when she appeared in conversation with Nobel laureate Toni Morrison (moderated by K. Anthony Appiah) at the PEN World Voices Festival in May 2010.¹ The growing interest in Van Niekerk's writing is evident in the growing number of translations of her works since 2002 in a range of world languages: French, Danish, Dutch and Swedish (De Kock 2013). Like the famous works of great writers such as Leo Tolstoy and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in terms of international reception, Van Niekerk will most likely be read and known through her translations, and not in the original language.²

Certainly, Van Niekerk has praised the cultural significance of translation, and her relationship with her translators has been highly collaborative. Both her South African translators have written on the process of translation, the difficulties they have encountered and the changes they have made, in consultation with the author (De Kock 2003, 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Heyns 2009). Other critics have also investigated and compared the English translation with the originals (Devarenne 2006; Swart 2007; England 2013, Minter 2013). Van Niekerk has embraced the opportunities translation has afforded, and expresses her enthusiasm through her character, Wiid, in *Memorandum*, who asks, "What else can one do with a secret language crying out to be heard?" (2006b: 61). Wiid self-reflexively comments on the value of literature in translation when he states "that a good translation brings to light meanings that are covered up in the original" (61). Furthermore, in the context of this doctoral thesis, the translations do not occur in an alternative paradigm across disparate cultures and time periods, but rather the receiving literature occurs within the same temporal, geographic and socio-political landscape as the original.

While I am not a scholar of translation studies and the scope of this study does not permit a thorough analysis of the merit of De Kock's and Heyns's translations, the role translation plays in the "evolution" of South African literature, as Afrikaans authors enter the international medium of English, is a subject for further study. For the purpose of this study,

¹ This interview in 2010 co-incides with the release of the American translation of *Agaat*, published by Tin House Books.

² In an article in *Beeld*, Rudolph Stehle remarks on the surprising popularity of *Agaat* in Sweden, noting that sales in the Swedish and Dutch translations of *Agaat*, respectively, more than double those of sales in the original Afrikaans (Stehle 2013: 10).

my primary material will be the translated texts; however, where necessary I will allude to the original Afrikaans texts.

In this study of Van Niekerk's three novels, *Triomf*, *Agaat*, and *Memorandum*, I explore the motifs of quest and creativity, and their association with the spiritual and numinous.³ In each novel I explore notions of self-creation, the imaginative re-creation of reality and the relationship between creativity, self-awakening and revelation. Another key concern in my study of these novels is how the encounter with alterity proves to be a catalyst for transformation and illumination. Van Niekerk's central characters, who form the focus of this study – Mol, Treppie, Agaat, Milla, Jakkie and Wiid – are story-tellers and myth-makers. It is through the creative use of symbol, myth and metaphor that Van Niekerk's characters bring about their own self-transformation. More broadly, this thesis explores the relationship between alterity, transformation, creativity and mysticism. This study contributes to the relatively unexplored terrain of a collective analysis and comparison of the common thematic concerns between Van Niekerk's three novels, and the progression of tropes and ideas from *Triomf* to *Agaat* to *Memorandum*.⁴ While their stylistic disparity and divergent fictional worlds in no way make them a trilogy, the quest-like nature of their trajectories, their focus on self-creation, and a shared concern for the philosophical, esoteric and mystical inspire further investigation.

The spiritual or mystical in Van Niekerk's novels is, as yet, a relatively unexplored realm of study. Broadly, critics only gesture toward or gloss the presence of the numinous in Van Niekerk's writing, most notably in *Memorandum*, to some extent in *Agaat* and hardly ever in *Triomf*. This study seeks to redress this occlusion. Before conceptualising my use of the term, "spirituality," it is necessary to signal references to the spiritual in scholarship on Van Niekerk's novels.

Wendy Woodward, in her investigation into the role of dogs in *Triomf* and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), notes that both novels "pose ontological questions about being human in

³ Van Niekerk's most recent collection of short stories, the metafictional *Die Sneuslaper* (2010a), is exemplary of the quest toward becoming a creator through the encounter with alterity, an encounter which is implicit in the art of writing fiction. Despite the value of this collection of interlinked stories, this study has chosen to limit itself to texts translated into English (as a thesis within the discipline of English Studies, and not Comparative Literature). It has also chosen to explore the genesis of this journey through Van Niekerk's novels. Furthermore, the novel form allows a broader scope for a sustained analysis of the development of plot and character.

⁴ See Willie Burger (2009a) and Lara Buxbaum (2011, 2014).

relation to other animals, as well as engaging with metaphysical and spiritual questions” (2001: 90). Woodward looks at Mol’s egalitarian relationship with dogs and her empathy with them as fellow beings, further suggesting that dogs “motivate some humans [...] to ponder on the spiritual aspects of dying” (113). Woodward argues that the death of Mol’s dog is a catalyst for her contemplation of an afterlife (113). Although the relationship with dogs is not the focus of my study, Woodward’s observation of Mol’s empathy and her concern with a non-dualistic view of death is extended in my study of Mol’s compassion and self-sacrifice.

Shaun Irlam, in “Unraveling the Rainbow: The Remission of Nation in Post-Apartheid literature,” observes a “steady retreat from the strident, public, and political character of [South African] writing to a more private, introspective, and confessional mode” (2004: 698).⁵ While Irlam’s interest is primarily in matters of the material realm,⁶ he also observes, in reference to *Triomf* and Jeanne Goosen’s *Ons is Nie Almal So Nie* (1990), that the need to “expiate the sins of the father” is accompanied by “a decaying sense of spiritual clarity and purpose that manifests itself symptomatically as a proliferation of varieties of haunting” (703). According to Irlam, the crumbling of Afrikaner “Calvinistic theopolitical certainties” has “given way to a new culture of interrogation” (703). Arguably, this loss, and consequent existential questioning, creates a space for re-imagining alternative “spiritualities” and metaphysics, such as Mol’s creative cosmology and Treppie’s “this-worldly” theosophy, discussed in Chapter One of this thesis.

Irlam’s observation of a “culture of interrogation” also relates to an ethical and stylistic imperative in Van Niekerk’s writing, which I bring to the fore in the conclusion of this project. In reviewing the endings of the three novels discussed in this study, I comment on their undecidability and how this presents a challenge of constant quest/ioning to the reader, a challenge achieved through the use of an open dialectic implicit in the inescapable excess and interrelatedness of language. In these closing thoughts I point to the ethical and ‘spiritual’ implications of this quest/ioning.

⁵ Irlam’s observation could also apply to *Agaat*, which had not been released at the time he was writing.

⁶ Irlam notes that after the euphoria that followed the end of apartheid over a decade ago the nation today is afflicted by a “deepening sense of political malaise” (2004: 697). He comments on a growing sentiment of scepticism, resulting from the crisis of governance in the ANC, the delayed response to the AIDS crisis, President Thabo Mbeki’s failure to offer moral leadership in the Zimbabwe situation, a rise in “cultural chauvinism” and “ethnic nationalism,” as well as other “social pathologies: crime, disease, poverty, and hopelessness” (696; 699). Furthermore, Irlam sees this milieu as reflected in the return to cultural insularity in a range of texts by South African writers such as Zoë Wicomb, K. Sello Duiker, Zakes Mda, Van Niekerk and others.

The interstices of spirituality and ecology in *Agaat* are brought to the fore by Van Niekerk's translator, Heyns, in his justification for including references to the works of Modernist poet, T.S. Eliot. Van Niekerk's concern with the soul and world-soul is evident in the novel's resonances with Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, as Heyns states:

these poems had in fact been very much present to [Van Niekerk] in writing *Agaat*, and one can see why: Eliot's locating, in *The Waste Land*, of a condition of spirit in the barrenness of the land has its equivalent in *Agaat*'s diagnosis of spiritual ills through human dealings with the soil; and his search, in *Four Quartets*, for a condition of surrender from the urgencies of human desires, for a merging with a larger order of being, is paralleled by Milla's struggle for release from the pettiness of her existence. (2009: 132–3)

Beyond Van Niekerk's acknowledgement of the echoes of Modernist mysticism in her novel, *Agaat* also shows a thematic concern with religion and spirituality in a postcolonial context, as Cheryl Stobie observes in her article on the novel. Stobie explores the parallels between Van Niekerk's novel and the biblical Book of Ruth. For Stobie, *Agaat* is a problematic and imperfect "saviour-figure" who presents a new "ecologically aware," "non-binarist," and "practical" religion as a counteraction to white, Afrikaner "supremacist religion" (2009: 57; 68). Stobie notes that Van Niekerk's use of "biblical allusion," "suggestive imagery and combinational pairings" presents a "spiritually luminous" narrative that speaks to readers across the theism-atheism spectrum (69).

In an article I co-authored with Stobie, "*chew me until i bind*":⁷ Sacrifice and Cultural Renewal in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*" (2012), the religious and mystical aspects of the novel are explored further, especially in terms of the tropes of the Eucharist and ritual sacrifice. Van Niekerk's extensive use of allusion, imagery and symbol includes references to a range of world myths and religions. It is the intention of this study of Van Niekerk's three novels to reveal the complex range of intertexts that inform Van Niekerk's own creative and experimental myth-making.

In *Memorandum*, the thematic concern with "spiritual awakening" is heralded in Etienne Britz's (2007) guide to the novel for the readers of *Insig*. Alwyn Roux's (2009) Master's

⁷ All italics are those of the original text unless stated otherwise. It should be noted that in *Agaat* the stream-of-consciousness passages are italicised, and these constitute a large portion of the novel.

thesis – a study that focusses on the more overt intertexts in the novel – notes that the novel is a journey of spiritual awakening brought about through the encounter with death. However, Roux does not delve into the more numinous and ontological implications of this encounter. Joan Hambidge’s poetic engagement with *Memorandum* draws attention to the text’s concern with “sieninge van die lewe/dood” (visions of life/death) (2007: n.p.). Hambidge aptly describes it as “’n boek van die ‘Sehnsucht’” (a book of longing), quoting the opening lines of Johan Wolfgang von Goethe’s poem, “*Über allen Gipfeln/ ist Ruh*” (Over all hilltops/ there is peace), in relation to *Memorandum*. Although Hambidge does not elucidate this intertext, these lines from Goethe’s second “Wayfarer’s Nightsong” are suggestive of cosmic consolation in death, the ultimate sublime, after the expression of “Schmerz und Lust” (suffering and desire) in the first “Wayfarer’s Nightsong.” This allusion thus signals the elements of metaphysical quest in Van Niekerk’s most recent novel.

Although the spiritual is foregrounded specifically in my chapter on *Memorandum*, this introduction serves to highlight an underlying concern with the spiritual in *Triomf* and *Agaat*. In the latter two texts, spirituality and mysticism are refracted through the prisms of existentialist philosophy and psychoanalysis. In this study, “spirituality” requires reframing, excluding associations with piety and otherworldliness, and including the mystical, religious, materialistic and even nihilistic (Kourie 2006: 20). In its broadest sense it refers to the “*raison-d’être* of one’s existence, the meaning and values to which one ascribes” (20). It is the intention of this study to illuminate the relatively unexplored domain of the mystical and spiritual in Van Niekerk’s novels. The focus of the project emerges within the context of a renewed interest in the spiritual, both locally and globally. In Ileana Dimitriu’s (2010) article, “‘Why are we suddenly talking about God?’ A Spiritual Turn in Recent Critical Writing,” she observes the import placed on re-thinking the spiritual by a range of critical thinkers in the humanities. These thinkers posit a more inclusive *secular* spirituality, Dimitriu notes, that moves beyond orthodox religion to include aesthetic experience (Eagleton 2009: 7), magic (Boym 2001: 11–12) and a new sense of the sacred as embodied and demotic (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass & McCredde 2009: 2–3).

The tropes of revelation and redemption through artistic creation, magic, mysticism, and a physical-material sublime are areas of interest that form the basis of this reading of Van Niekerk’s novels. The concern with immanence and non-dualism in Van Niekerk’s novels is typical of postmodern spirituality, a particularly inclusive and perhaps vague typology

described as “integralist,” “trans-traditional” (Schreiber 2012: 7), “sociologically messy, experiential, multifaceted, ecological, provisional and collective” (Petrolle 2008). The thematic preoccupation with the poetic imagination, human and cosmic interconnectedness and re-enchantment in Van Niekerk’s novels resonates with Dudley Schreiber’s argument that the ontological absence of postmodernity and the consequent “craving for presence in an expanding cosmos” call for “active imagination,” “integralist thinking” and creativity as providing a “richer” spiritual “wardrobe” (2012: 7). More specifically, my focus is on the redemptive or revelatory potential of art and creativity in Van Niekerk’s novels (most obvious in *Memorandum*).

Schreiber does not mention Friedrich Nietzsche in his article, but his argument is strikingly Nietzschean. For the German philosopher, art is spiritual and redemptive, turning the individual into a creator and “transfigurer” of existence. In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche writes:

I desire for myself and for all who live, *may* live, without being tormented by a puritanical conscience, an evergreater spiritualization and multiplication of the senses [...]. We no longer need [priestly and metaphysical] calumnies: it is a sign that one has turned out well when, like Goethe, one clings with ever-greater pleasure and warmth to the “things of this world”: for in this way he holds firmly to the great conception of man, that man becomes the transfigurer of existence when he learns to transfigure himself. (1968: 434)

Art is Nietzsche’s remedy for nihilism – a counteraction to metaphysics. He goes as far to assert “art as the real task of life, art as life’s metaphysical reality” (453). In his later writings the Dionysian forces in life and art come to represent the apotheosis of the artist-philosopher. According to Richard Schacht, the Dionysian worldview is Nietzsche’s “this-worldly alternative to (or kind of) religiousness” (2012: 131). For Nietzsche the artist-philosopher (the synthesis of the two crafts is essential in his view) is an artificer who creates meaning out of the abject, chaotic and fragmentary nature of existence. The resonance of Nietzsche’s writings with Van Niekerk’s work is not unexpected – she wrote her Master’s dissertation on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885) (see Van Niekerk 1978.)

It is my view that Van Niekerk’s novels are philosophical and reflect a spiritual, ethical and aesthetic quest toward a greater openness to alterity, to the world, and toward cosmic interconnectedness. Her ontological vision, presented through her key characters, is informed

by her broad education in world thinkers, which is rooted in traditional continental philosophy, but far exceeds it.⁸ In light of this, my study serves to acknowledge the rich existential, philosophical and esoteric canvas of Van Niekerk's novelistic writing by employing an eclectic selection of thinkers in illuminating Van Niekerk's aesthetics. It is also my intention, in my analysis of *Memorandum*, and in summary, to consider how Van Niekerk makes her creative writing a way of thinking and quest/ining – *poetically*. In an interview with Willie Burger, Van Niekerk attests to the philosophical (as well as psychological) nature of her writing, but foregrounds her preference for the novel as a better space for the “konkretiserings en dramatiserings van idees” (concretisations and dramatisations of ideas) (2009b: 152). She writes, “[i]n die eerste plek dink ek dat ek die skryf van 'n roman bo die skryf van filosofie kies omdat ek myself beter kan verras daarmee” (in the first place, I think that I choose the writing of a novel over the writing of philosophy because I can surprise myself better with it) (152).

Before outlining the structure and focus of this thesis, it is necessary to offer a brief summary of the narratives under scrutiny. *Triomf*, set in the months preceding the first democratic elections in South Africa, centres on the life of an incestuous, poor white Afrikaner family – the Benades – and their daily struggles. The violent, abusive and destructive behaviour innate to this family, as well as their paranoid fear of an apocalypse, signalled by the end of apartheid and the election of a multi-racial democratic government, are tempered by Van Niekerk's dark humour. While early criticism of the novel focuses on unpacking allegorical correspondences between written context and socio-political text, critics such as Burger have noted that the success of the novel lies in the fact that the characters exceed their stereotypes and are also presented as individuals (2000: 18).

Van Niekerk's narratives contain allegorical elements, but her use of allegory always surpasses a simple one-to-one equation and her multifaceted characters avoid final definition. Consequently, I offer a sympathetic reading of the two dominant voices and antithetical

⁸ When I met Marlene van Niekerk at *Time of the Writer* (2009) in Durban she mentioned that she was reading the works of the psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein, which I happened to be reading for my chapter on *Agaat*. This unexpected coincidence points to Van Niekerk's continued interest in a broad range of paradigms for thought and human experience. The allusions to Claude Levi-Strauss, Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Gaston Bachelard, and others, in *Memorandum*, as well as the echoes and traces of philosophical ideas in *Triomf* and *Agaat* ground Van Niekerk's narratives in a complex web of ethical and existential questioning.

perspectives presented in the novel: those of the brother-and-sister duo, Treppie and Mol.⁹ Beyond satire and allegory, *Triomf* is a synthesis of novelistic technique and philosophical probing, following (to some extent) the technique of the existentialist writer, Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Nausea* (1964 [1938]). The philosophical and mystical dimensions of the novel are veiled by bawdy language and the simplicity of the narrative. However, Van Niekerk seems to caution against a reductive reading of her novel when she relates that a criticism of her short stories as being “too constipated [...] wordy and [...] intellectual” caused her to write a novel “about the most complex things in the most crass language imaginable” (L’Ange 2007).

Notably, *Triomf* is stylistically very different from Van Niekerk’s subsequent novels: *Agaat* and *Memorandum*. Arguably, *Triomf*’s success gave the author courage to refute her early critic and write a highly allusive and encyclopaedic novel.¹⁰ Van Niekerk’s second novel centres on the complex relationship between Milla de Wet, a white farmer woman afflicted with motor neuron disease, and Agaat Lourier, her adopted coloured¹¹ daughter, housekeeper and nurse. Narrated by Milla, on her deathbed, *Agaat* is obsessively concerned with disease, the degeneration of the body, and minutiae of burial and funeral arrangements, as well as the nature and destination of the soul, guilt and reconciliation. It is also, as Chris van der Merwe observes, concerned with relationships, with “mense wat mekaar vorm en mekaar reflekteer, wat die wêreld na hul eie sin beskou en *herskep*” (people who form and reflect each other, who view and *recreate* the world according to their own perspective”) (my emphasis, 2004: n.p.).

If *Triomf* saw Van Niekerk digressing from her poetic tendency to write elevated prose, and *Agaat* is Van Niekerk’s defence of “wordiness” (the novel is over 700 pages long), the metafictional novella, *Memorandum*, sees Van Niekerk in her true métier playing with words in a circuitous, philosophical novel that reflects on the role of the artist-thinker. The protagonist in *Memorandum*, Wiid, suffering from metastasised colon cancer, embarks on a

⁹ For allegorical readings see Viljoen (1996), Brophy (2006) and Shear (2006). A more comprehensive review of literary criticism on *Triomf* is provided in my chapter on the novel.

¹⁰ See Heyns on the “encyclopaedic breadth of reference” in *Agaat* (2009: 127).

¹¹ In South Africa the term ‘coloured’ does not refer to black people in general, but those commonly thought of as ‘mixed race.’ Coloured people are also the descendants of Cape slaves, the indigenous Khoisan people and various other black groups as well as Europeans (Adhikari 2005: 2). They occupy an interstitial position between the white minority and black majority in the South African racial hierarchy (2). The term, ‘coloured,’ is highly contentious because of its association with miscegenation, and thus scandal (Wicomb 1998). Also see G.J. Gerwel (1988).

philosophical and spiritual quest sparked by a chance eavesdropping on a conversation between two fellow hospital patients, whom he names Mr X and Mr Y. This encounter leads to Wiid's personal transformation, changing the "desolation" he feels about his death (Van Niekerk 2006b: 7) and resulting in his extraordinary decision to abandon the potentially life-extending surgery. The novel ends with Wiid's vision of himself as Death's emissary, greeting all who enter the underworld with: "Stranger, be welcome to this place! Death has here been restored!" (124).

In the following three chapters I analyse Van Niekerk's three novels in terms of tropes of quest and the encounter with the other. Each chapter foregrounds literary criticism and scholarship on the novel and outlines a theoretical framework. My reading of *Triomf* centres on Treppie's and Mol's ontological quests. Although Mol is not a thinker or social critic in the way that Treppie is, her affinity with abjection allows her to create a porous threshold between self and other. I explore Mol's abjection in terms of Luce Irigaray's writings on female mysticism, looking at Mol as a burlesque Mary/Martha figure. I argue that her affinity with alterity allows Mol to become the creator of her own cosmology – "Man of Stars," an anthropomorphism of the constellation Orion. The latter half of Chapter One focuses on Treppie's quest toward becoming a philosopher and, finally, Dionysian artist. I critically examine the final assertion in the novel by Treppie and Mol – a refusal to *trek* North – and its ambivalent significance.

In Chapter Two I shift from the Nietzschean thought that governs the first and third chapters to employ a psychoanalytical lens. Eric Santner's defence of the applicability of psychoanalysis seems pertinent here. His assertion that psychoanalysis is "always already a 'social science'" in that it "addresses what seem to be our most intimate and individual secrets" and is "deeply engaged with the texture of social bonds" (2006: 196) is evocative of the secrecy and hidden motives in the family bonds in *Agaat*. Moreover, the language of psychoanalysis better suits the predominance of interior monologue, the 'telepathic' communication between Agaat and Milla, and the expression of unspoken and unconscious desires in *Agaat*. In this chapter the quest motif is framed in terms of the Lacanian *la traversée du fantasme* (the traversing of the fundamental fantasy), a circuitous journey into the unconscious that reveals the fundamental fantasy that underpins and structures our

reality.¹² I argue that Agaat figures simultaneously as Milla’s “fantasy” and her guide, assisting Milla to open her eyes and acknowledge her paradoxical abjection and idealisation of Agaat. Chapter Two concludes by exploring the interrogative function of the frame narrative. Here, ironically, the narrator, Jakkie, does not close the fictional story, but signals narrative aporia – summoning the reader, with his *Wunderhorn* and allusions to poetic inspiration, on a quest of creative production.

Chapter Three begins by foregrounding the labyrinthine structure of *Memorandum* and how this correlates with the quest motif and its association with spiritual awakening. The paradoxical quality of the labyrinth as chaos and complexity concealing order and symmetry (Shiloh 2007: 28) relates to the structure as well as the cosmological vision presented in *Memorandum*. I explore *Memorandum* as a postmodern *nekyia*, the Homeric term for the descent into Hades. The *nekyia*, with its association of entering the unconscious realm of symbols and archetypes, is a metaphor for *poiesis*, the processes of the creative act (Smith 1997: 201), making this a *Künstlerroman*. I argue that Wiid’s quest is similar to Zarathustra’s “going under”: a twofold quest for his true self and a *creative* language of his own. Entering the labyrinth of X and Y’s manic discourse and embracing “Mania” (goddess of death and figure of absolute alterity, a feminine evocation of Nietzsche’s Dionysus and a creative-intuitive ontology), leads to Wiid’s transformation and apotheosis as an artist. Finally, through the lens of Gaston Bachelard’s writings on the creation of poetry and Nietzsche’s writings on art, I explore how Wiid’s poetic reverie makes self-reflexive comments on the act of reading and writing – the community of readers and writers – and challenges conventional understandings of love and connection.

Despite employing a varied and eclectic theoretical frame, the principal theories I have utilised – including feminist psychoanalysis, Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophies on art, Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian analysis, and the phenomenology of Gaston Bachelard – elucidate a common motif in Van Niekerk’s novels: an endless quest toward self-creation through *poiesis*, the processes of artistic creation. Although *poiesis* is the root word of poetry, following Martin Heidegger I embrace the broader denotation of *poiesis* in its relationship with *physis* (the organic powers of nature), as a gradual process of emergence or calling into being.

¹² These theories and terms will be explained in Chapter Two.

Before outlining Heidegger's views on *poiesis*, it is worth noting that Van Niekerk's prose is as dense and layered as poetry. The translator of *Triomf* and literary critic, Leon de Kock, stresses the "visceral energy" of both her prose and poetry, her "word-bending sound-effects" and "'thick' images which are evoked in layers, at a micro- as well as a macro-level" (2013: n.p.). Nietzsche's claim that "the great masters of prose have almost always been poets," and that "[g]ood prose is written only face to face with poetry" (1974 [1887]: 145), can be applied to Van Niekerk, poet-novelist-dramatist. Significantly, this study gravitates toward the more poetic, elusive and allusive passages in Van Niekerk's novels, passages which heretofore have not been subject to a sustained critical analysis: Treppie's toilet vision in *Triomf*, two crucial stream-of-consciousness passages in *Agaat*, Milla's waking dreams, the elusive last page of *Agaat*, and the prose poem, "Passacaglia," that ends *Memorandum*.¹³ I am particularly interested in the layered quality of Van Niekerk's writing, her play with words and their origins, as well as her use of symbol and myth. Admittedly, this is a study of works in translation and there is undoubtedly, in the words of Heyns (translator of *Agaat* and *Memorandum*), "irreparable loss and exorbitant gain" in the process of translation (2009). Heyns's approach to translating Van Niekerk's novels, articulated in the two options identified by Umberto Eco, is to "lead the reader to understand the linguistic and cultural universe of the source text," rather than "transform the original by adapting it to the reader's cultural and linguistic universe" (2009: 127).

I explore the characters in Van Niekerk's novels who show a progression from philosophising, or thinking, toward a creative transformation or re-imagining of their reality. Van Niekerk's concern with creativity resonates with Martin Heidegger's formulation of *poiēsis* or artistic creation as a "bringing-forth," an "arising of something from out of itself" (2008 [1977]: 4–5). Through *poiesis* or creative imagining, Van Niekerk's characters transform abjection (in *Triomf*), despair (in *Agaat* and *Memorandum*), and the mundane (in *Memorandum*) into art.

Poiesis does not only refer to the creation of an object of art, but has broader significance as a "threshold occasion, a moment of ecstasis when something moves away from its standing as one thing to become another" (Halliburton 1981: 144). Thus, the consequence of artistic

¹³ Helize van Vuuren's analysis of Wiid's "Passacaglia" (2014) was discovered in the very final stages of completing this thesis.

creation is not only the production of art, but also the transformation of the artist. In Heidegger's words, "what is brought forth by the artisan or the artist [...] has the bursting open belonging to bringing-forth not in itself, but in another (*en allōi*), in the craftsman or artist" (2008: 5). Thus, I argue that the characters who are the subject of this study become (to varying degrees) artists whose involvement in the process of "bringing-forth" – of transforming their perception and reality – results in their own personal emergence or awakening. Heidegger's idea of the transformation of the artist through art, suggestive of art as an ontology of constant becoming, echoes Nietzsche's proclamation that we should become "poets of our life" (1974 [1887]: 240), transforming the mundane, abject, and even most detestable sides of life, into art. Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian is central to my analysis of Treppie's character and becomes the primary theoretical lens in reading *Memorandum*. Van Niekerk's characters are not only artists/poets, but in their final realisation they become *poetic thinkers*, merging intellect, intuition and imagination.

Heidegger may be a pragmatist, but his articulation of *poiesis* as "bursting open" and a reciprocal human-material "bringing-forth" in the process of artistic creation is resonant of mystical revelation. Awakening or revelation is a recurring trope in Van Niekerk's writing, and, markedly, an essential aspect of the quest narrative. Van Niekerk's counteraction of orthodox religion in her novels recalls Walter Benjamin's assertion that the "true, creative overcoming of religious illumination [...] resides in a *profane illumination*, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration" (1979: 227). Through the lens of various theoretical paradigms I discuss and unpack the significance of moments of illumination in Van Niekerk's novels. Significantly, the use of dreams, daydreams, fantasy and phantasmagorical images are a common feature of Van Niekerk's writing. In Van Niekerk's diegeses, waking dreams are often the gateway to alterity, and in turn, revelation. In Benjamin's words, "dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth" (1979: 227). Although Van Niekerk is not strictly speaking a surrealist, Benjamin's essay, "Surrealism," bears striking relevance to this study of her novels, and, in particular, to a discussion of the relationship between art, imagination and the realm of the socio-political and ethical. These issues (ethics, politics, creativity) guide my reading of the three novels, but will be explored in more detail in the conclusion. Like the surrealists and avant-garde writers that Benjamin speaks of, Van Niekerk is concerned with "the magical realm of words," "magical word experiments," and "passionate phonetic and graphic transformation games" (Benjamin 1979: 232). Furthermore, Benjamin links the profane illumination with a socio-political imperative that warrants further discussion in

terms of Van Niekerk's novels: for Benjamin, profane illumination is a self-transcendence – a “revolutionary experience, if not action” that finds inspiration in the secular, the mundane, and even the detritus, of modern life. It supposes “a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday” (237). Indeed, Benjamin, like Heidegger, sees thinking as a passage to alterity, and the encounter with alterity as transformative.

The revolutionary or transformative potential of the magical and mystical is an underlying concern in my analysis of Van Niekerk's three novels, and is related to alterity. In all three novels, alterity, and the various permutations of the other, function as a guide to self-transcendence. Engagement with alterity leads to moments of revelation, or “profane illumination” (1979: 179). For Benjamin, such moments of insight are brought about through a “loosening” of the self, sparked by intoxication (179). Admittedly, intoxication is not the primary passage to artistic activity in Van Niekerk's novels (although Treppie is constantly drunk, and Wiid is mildly inebriated on sweet wines); however, the encounter with alterity provides an equivalent catalyst for undoing the boundaries of the self. Van Niekerk's characters confront alterity on numerous levels: their own abjection, death, the racial other, and the experience of alterity in artistic creation.

Van Niekerk's novels, coloured by death, dying and the abject, provide a veritable eschatology, whether it be the end of an ideology (as in *Triomf*, and to some extent, *Agaat*) or personal mortality (as in *Agaat* and *Memorandum*). The confrontation with death, abjection and alterity becomes the catalyst for a spiritual-philosophical and aesthetic quest to find and create meaning in existence. In Van Niekerk's novels alterity has a magical allure that becomes a stimulant for reflection, critical self-evaluation, and, finally, creative transformation. The degree of creativity and transformation increases incrementally in each of Van Niekerk's novels. In these three novels interaction with the other can be seen as contagious, effecting moments of revelation or self-awakening that lead to imagining new ways of being.

Jean Petrolle provides a useful summation of the divergent delineations and effects of alterity as defined by various theorists. She notes that for Emmanuel Levinas and Hélène Cixous, alterity denotes “an awareness and experience of the other, that which is not the self, that which is outside the self” (2007: 115). They speak of the other in a “morally serious” tone,

and employ “charged terms that locate in it a certain numinous quality associated with the religious.” In contrast, Petrolle observes, for Walter Benjamin and Michael Taussig alterity implies:

a more playful, irreverent, even mischievous act of being – a manipulation and transcendence of ordinary consciousness that leads more to transgression or revolt than to the kinds of Judaic or feminist concepts of peace and moral virtue Levinas and Cixous imagine. These French philosophers think of alterity as immanent – a *fact* more than an *act* of being. For Taussig, following Benjamin, the allure of alterity inspires action, an effort to *become* other. (2007: 115)

In particular, Petrolle observes the association of alterity with a spiritual-ethical dimension, on the one hand, and with mischief and insurrection, on the other. Both of these dimensions are evident to varying degrees in the works discussed in this study.

In view of Petrolle’s distinctions, in *Triomf* I explore the spiritual-ethical aspect of alterity in Mol’s engagement with abjection: her own dereliction and that of the racial other she embraces – “the Chicken Licken woman” at the peace rally. I argue that Mol’s openness to others presents an ethics of compassion and hospitality. Furthermore, the embrace of the other enables a shared epiphany and moment of spiritual transcendence. In my discussion of Mol’s character I rely predominantly on the French feminist thinkers, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, who, like Cixous, provide a rich, esoteric vocabulary for describing the ineffable quality of alterity. Conversely, I look at the subversive and Machiavellian aspect of Treppie’s relationship with alterity, where the abject and scatological become a catalyst for insight into his and his family’s complicity with apartheid ideology. In addition, the abject becomes a source of creative inspiration which enables Treppie to transform the “shit” of their lives into art, thus sublimating abjection. Unlike Mol, who seeks transcendence in the beyond (her “Man of Stars”), Treppie seeks immanence, a “this-worldly” sublime, in the spirit of Friedrich’s Nietzsche notion of the Dionysian.

Van Niekerk’s novels show a progression in terms of the presence and effect of the other. De Kock observes the “deep ontological isolation” of the fictional world of *Triomf*, and the remoteness of the racial other (2010: 27). Encounters with the other are limited: Lambert’s

interaction with the culturally hybrid Sonnyboy at the rubbish dump outside Triomf,¹⁴ his awkward dealings with a prostitute of mixed race, and the family's encounter with a multiple society at the peace rally. In the closed world of the Benades, alterity exists in their own abjection. Treppie identifies the Benades as the abject of the Afrikaner *volk*: the “shit,” or excess of the white self.

In comparison to the insular diegesis of *Triomf*, alterity looms largely as the primary narrative force in *Agaat*. The narrative is guided by the nurse/analyst, Agaat, sitting behind the scenes (but also at the centre of the action), probing her reclining patient to enter into the painful process of delving into her unconscious motives. The title character is presented as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a figure of mystery, awe, fascination and fear (Otto 1936 [1923]: 26) that serves as catalyst for her adopted mother's numinous revelation. Rudolf Otto's idea of the numinous as the uncanny “wholly other” finds its psychoanalytical counterpart in Jacques Lacan's *objet petit a*, a paradoxical object of terror and joy. Interestingly, in terms of associations with the numinous, Žižek refers to the *objet a* as the “sublime object,” an elusive and indescribable figure of alterity, the fundamental object of desire imagined to fill the void of existence (Wright & Wright 1999: 3). In my chapter on *Agaat* I examine Agaat's role as “sublime object,” and how the encounter with alterity encourages a process of self-interrogation that serves to destabilise racial hegemonies. I explore the revelatory and redemptive potential of interaction with the other, the inseparability and mutually authoring effect of self and other.

In *Memorandum* Wiid faces the absolute other: death, personified by the goddess of his writing, Mania. Wiid's journey is not simply one of remembering, and making sense of, a fragmentary conversation; the deeper level of his quest involves coming to grips with his own death. I argue that Mania is a unifying trope of a non-rational, creative ontology. By embracing Mania and her emissaries (X and Y, and his iconoclastic librarian, Joop), Wiid's hermit-like existence is opened up to other worlds. Alterity in this novel is figured on a cosmic, esoteric and intellectual, as well as subjective, level and equates to opening up to other paradigms of thought and modes of being. In particular, I analyse Van Niekerk's provocative exposition on alterity, presented in a footnote.

¹⁴ De Kock subjects this encounter to critical scrutiny in his article, “The Call of the Wild: Speculations on a White Counterlife in South Africa” (2010).

Following Benjamin's view that Surrealists (like their baroque predecessors) see reality as things (emblems or ruins) and ideas ("allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things") (in Sontag 1979: 16), I associate the moments of awakening (metaphorical 'grails' of the quest) in Van Niekerk's novels with three emblems. The three emblems or ruins that feature prominently in Van Niekerk's three novels, and that form my title are: the constellation, Orion, in *Triomf*; the cornucopian Ram's-horn in *Agaat*; and the labyrinth, in *Memorandum*. Notably, *Triomf* ends with the surviving characters gazing at the constellation of Orion. *Agaat* ends with the frame narrator, Jakkie, reflecting on the gift of the Ram's-horn from *Agaat*. These emblems mark a gradual (at times, eddying) progression from a search for transcendence (an ambivalent looking up and outward in *Triomf*), to an uncomfortable and fraught looking-adjacent to the racial as well as geospatial and cultural other (alluded to in the frame narrative) in *Agaat*, to an infinite, multiple, labyrinthine opening out to the world in *Memorandum*. Another way of looking at this is a shift from a search for inspiration in a distant cosmos (Orion), to a receptive waiting for inspiration to blow through the air (in the merged symbols of Ram's-horn-Aeolian harp), to a more active search for creative stimulus in the earth beneath one's feet – the chaos of material reality (labyrinth). Shifting from *Triomf*'s distant, outer-space orientation, the interminably labyrinthine world of thought in *Memorandum* opens the protagonist and reader out to "galaxies within" (Nietzsche 1974: 322): a grounded, expansive universe of thinking and being that replaces transcendence with immanence.

In the conclusion, I offer a final analysis of the three novels and the significance of their endings in terms of the "vital excess of alterity" in Van Niekerk's work (Van Niekerk in Burger 2009b: 155), her concern with the threshold, and ethics of negative dialectics. In this conclusion I connect Nietzsche's anti-dialectic and "error" with Adornian negative dialectics and poststructuralist undecidability. (It should also be remembered that the obliteration of normative differentiation and the stable, rational ego are Nietzschean legacies.) While the combination of critical theory and poststructuralism may appear counterintuitive, I view them compatible in creating a critical thinking that challenges "universalising moral philosophies or generalised theories of (distributive) justice, [...] but does not remain averse to [...] a deconstructive ethics" – a form of "enabling and generative" undecidability (Hanssen 2000: 7). I relate this dialectical method to *poiesis* and to the Nietzschean view of art as a contingent, emergent mode of being. Nietzsche's views on the artist-philosopher and art as

means of self-transformation are introduced in my analysis of Treppie, in the chapter that follows.

Chapter One: *Triomf*

1.1 Introduction

Triomf (1999 [1994]; trans. Leon de Kock), the first, and arguably the most politically overt, of Marlene van Niekerk's novels, satirises Afrikaner nationalism's desire for racial purity by exposing its abject core, the poor white Afrikaner family, exemplified by the Benades. *Triomf* tells the tale of the incestuous and sadomasochistic Benade love-quadrangle consisting of Mol, the abject mother; Pops, her brother who poses as patriarch; Treppie, the other brother and cynical trickster figure; and Lambert, their monstrous child. The novel is set in 1994 at the dawn of the first democratic South African elections and the consequent demise of Afrikaner nationalism.

The Benades are, as Treppie attests, "the dregs of Triomf!" (324). His plan to get rich in Triomf by repairing and selling second-hand fridges fails, and the family live off welfare pensions and survive on a staple diet of bread, polony, Coke and Klipdrift. Suspense in the novel is created by the anticipation of personal and political events that affect the Benade family. In terms of the former, the family fear Lambert's fortieth birthday. This very overdue symbolic coming-of-age will be a test of his oedipalisation as Treppie has promised him the gift of a prostitute. The whole family know that if Treppie fails to deliver it will be the "worst thing ever" (343), "*The End [...] Then all hell will break loose and the graves will fall into the holes holes holes*" (347), according to Mol. Lambert appears oblivious to the fact that this is a once-off financial transaction with a sex worker. He has unrealistic expectations that this woman will offer long-term companionship on the *trek* (migration) North when "the shit hits the fan" (221) after the first democratic elections. All possible outcomes seem negative: the family members fear Lambert's wrath if Treppie defaults on his promise to provide the prostitute, but they are equally concerned about Lambert's potential impotence, which Treppie predicts in his riddle rhyme: "*His pressure was low/ And his tubing had taken a blow/ Which is why at forty/ Lambert could no longer be naughty*" (348). Meanwhile the reader also waits for the unsuspecting Lambert to find out the truth about his incestuous origins, which will be the Benades' personal apocalypse. Tension mounts in the Benade home as their future remains uncertain in the face of a new multiracial political order.

The Benades serve as a microcosm of white Afrikaner culture pre-1994. Consequently, criticism of the novel tends to focus on the novel's symbolic potential as an allegory and satire of the degeneration and incestuous insularity of apartheid ideology. The novel is explored in terms of its symbolic or metaphorical potential and as a parody of an insidious ideology and its gullible ideologues. As Louise Viljoen states, "[on] a political level the incestuous and inbred Benade family becomes symbolic of the extremes to which the apartheid philosophy of racial exclusivity led" (1996: 71). Matthew Brophy relates the characters to Jungian archetypes and reads *Triomf* as a form of "psychological allegory in which the Afrikaner psyche, after a long history of repression, is forced to confront its *shadow*," manifested in the form of Lambert, who represents the "violence, the incestuous insularity, and the tendency toward self-destruction precipitated by apartheid, which for so long the dominant Afrikaner discourse would not publicly acknowledge" (2006: 96–7, 100). Not too dissimilarly Jack Shear, in his categorisation of the novel as postcolonial gothic, sees the novel as a "return of the repressed" (2006: 75).

Other critics observe Van Niekerk's playful and subversive use of vernacular and demotic Afrikaans language as well as her hybrid mix of English and Afrikaans that challenges notions of cultural purity (Burger 2000; De Kock 2003 & 2009a, Devarenne 2006). Such explorations of satire and linguistic subversion tend to focus on Treppie, the trickster figure, and the novel's primary voice of satire (Devarenne 2006: 111). Treppie is "the most self-aware of *Triomf*'s characters" (Devarenne 2009: 64), the cleverest and most cynical (Van der Merwe 1999: n.p.). Treppie pokes fun at his family's blind belief in ideological rhetoric, from the Voortrekker myth that assumed their divine right to the promised land, South Africa, to the doomsday prophecies of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Chris van der Merwe, in his review of the novel, notes how Treppie seeks to reveal the religious and political ideologies that shape their lives, despite the fact that it is difficult for the Benades to live without illusions in circumstances such as theirs (1999: n.p.). Burger (2000) takes this theme further in his Nietzschean reading of Treppie's paradoxical role as the "Dionysian Devil" that both destroys and creates illusions.

Even though he is abusive towards Mol and often incites Lambert to violence, Treppie is "Tickey" the clown (Van Niekerk 1999: 337), and like the fool in Shakespearean tragedies he reveals the truth about their situation through wit, wry humour and riddles. Treppie

encourages the reader to maintain a critical distance, in an almost Brechtian fashion, as does the structure of the novel, with its numerous ironic and descriptive chapter titles and subtitles.

Much of the pleasure of the text comes from Treppie's scatological humour, irony and cynicism. However, the Benades do not only evoke attitudes of amusement, contempt or indignation typical of satire, they also evoke deep pathos. They all suffer, as victims of poverty, as the laughing stock of the neighbourhood and as the abject of the Afrikaner *volk*. They are keenly aware of how their neighbours look upon them with disgust, and yet even in their greatest moments of shame and degradation they still attempt to hold on to their right to be treated with some sense of human dignity.

In this chapter I will focus on the two dominant voices and antithetical perspectives presented in the novel, those of the brother-and-sister duo, Treppie and Mol. I argue that Van Niekerk presents two opposing metaphysics, ontologies and ethical stances through these two characters. Van Niekerk's novel is not only a satire or allegory, but a synthesis of novelistic technique and philosophical probing, following (to some extent) Jean-Paul Sartre's technique in *Nausea* (1964 [1938]). The philosophical aspect of the novel is made evident in Burger's (2000) application of Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of the Apollonian and Dionysian in art to his analysis of Treppie's character. Burger's article inspires my further investigation of how an existentialist paradigm informs, underlies and elucidates Treppie's character. Mol may not appear to be a thinker or social critic, but a sympathetic reading of her character reveals that she is more than Treppie's "valley of echoes" (Van Niekerk 1999: 26), a hysteric who mimics the dominant male discourse of the narrative. To date there has been little close analysis of Mol's character,

Mol's (perhaps perverse) concern for the men in her family, and her openness to others, presents an ethics of compassion. Both characters, to varying degrees and in varying approaches, implicitly ask: what does it mean to *be*? What is existence? What is being *qua* being?

Mol and Treppie's opposing ways of perceiving and experiencing are identified by Treppie: "When he, Treppie, tells Mol things it's not to see if she can still think, but to see if she can still feel. [...] He can't figure out if he wants her to feel things, or not to feel anything at all. *That's 'cause what's better for Mol will be worse for him*" (my emphasis, 116). He admits

that it is a “fucken miracle” that she still is able to feel and that he “has to dig deeper and deeper nowadays to find Mol’s feelings. First you get blood and shit and gore. Then only feelings” (116). In terms of the gendered division of discourse, Mol is situated on the side of ‘heart’ or feelings, silence, passivity, irrationality, nature and body, while Treppie is situated on the side of ‘head’ or reason, discourse, activity, culture and mind. Although these binaries are not inviolable in the novel, Mol is depicted as an almost entirely libidinal being, whilst Treppie is the witty intellectual – the thinker. Treppie is obsessed with, almost envious of, Mol’s ability to feel. Her association with feeling points to her possession of some imagined and hidden surplus pleasure in pain, or *jouissance*. According to Lacan’s theory this feminine “*jouissance* of the body,” “a *jouissance* beyond the Phallus” (Lacan 1982: 145), is something she does not know or understand but merely experiences, like a mystic (145, 147). Lacan asks, “And why not interpret one face of the Other, the God face, as supported by feminine *jouissance*?” (147).

Mol and Treppie’s interpretation of events and focalisation are also often presented in juxtaposition. The most significant moment when their voices and perspectives are in counterpoint is at the end of the novel when Treppie declares, “No more North” and Mol’s internal monologue follows, “North no more” (Van Niekerk 1999: 474). I explore the significance of these final words in the following analysis of Mol and Treppie, and conclude the chapter by comparing and contrasting how the final moments in the novel highlight their different outlooks. The chapter on *Triomf* is divided into two sections, on Mol and Treppie, and offers a sympathetic reading that explores their diverse metaphysical perspectives and how these orientate them towards the future, beyond the white Afrikaner cultural insularity of apartheid.

The section on Mol is titled “Martha(martyr)dom: A Philosophy of Compassion and Sacrifice.”¹⁵ In this section I pay particular attention to the motifs of compassion and hospitality offered through the maternal body, focusing on Mol’s depiction as a composite Christ/Mary figure, a sacrificial and abject mother. I examine Mol’s (perverse) compassion in her offering of her body to her brothers and son, as well as her demonstration of hospitality at the peace rally the Benades accidentally arrive upon. At the rally Mol becomes part of a collective epiphany, a spiritual experience that reveals the ambivalence of the sacred as both

¹⁵ This section is an adaptation of a journal article, published in *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* (see Rossmann 2012a).

impure and pure. I argue that in this scene abjection, paradoxically, enables a spiritual transcendence and 'pure' hospitality. Finally, I explore Mol's role as mystic, which enables her partial escape from patriarchal subjugation through the creation of her own cosmology, and consider the extent to which this alternative theology presents a productive feminine model that breaks with Afrikaner patriarchy's dereliction of the feminine and offers a positive re-signification of sacrifice.

The section on Treppie is titled "Treppie's Trepanations: Fridge Philosophy and Excremental Visions" and is divided into five subsections. I begin, in "Excrement: The Satirist's Master Trope," with a discussion of Treppie's role as satirist and the function of his extensive use of excremental language and metaphors in degrading all that is sacred to Afrikaner cultural mythology. The brutal truth-telling of the satirist is a virtue extolled in the existentialist view, which calls for an unflinching acknowledgement of life as it is, without any comforting pretences. Thus, in the second section I look at Treppie's "Excremental Existentialism." I argue that, despite Treppie's atheism and cynicism, he shows convincing concern for his family's souls, not in a metaphysical beyond, but in the here and now. This is evident in Treppie's realisation that Lambert, who is almost 40, needs to acquire a vocational skill that will enable him to become self-sufficient. Treppie is not only concerned about Lambert learning practical skills, but also that he live authentically and face the truth of his incestuous origins. I note that Treppie's existentialist approach relates to a tradition of philosophy, dating back to Socrates, as "care of the self" (Flynn 2006: 1). In this sense the philosopher is a kind of physician of the soul. Treppie's name, with its association with trepanation, relates to his function of probing into and scrutinising how his family have been interpellated by Afrikaner nationalism. In "Treppie's Trepanations" I focus primarily on an interior monologue that occurs whilst Treppie is on the toilet awaiting a bowel movement. Treppie's toilet contemplation serves to expose the ills of apartheid ideology and Afrikaner cultural mythology in general by delving into the Benades' family history of ideological interpellation. In the fourth section, "Excremental Ecstasy and the Dionysian Sublime," I offer a close reading of Treppie's ecstatic purging of his bowels and its significance in terms of the novel as a whole. I explore the extent to which this sublime moment truly offers the Benades any kind of transcendence beyond their life of suffering and abjection. Finally, in "'No more North': An Alternative Transcendence," I analyse the significance of Treppie's final words and what they may suggest in terms of a new mode of being for Treppie, the Benades, and by extension white South Africans, in a post-apartheid South Africa.

1.2 Martha(martyr)dom: A Philosophy of Compassion and Sacrifice

Mol's perspective has been sidelined in critical accounts of *Triomf*, despite the fact that the novel opens and ends with her focalisation. This may be because she is the object of much of Treppie's humour and is a particularly pathetic character. It is through Mol that Van Niekerk knits issues of spirituality and sexuality in the novel, and explores notions of compassion and sacrifice. From a feminist perspective Mol's compassion is problematic as she appears to be a passive receptacle for male domination and thus perpetuates the phallogentrism of Afrikaner identity. Elsie Cloete argues that the "concept 'Afrikaner' is undeniably masculine, literally and figuratively and not simply experientially. Afrikaans rules of grammar state explicitly that all things, concepts, all inorganic entities are male and must be signified by 'his' or 'him'" (1992: 46). Furthermore, "the Afrikaner [...] expected Afrikaner women to sublimate themselves to and collaborate in the establishment of Afrikaner nationalism's volks-utopia" by taking on the role of the patient and suffering *volksmoeder* who would sacrifice everything for God and Fatherland (45, 49). The feminist poststructuralist thinker Irigaray observes that patriarchy depends upon the sacrifice of the mother. Consequently, women exist outside the symbolic order in a state of dereliction (in Whitford 1991: 77). Margaret Whitford summarises Irigaray's central argument that women are used "by the male imaginary to deflect or mediate the death drives of men [...]. They are, like Antigone, the 'guardians of death,' but there are no social/symbolic forms which mediate their death" (159). They are "sacrifices that ensure the maintenance of patriarchy" (159). However, Irigaray foresees two ways in which women can free themselves from this bind: through the divine and a maternal genealogy. Whereas Van Niekerk's second novel, *Agaat* (2006), imagines the latter in the mother-daughter bond between Agaat and Milla, in *Triomf* Mol is literally "alone of her sex," to borrow a phrase from Marina Warner's text, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976). Within the male-dominated Benade household Mol has no feminine alliance to rely on – her only alternative is union with the divine.

1.2.1 "She went and lay herself down. Housecoat and all.": (Perverse) Compassion

Mol demonstrates compassion in terms of the word's denotation, "to suffer with," from the Latin *com*, meaning together, and *pati*, to suffer. The German *mitgefühl* (fellow-feeling) and Afrikaans *medelye* (fellow-suffering) best describe Mol's sense of compassion. This fits an almost Heideggerian phenomenology of existence as being-with-others, in terms of the

unifying concept of care. Mol reaches out to others in search of “fellow feeling,” and in order to be acknowledged as a person when she accepts a cigarette from one of the neighbours who are enjoying watching the Benades suffer after Lambert, now burnt and partially naked on the lawn after an epileptic seizure, has created a bonfire of their “rubbish” and almost burned down their home. The catastrophic bonfire occurs aptly on the fifth of November (the title of the chapter), Guy Fawkes night. Pop observes that Mol is impervious to the neighbour’s snide comment, “after action satisfaction” (Van Niekerk 1999: 242), an ironic repetition of the slogan for Lexington cigarettes and a clear expression of *Schadenfreude*: “She wants to see another person’s face. She wants to touch another person’s hand. If someone wants to give her a cigarette, who’s she to say no? Some people still care when they see you’re suffering. That’s what Mol’s thinking. Pop knows. Shame. Poor Mol” (242).

Mol’s notion of compassion as literally laying herself down for others keeps the Benades together. She offers her body to her brothers and to the product of their incestuous relationship: Lambert, the ‘monstrous’ hypersexualised epileptic and pyromaniac whose violent outbursts keep the family in a perpetual state of anxiety. Mol bears the brunt of Lambert’s physical aggression and insatiable sexual appetite. In a chapter aptly titled “Knitting” Mol explains how she attempts to calm Lambert and thus save the family from falling apart. Mol follows a (perverse) Christ-like understanding of compassion as not merely a sympathetic feeling, but feeling translated into action, and indeed into bodily sacrifice. Mol recalls:

[W]hen Lambert began to swear and get wild, breaking all their stuff so that Treppie would drag Pop out from behind the bathroom door where he was hiding and say to him come, let’s pack our stuff so we can get out of this bladdy madhouse for once and for all, then she would say to Lambert he must come and lie down with her in the back room so he could find some peace for his soul.

She would rub his thing until he was finished and then everything would be fine again. But after a while that was also not good enough anymore. He wanted to put it in. He wanted to do it himself. What could she do? She lay down for him. She went and lay herself down. Housecoat and all. (41)

Mol explains that “she’d lain down for them” to prevent them “fall[ing] to pieces [...] like kaffirdogs on rubbish heaps” (41). She spares the family from utter abjection by abjecting herself. Mol’s notion of “laying herself down” echoes Christ’s words to his disciples in the

parable of the Good Shepherd. Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10: 11, 14–15).

In this parable Jesus refers to himself as “the gate,” saying, “whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture” (John 10: 9). The gate and garden, Christian symbols of rebirth and paradisaal bliss, were originally pagan symbols of the womb and Great Mother goddess. This is implicit in the word Eden, which in Hebrew means “a place of delight.” In the Middle Ages a common Christian metaphor for heaven was the Garden of Delights, and whilst Jesus in Matthew’s gospel states that there will be no marriage in heaven (and thus implicitly no sex) (Matthew 22: 30), the pagan tradition views “paradise as the epitome of all sensual gratifications and the satisfaction of all sexual-romantic yearnings” (Walker 1983: 770).

Mol’s concrete act of compassion and hospitality is to offer her body. Significantly, the Hebrew root of the word compassion (or mercy), an attribute of God, is *rehem*, the womb (Schroer & Staubli 2001: 72). The female sexual organs are thus a metaphor for divine compassion and hospitality. Although Mol faithfully listens to the Christian teachings of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and practises the Christian principle of sacrificial love, her theology is more complex and contradictory. Her full name is Martha, like the biblical Martha of Bethany, sister of Mary who sat at Jesus’s feet and listened to his words whilst Martha tended to the domestic practicalities of looking after the men in the home. Martha interrupts Jesus and asks that Mary leave his side so she can assist her, but Jesus favours Mary’s contemplative position, saying to Martha, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10: 41–2). The feminist theologian, Dorothee Soelle, suggests that these two feminine models of faith, the doer and dreamer, should not be hierarchised, but integrated. Soelle is critical of a Western tradition, “based on values formulated rather by Aristotle than by Jewish thought,” that judged contemplative life to be superior to active, practical life and thus degraded Martha as “narrow and limited” (2006: 129). Mol may appear unlike the romanticised version of the sweet, young Mary of Bethany, but Mol is also a dreamer and stargazer who idealistically seeks love in her romance novels, reminisces over her days selling roses, imagining she too was a rose, and longs for a hereafter of peace and plenitude as she gazes at the stars. But like Martha, Mol must also be the pragmatist who is burdened with preparing for her family’s needs and cleaning up their messes: she always carries a peg

in her pocket in order to prevent Lambert biting off his tongue during a seizure and she is the only one who has earned a living to support the family. She is not afforded the luxury of Mary's quiet contemplation and unquestioning faith. Mol cannot rely on God or the government to assist her in satisfying her family's most basic needs: "The National Party has never been able to stop three men getting the better of her in one morning" (Van Niekerk 1999: 42). According to Mol, "If they really want to help, the National Party must provide some prostitutes. Well-paid, plump, fancy broads to save women like her from their lot in life" (43).

1.2.2 Abject Mother: Mol's (Un)hole-iness

Mol's full name, Martha, (in the Afrikaans pronunciation) puns on the English word, martyr, and is fitting in terms of her role as an unorthodox Christ figure or sacrificial hero. Christ may be a man, but, according to Irigaray, he is the "most female of men" (1985 [1974]: 199). The perversion of his passion reverses patriarchal logic as the female mystic's self-abasement mimics His abjection upon the cross: "She is chaste because she has faced the worst perversions, has prostituted herself to the most disgusting acts" (199). Like Christ's, the mystic's triumph is in her abjection. Mol is the abject core of the Benade family – their concubine and symbolic whore (she receives no payment for this service). As the incestuous mother she is the wellspring of their abjection. She is presented as a simple creature, sympathetic to dogs and treated as the family's 'general dogsbody.' She is physically and psychologically afflicted by Lambert's epilepsy, violence and insatiable sexual appetite. She has suffered a nervous breakdown, and Treppie and Lambert think she is dimwitted and demented. "Lambert schemes his mother's not all there anymore. She's lost some of her marbles" (Van Niekerk 1999: 29). Treppie says, "There's just a hole where Mol's head is supposed to be" (116). In order to keep the peace in the home, she has been reduced to relative silence. She takes Treppie's provocations "lying down, like a scared dog. Never backchats" (26). When she does speak it is often to repeat Treppie's words. He calls her their "valley of echoes" (26). Mol oscillates between hysterical mimicry and mystical ecstasy, although her belief systems are problematic as they do not entirely break from androcentric theological configurations. Irigaray argues that women are more prone to be mystics by virtue of their marginal position in the phallogocentric order: it was "the poorest in science and the most ignorant [who were ...] the richest in revelations," thus generally women (1985: 192). It

is precisely because the mystic is already outside scopical representation that she seeks ecstasy, from the Greek *ekstasis*, to stand outside oneself. In her “ex-stasies, she risks losing herself,” her subjecthood (192).

Mol can be seen as a composite of Christ, Mary Magdalene (the Sacred Harlot), and the Virgin Mary as Queen of Humility. Mol offers Lambert comfort associated with heavenly and spiritual salvation – “peace for his soul” – through sexual gratification. Her conception of compassion, comfort and peace is a very literal translation of Jesus’s instruction: “Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence” (1 John 3: 18–19). Mol shows her love in the only way left (or known) to her: through providing sexual gratification. She is whore to the Benade Holy Trinity. They appropriately name their old Volkswagen run-around after her. Treppie explicates the parallels between the car – the Volkswagen (nation’s car) – and their own *volksmoeder*, Mol, who, as Treppie says, “Services them all! Father, Son and Holy Ghost, into their glory!” (Van Niekerk 1999: 27). In this equation she is both Holy Mother and Sacred Whore – service station and rest area. Marina Warner, in her study of the evolution of the myth and cult of the Virgin Mary, observes that the two Marys are often confused. The Church felt that Mary Magdalene was an unsuitable first witness to Jesus’s resurrection, and thus in the myth of the apparition the Virgin Mother replaces Mary Magdalene. However, the mystical union of mother and child was often eroticised, as it is in Maria de Agreda de Jesus’s seventeenth-century text, *City of God*. According to Agreda de Jesus, “the Virgin Mother participated in an extraordinary favour ... the glorious body of the Son so closely united itself to that of this purest Mother that He penetrated into it and she into his” (in Warner 1976: 231).

Unlike the Virgin Mary, Mol is not pure; she is associated with filth and waste. At the second-hand car dealer’s Treppie finds her “standing among the scrapheaps and the writeoffs” (Van Niekerk 1999: 26). Lambert says “It’s just his mother that he can’t get fixed up” (26). The Benades may symbolically represent the abject of Afrikaner ideology, the white trash that the *volk* would rather forget, but even Lambert, whose feet are deformed, whose seizures make him appear demonic and whose privates are often exposed, feels ashamed of his mother. Whilst the Virgin Mary’s holiness depends on the incorruptibility of her body, her “wholeness” and wholesomeness, Mol’s unholiness is evident in her “hole-iness” and unsavouriness. She “tore open” when she gave birth to Lambert (28). Her sexual

availability is evident in the fact that she “doesn’t wear panties” (32). Although she wears a housecoat “so she won’t mess up her clothes” (32), Lambert realises that this garment now entirely defines her. In his murals, Lambert depicts her as a mole (because of her name, Mol) and under the sketch of her housecoat, labelled “HOUSE COAT,” he writes in brackets “MOLE SKIN,” but notes that it “looks more like a piece of slaughtered human skin” (165). Lambert has imaginatively “skinned” Mol in order to strip the boundary between himself and the mysterious (m)other. Elsewhere in the mural moles are depicted with “things stuck up you know where” (40). Lambert’s obsession with violent penetration suggests his failed oedipalisation and separation from the mother. Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror* (1982 [1980]), observes that society is founded upon the abjection of the mother and the repression of the primary mother-child dyad. The maternal abject is a troubling reminder of the fragile boundary between subject and object, and a threat to the unity and identity of the subject. The separation from the mother, states Kristeva, is “a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling” (1982: 13). Lambert’s drawings reveal his struggle to abject his mother and enter the symbolic order. In his drawings Mol’s slaughtered skin is dismembered from her body and her body is violently penetrated. Lambert denigrates his mother by depicting her either as a mole or a dog, but also reveals his fear of her by imagining her as a “Superbee” with multiple phallic stings. However, Mol’s power as a “Superbee” is only a mirror to reflect his own desire for phallic power, allowing the masculine subject to invert, through fantasy, his own state of impotence. For Kristeva, abjection is primarily and originally associated with the maternal body; it is “the translinguistic spoor of the most archaic boundaries of the self’s clean and proper body. In that sense, if it is a jettisoned object, it is so from the mother” (1982: 73). Lambert’s incestuous relationship with his mother makes him, in Kristeva’s formulation, a “devotee of the abject” who does “not cease looking, within what flows from the other’s ‘innermost being,’ for the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body” (1982: 54).

1.2.3 Madonna of Humility and Orion, “Man of Stars”

Mol is a burlesque Mary figure, in terms of her (sexual) martyrdom, her submissiveness, longsuffering, humility and lowliness. In the Gospel of Luke the Virgin Mary declares herself the handmaid of the Lord (Luke 1: 38). Mol in her ubiquitous housecoat is certainly the

picture of the maid. Although the Church had always commended Mary's silence, modesty, and self-effacement, Warner observes that it was only in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that the Franciscan order extolled the virtues of extreme humility, poverty and self-abnegation based on the cult of the "Madonna of Humility" who had "left her starry throne in the heavens and laid aside her robes and insignia and diadem to sit cross-legged on the bare earth like a peasant mother with her child" (1976: 182).

Mol is humble in the most literal sense of the word, in its origin in the Latin *humus*, meaning earth, of the ground, or of decomposing matter. However, her abjection allows her privileged access to the divine. Like the mystic's, Mol's suffering and abjection "paradoxically [open] up a space where her own pleasure can unfold. Though still circumscribed by male discourse, this is a space that nevertheless is vast enough for her to feel no longer exiled" (Moi 1985: 137). Mol finds her pleasure in the creation of a personalised deity, "Man of Stars," a personification of the constellation Orion. This figure emerges as Pop and Mol listen to Lambert talking in his sleep after the seizure triggered by the great bonfire to burn their "rubbish." Mol fixates on two of Lambert's utterances: "Light-blue my beloved, for ever and ever" and "Orion washes my feet" (Van Niekerk 1999: 268). Light-blue is the colour of the heavens and the ocean and is thus associated with the sublime. It is also the colour of the mantle of the Madonna, the Queen of Heaven. Furthermore, the Benades all have light-blue eyes. As eyes are the window to the soul, Mol's Orion may signify hope for the Benades' spiritual perpetuity in heaven, as on earth their only son is clearly a "genetic cul-de-sac" (72).

It is worth noting that Lambert's post-seizure ramblings are garbled reconfigurations of his plan to take the prostitute (the gift for his fortieth birthday) for a ride in their Volkswagen with "new light-blue seats" so that they can listen to "romantic, late-night music from Radio Orion" (207). Lambert is also concerned about washing his feet so that he is presentable for her. Nevertheless, Orion becomes Mol's "warhead, through thick and thin" and "washes [*her*] feet" (my emphasis, 472). There are certain similarities between Lambert and the Greek hero Orion: they are both giants and come from ambiguous parentage. One legend tells that Orion was born out of an ox hide that Zeus, Poseidon and Hermes ejaculated into (Gantz 1996: 273). But whereas Lambert uses his strength against Mol – stabbing her, locking her in a fridge and raping her – Mol's Orion is her humble saviour and protector. Orion, the hunter, known for brute force and sexual rapaciousness, may be emblematic of Afrikaner *machismo* and the apartheid government's brutishness in enforcing its policies of segregation. Like the

Afrikaner who boasts of cultural supremacy, Orion is also guilty of hubris. His boast to Gaia that he is a match for any animal on earth is short-lived as she sends a scorpion to slay him. Artemis and Leto take pity on him and appeal to Zeus to place him in the sky, thus deifying him (272).

Mol's "Man of Stars" is chastened as he must kneel to wash her feet. When Mol looks up at the sky, the stars look like tears. She sees "Big, wet, runny stars. Old stars" (Van Niekerk 1999: 472). This image echoes the tender scene where Pop and Mol bathe each other after surviving Lambert's Guy Fawkes bonfire. Pop gently and meticulously dries each part of Mol's body: "He doesn't miss a single spot, but he's like someone who's lost his way" (265). In this ritual cleansing Pop is penitent before her feet, her body his rosary, an instrument of prayer: He stands "on his knees in front of her [...]. It's as if he wants to give her something. She looks down, at where he's drying her off" and tries to stop him drying her behind, her most abject orifice, but he persists, "He says he's counting his blessings" (265). He "pushes his head into the hollow of her hip" and begins to cry until his tears "fall onto her feet. Thick, fat, lukewarm tears" (266). Their tears wash over each other's bodies in a mutual pedilavium. Pop washes Mol's feet out of gratitude, as Mary of Bethany washed Jesus's feet for raising her brother Lazarus from the dead, and as Jesus washed his disciples' feet as a lesson in humility and sacrificial love.

1.2.4 An Active Mystic: Productive Contagion and Hospitality

In "The Age of Breath" Irigaray writes that a woman "must accept active responsibility for her spiritual life, for her soul. She must become a creatress of humanity, generate it spiritually and not only naturally" (2004: 167). By sublimating elements from her own lived reality, Mol becomes an active creator of her own cosmic world. Her cosmological vision is primarily androcentric; nevertheless, Orion is a refuge for the frail and abject. Mol imagines Pop "taking a rest up there, in Orion's belt, in a hammock that hangs from the two outside stars" along with her favourite dog, Gerty, who is "resting between the two stars on the other side" (Van Niekerk 1999: 473). Mol's cosmology, based on the virtues of humility and compassion, presents an alternative morality for white South Africans in post-apartheid South Africa. Her example of reaching out to others can be seen in the peace march the Benades unwittingly enter when they take a drive into Johannesburg. As they are pulled out of their

car by the predominantly black masses, Lambert, Treppie and Pop become anxious and fear losing each other, whilst Mol immerses herself in the crowd and is approached by a young black woman who works at the fast-food restaurant, and an old homeless man.

[A] young meid with a Chicken-Licken cap on her head came over and said: “Peace be with you, Ma,” and she smiled at Mol and pinned a light-blue ribbon on her housecoat, with two doves on a bright blue pin, one white and the other light-blue. [... The] young meid kept squeezing her hand and smiling at her with shining eyes. She smelt like Chicken Licken and her hand was a bit greasy. But then she squeezed the hand back, even though she’d never touched a black hand before, clean or dirty. On the other side of her was an outa with only one leg, leaning on crutches. He stuck one of his crutches under his arm and then he shook her hand. That hand was cold and the skin was loose. And the bones felt like they had come apart.

She saw the outa had no blue on, so she worked her hands loose to give him her own ribbon. [...]

Suddenly everything went so quiet you could hear a pin drop. All around her people began to cry. The outa dropped his chin onto his chest and closed his eyes and then tears started rolling down his cheeks. Next to her, the young meid was sniffing. The next thing, that meid picked up her hand, with Mol’s hand still in it, and used it to wipe her nose. Mol thought, ja, it’s hard to believe, but if that young meid had rubbed her snot off on the back of Mol’s own hand, she would wragtag not have minded. There was such a nice feeling in the air that she almost started crying herself. But then the silence was over and all of sudden it was just hooters and bells and singing and people in taxis throwing peace signs. A young man in a striped tie grabbed her and they did a tiekiedraai like she last saw in the days of Fordsburg’s garment worker dances. (300–1)

This collective epiphany with its white and light-blue doves, colours associated with purity and the sublime, and its vision of a harmonious, jubilant and hopeful multi-racial society, is reminiscent of the Christian paradisaal community where the meek finally exist in glory. The revelation is so powerful it transforms all those who experience it. This shared spiritual moment contradicts and reverses expectations of the sacred. Typically, a greasy hand and snot would be seen as impure and tears as pure, but here both tears and snot are part of a scene symbolic of a spiritual union and renewal. Snot is closer to “saliva and genital secretions,” which Mary Douglas describes as “more pollution-worthy” than tears (1978: 125). Douglas reads the body as a microcosm of the body politic, “a symbol of society” (115): anxiety about maintaining “unity and purity” of the body equates to anxiety about boundaries of the body politic (124). In this scene Mol’s body becomes a contact zone where boundaries of pure/impure and white/black are transgressed. Tears may be pure and have

significance as being spiritually cleansing; however, Douglas notes that their “scope for symbolising social relations and social processes” is limited (125). Here snout has greater symbolic potential as a sign of social cohesion, suggesting progressive social ‘contagion’ between the races. Rules determining uncleanness are socially and culturally determined, but “can be set aside for the sake of friendship” (7). Indeed, Douglas notes, “sound hygiene [is] incompatible with charity” (8). Mol demonstrates her friendship, care and awareness of the sanctity of the moment through contravening the laws of hygiene. Her hospitality highlights the ambivalence of the sacred as simultaneously holy and defiled. Engagement between strangers at the peace rally demonstrates a dissonance between bodily impurity and purity of spirit experienced in acts of compassion and hospitality. Paradoxically, bodily abjection enables spiritual transcendence and social transformation.

Mol’s affinity with abjection facilitates her compassion for, and kinship with, the most marginal members of South African society. For Mol contagion is implicit in compassion, but bereft of its negative sentiment. She shows compassion realised as hospitality by sharing her peace pin with the “outa,” and permitting (even enjoying) the liberty the Chicken-Licken women takes in wiping her nose with Mol’s hand still clenched in hers. Mol’s hospitality may be described as ‘impossible’ unconditional hospitality, in Derridean terms. Jacques Derrida suggests that ‘pure’ or unconditional hospitality involves an impossible aporia, as being a host implies self-mastery and ownership of property, land or a nation, but to be hospitable one must relinquish self-mastery and ownership to the guest. For Derrida hospitality is “an interruption of the self” (1999: 51), an impossible altruistic act. Consequently, hospitality tends to be conditional, as the host sets limits in place in order to secure his or her position of power. According to Derrida, hospitality cannot be “without sovereignty of oneself over one’s home,[people, or nation,] but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing and thus by excluding and doing violence” (2000: 55). Hospitality thus involves violence against the self, both in unconditional hospitality, through the self’s abnegation, and in conditional hospitality, through violence against others.

However, there is a possible lacuna in Derrida’s theory. Penelope Deutscher observes that Derrida’s theories rarely thematise hospitality from, to, or between women. Historically, women are rarely the hosts or *arrivants* (the stranger or other who comes from outside); they may be companions of strangers or facilitate the extension of hospitality by the host (2010:

256). Indeed, in “biblical stories women are notoriously [...] sacrificed to the hospitality extended by men to men” (256). However, Mol, the Chicken-Licken woman and the old man play both host and *arrivant*. All three are depicted as marginal and abject in society; they are already “interrupted” selves. In the above scene it is suggested that self-mastery and ownership of property are not necessarily prerequisites for hospitality. In her more recent writings on spirituality and the feminine divine, Irigaray draws attention to woman’s “hospitality,” her affinity with alterity. Irigaray writes that this “place of hospitality for the other” is made “of our flesh, of our hearts” and often “escapes the control of will” (2004: 30), as is evident in Mol’s spontaneous communion with the crowd, whilst Treppie, Pop and Lambert remain frozen in fear. The hospitality shared between Mol and the strangers occurs primarily through the body: holding hands, smiles, tears and dancing.

Judith Still states that for Irigaray each subject “should be involved in creating a third place, a threshold, in-between. This would create a horizontal transcendental between *I* and *you*” that would not attempt to domesticate otherness (2010: 159). Mol creates this space and breaks down racial divisions through acts of humble hospitality and compassion. The novel’s primarily ambivalent, even cynical, attitude toward the future of the insular white Afrikaner community and their integration into a new multiracial society is countered by this vision of social harmony. Here, the humble, through their shared understanding of suffering, participate in a spiritual experience and are exalted. Compassion becomes the catalyst for social change, and fellow-suffering becomes a source of consolation. Through the solidarity Mol experiences with marginalised others, her despair and powerlessness are transformed into consolation and even joy, as she exchanges tears for dancing the “tiekiedraai” (Van Niekerk 1999: 301). For Sölle, religious experience is inherent in ordinary lived reality. Promoting an active mysticism, rather than an ascetic withdrawal from the world, she observes, “[s]uffering makes one more sensitive to the pain of the world”; however, what is “essential is whether we carry out the act of suffering or are acted upon, indifferent as stones” (1975: 132). At the peace march Mol re-signifies self-sacrifice not as self-abasement, but as a more positive openness to others, and reveals the transformative powers of compassion.

Mol’s repetition of Treppie’s utterance at the end of the novel, “North no more,” does not imply surrender, but commitment to the here and now (Van Niekerk 1999: 474). She does not wait passively, but practises her driving, “so I won’t be stranded one day if there’s a crisis” (473). Mol declares that “they’ve learnt by now to leave her alone” (473); however, her

liberation from patriarchal control is not emphatic. Her mysticism may enable a temporary and partial escape from Afrikaner patriarchy's dereliction of the feminine, but her potential for redemption is far from decided. The final scene, in which Treppie, Lambert and Mol watch Orion dipping "head first behind the roofs of Triomf" until only his heels stick out above the overflow pipe (473–4), may be a scatological critique of any narratives of redemption, or an overly empathetic reading of Mol's plight and perverse compassion. As Kelly Anspaugh succinctly states, the "task of the satirist is to de-idealise or de-sublimate, to take what humanity has put high and bring it low, and shit, as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, is 'the most suitable substance for the degrading of all that is exalted'" (1994: 75). Orion's 'dumping' reminds the reader of Mol's naïveté, and cautions against valorising feminine subservience within the paradigm of male chauvinist Judeo-Christian religious ideology. The abjection of Mol's deity may point to Van Niekerk's ambivalence towards any sublimation, and her awareness that while it is necessary or inevitable, it could also be a delusion, as the Benades' blind belief in apartheid ideology turned out to be.

1.3 Treppie's Trepanations: Fridge Philosophy and Excremental Visions

1.3.1 Excrement: The Satirist's Master Trope

The Benades literally live on top of the rubble of Sophiatown, the culturally and racially plural community that was demolished by the social engineers of apartheid in the 1950s. The novel opens with Mol watching Lambert digging up bits of rubble and "other stuff [that] shine[s] in the muck" (Van Niekerk 1999: 1). According to Treppie, "Triomf's name was all wrong, by a long shot. It should have been Shitfontein or Crapville" (114). Treppie calls Triomf "a dump" (317), and their home is the carbuncle of Triomf with their garden bestrewn with the remains of burnt and broken fridges, a broken-down Volkswagen Beetle and other rubbish unearthed by Lambert from the ruins of Sophiatown.

Jack Shear describes Treppie as having the "most informed and socially critical perspective" in the Benade family (2006: 82). He is the "only one [in his family] who actually clicks" that Triomf is "a dump" (Van Niekerk 1999: 317), and the only one who "can see them for what they are" (116). Burger (2000) notes Treppie's frustration with people's unwillingness to see things as they really are and their use of ideology (which, according to Burger, includes narrative, religion and political mythology) to veil or idealise reality. Burger likens these

illusions or idealisations, what Treppie refers to as “wallpaper,” or “walls full of mock paradise” (Van Niekerk 1999: 91), to Nietzsche’s Apollonian veils (Burger 2000: 6–7). Treppie, according to Burger, is a Dionysian Devil, whose task is to strip down the Apollonian veils and lay bare Dionysian chaos: the gritty reality of their lives (15). According to Treppie, naming the failed Afrikaner Nationalist project of poor white social upliftment *Triomf* (Afrikaans for triumph), “full of prefab wagon-wheels and aloes, rotten with rubble,” makes “people think they’ve got a licence to bullshit” (Van Niekerk 1999: 91–2).¹⁶ As satirist it is Treppie’s task to expose “bullshit” (any form of deception), and he does this through “shit-stirring” (317), a task he compares to artistic creation – more specifically, he likens his wily verbal manipulations and invectives to the melding of the Menorah, a seven-branched golden candelabra in the Tabernacle spoken of in Exodus. Excrement is an appropriate medium for the satirist’s art. It is the “most suitable substance for the degrading of all that is exalted,” according to Mikhail Bakhtin (1984 [1968]: 152). Treppie refers to the lies propagated by the Afrikaner nationalist government as “shit.” He says that “there’s so much shit in the country” because “everyone who looks for shit, stands for shit too,” and he envisions it building up to an excremental apocalypse when the shit will “[come] like lava from two sides” (Van Niekerk 1999: 221). Treppie follows this story by singing, “Tides of Benediction!” (221). This is evocative of Bakhtin’s comments on excremental imagery as simultaneously debasing and regenerative, “humiliating” but also a “blessing” – turning death into a “gay monster” (1984 [1968]: 151). Treppie, unlike Mol, Pop and Lambert, joyfully anticipates the eruption and exposure of the lies upon which their lives are based.

The contradiction in Treppie’s character, Burger identifies, is that he is also complicit in deception, in creating “wallpaper” (2000: 14–16) because he gives his family “perspectives” to “save their backsides” (Van Niekerk 1999: 432), such as the “saving perspective” that they are a normal family, that Pop and Mol are husband and wife and Lambert their son. However, Burger notes that for Treppie it is “noodsaaklik om voortdurend daarvan bewus to wees dat so ’n perspektief, verhaal of storie, nie die werklikheid is nie” (necessary to constantly be aware that such a perspective, myth or narrative, is not reality) (2000: 15). Unfortunately, Mol, Pop and Lambert tend to believe these “perspectives” wholeheartedly. Unlike them, Treppie experiences the perpetuation of lies as a burden, an uncomfortable state that is physically manifested in his chronic constipation. Treppie “schemes” that if “the Holy Spirit

¹⁶ *Kak* (Van Niekerk 1994: 86), literally denoting defecation but also an Afrikaans expletive, is translated as “bullshit” in the English version.

ever descends upon him [...] it will be in the form of gippo guts. Then he'll be truly blessed" (Van Niekerk 1999: 440). While the gift of the Holy Spirit to Jesus's disciples was talking in tongues, Treppie's ideal blessing would be a more base catharsis. It is appropriate then, that Treppie's confession of his and his family's complicity with Afrikaner nationalism occurs during a lengthy toilet session, which ends in the long-awaited messianic moment of the opening of his bowels.

1.3.2 Excremental Existentialism

The Benades' base existence is a very literal expression of existentialist ontology. In Sartre's view humankind is "born into a kind of void (*le néant*), a mud (*le visqueux*)" (Cuddon 1999: 295). Appropriately, the novel opens with Lambert digging about in the "muck" (Van Niekerk 1999: 1), and in Chapter Seventeen Treppie's view of human existence is very similar to that experienced by Jean-Paul Sartre's protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, in *Nausea* (1964 [1938]). Treppie likens the individual to a confused, "exposed" blind man with branch-like hands reaching out into nothingness, in an indifferent world: "your hands each with their five twigs. Always trying to grab onto things in the void here in front of you, never knowing what's coming next. Or what's likely to trip you up" (Van Niekerk 1999: 315).¹⁷ In *Nausea*, Roquentin lies on a park bench and sees "great black tree-trunks, [...] with] black, knotty hands reaching towards the sky," and later imagines the "branches groping around like blind men" (Sartre 1964 [1938]: 64, 67). It is under the chestnut tree that Roquentin experiences a vision that leads to his awareness of the absolute contingency of existence, its "nothingness." However, it is through facing this reality – the absurdity and meaninglessness of life – that he realises a terrifying freedom and with it the responsibility to make of life what one wants. Sartre's novel is open-ended, and the solution to Roquentin's nausea and despair in facing the contingency of existence remains open to debate. One possible solution is music or art, a thesis presented by Sartre's predecessor, Nietzsche (which will be discussed in more detail later). In Sartre's later philosophical writings he argues that "commitment (*l'engagement*) to some action and part in social and political life" can provide a "reason and structure for existence and thus [help] to integrate society" (Cuddon 1999: 295). Chapters Seventeen and Eighteen reveal Treppie's self-discovery and commitment to his family's future within an

¹⁷ I am elaborating on Shaun Irlam's comment that "Treppie's hands [as described above] tell a different existential story about the world" (2004: 706).

existentialist paradigm. After his contemplation on the toilet of his and his family's situation in life, their "thrownness" into the political "muck" of apartheid ideology, Treppie takes action (in Chapter Eighteen) by assisting in Lambert's "salvation": his training as a fridge technician.

Despite the pleasure Treppie appears to take in riling Lambert and confusing Mol, his intentions are not always malicious. In fact, his sardonic humour often belies a real concern for his family's souls, not in a metaphysical beyond, but in the here and now. Treppie is anxious about Lambert's future and ponders on ideas of salvation and redemption in Chapters Seventeen and Eighteen. Metaphorically associating Lambert with their broken fridges, Treppie asks, "How do you save a fridge [...] with a condenser that won't condense and an icebox without ice? God's own evaporator. One big heavenly leak" (Van Niekerk 1999: 333). While Mol is the romantic who creates fantasies and imagines a better hereafter in order to cope, Treppie is the sceptical pragmatist who realises the importance of facing the cold, hard truth of their situation. He "doesn't want to be around the day Lambert finds himself alone in the world [...]. The day he has to make a polony sandwich on his own. Or mow the lawn" (314). Treppie realises the necessity of equipping Lambert with practical skills to enable him to be self-sufficient, and even with a trade, Treppie knows Lambert requires a miracle. Lambert has little understanding of how to cope in the 'real world,' beyond the boundaries of their backyard, or in a 'new' South Africa where the myth of white Afrikaner supremacy is exposed as a lie, and his own monstrosity is eventually revealed to him at the end of the novel. Leon de Kock observes that Lambert's encounter with the hybrid character Sonnyboy highlights Lambert's "deep isolation" and "loss of mastery," his "inability to extend outwards into a greater Symbolic order of other languages and other signifying systems" (2010: 27).

After Lambert spends many days trying (unsuccessfully) to fix the Benades' broken fridges, and following pleas from Mol and Pop, Treppie agrees to offer Lambert some instruction. In "Triomf Trials," Treppie conducts a mock catechism. He dons a red nose, like Tickey, the clown, and poses as *dominee* (pastor) and catechist. He passes the "family Bible" (Van Niekerk 1999: 333) (his fridge manual) on to Lambert and after a period of study orally examines his catechumen. Treppie mocks the seriousness of his instruction by declaring the "holy Electrolux [as his] witness" and the fridge manual as containing "the prophets and the law, and everything else you need to inherit the earth, be blessed, and live in eternal glory with your Fuchs and Tedelex" (333). Treppie's parody of a Christian sacrament belies a sense

of real urgency and importance to this instruction. Lambert is almost 40 and has still only had sex with his mother. In terms of psycho-sexual development, he can only attain full subjecthood after separating himself from his mother and making new symbolic attachments. In order to engage with the wider cultural world, one must submit to the Law of the Father. In this case, Van Niekerk has Treppie dramatise the Oedipal narrative using the fridge metaphors known to the Benades, and with Treppie occupying the impossible position of Name-of-the-Father. Bearing in mind that no one can actually occupy this position, as the Phallus is pure signifier and thus “can only play its role as veiled” (Lacan 1982: 82), or in disguise, Treppie highlights the staged nature of his performance by wearing a clown’s nose. The function of the Name-of-the-Father is to regulate desire, breaking up the mother-child dyad by substituting the Law of the Father for desire of the mother. It is thus fitting that Treppie’s gift to Lambert for his belated coming-of-age is a prostitute – in the phallic economy, a socially acceptable substitute for his mother.

Despite Treppie’s sarcasm in performing the catechism, it is clear that he is genuinely concerned about Lambert’s ability to survive without his guardians. In the Christian liturgy catechism is given in preparation for Confirmation: a “gift of the Spirit” and a “sacrament of Christian maturity” bestowed upon the faithful as a *gratia ad robur* (grace for strengthening) in professing one’s faith (Fransen 2004: 283). This is Treppie’s way of symbolically attempting to integrate Lambert into society, enabling his “[acceptance] into the bosom of the congregation [...] of Triumph Electrical Appliances” (Van Niekerk 1999: 333). Lambert certainly requires a ‘miracle’ to aid his oedipalisation and entry into the Symbolic, as Treppie predicts in his riddle. This chapter is aptly titled “Fridge Trial,” as it is only a mock exam; Lambert’s real test will begin with his sexual encounter with the prostitute on his birthday and end with his discovery of his incestuous origins.

Although this may only be a theoretical test for Lambert, it is an ordeal for the whole family as they understand the risk taken in allowing Lambert “to be the hero” (350), enabling his emancipation and sharing their knowledge with him, for it is not only knowledge of fridges that he needs to receive, but the truth about himself. Mol, as focaliser, is aware that they are all “scared” because handing over the fridge manual creates a “hole” that cannot be filled and “they knew there were still lots of other things in that hole, and the whole caboodle was now making its way straight to Lambert,” so that they “wouldn’t have a leg to stand on anymore, never mind a perspective to live from” (350). The opening of this “hole” suggests the

irruption of the Real (in the Lacanian sense), a constant reminder of the inadequacy and failure of the Law of the Father, with Lambert as symbolic of the failure of Afrikaner eugenics and apartheid's cultural insularity. As the epitome of apartheid's dysfunctionality, Treppie describes Lambert as "[o]ne big heavenly leak" (333). In order to fill this gap, Treppie hands Lambert the fridge manual, their "trophy." As this title suggests, the fridge manual is a hollow signifier and has served very little practical purpose as the Benades' fridge business was never realised. Like the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the sublime object that comes to fill the void in the symbolic order, the fridge manual and its association with Treppie's dream of financial success is a "'no-thing' that only becomes something through the subject's desire" (Homer 2005: 85).

From a Lacanian perspective this void is experienced as a trauma, a terrifying disturbance; however, in existentialist terms facing ontological nothingness causes a productive anxiety that leads to the realisation of the infinite contingency of being. This nothingness is terrifying but it also means the possibility of creating something out of nothing, as Treppie does with his "perspectives." Treppie may create perspectives only to overturn them, as Burger argues (2000: 16), but he is not indifferent to the possibility of the Benades' shameful reality being exposed. Treppie takes off his red nose, dropping his guise as jester, to reveal the gravity of this initiation ceremony. He is clearly shaken as he turns around "as if he was looking for something to hold onto" (Van Niekerk 1999: 350). He winks, but "not a devil's wink, [...] a half-mast wink, like he was half-sad" (350), suggesting his pathos for Lambert's desperate position, and perhaps the improbability of a positive turn of events. He momentarily suspends his cynicism, and, offering Mol and Pop reassurance, says: "'Well now, people, fasten your seatbelts, the playing fields have been levelled for a miracle, whether you believe it or not'" (350).

Treppie's concern goes beyond providing Lambert with practical and vocational skills; he cares that Lambert live a life of integrity and face the truth of his situation: "If [Lambert] was good enough to inherit all that they still had of any value, namely his fridge book and his fridge tools, then now was also the time for him to inherit the secrets of the fathers, so he could seek his own salvation with open eyes, like a man" (444). Treppie's views on how to live ethically relate to the existentialist precept of authenticity. To live authentically "is a forbidding task" that involves actively and consciously choosing one's own path, or, "as Heidegger puts it, retrieving one's 'ownmost possibility' for being," with a candid assessment

of one's situation (Cooper 2012: 43). Treppie's decision to assist Lambert reflects the moral philosophy propounded in Sartre's lecture, "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946). Defending existentialism against criticisms of its lack of social and political conscience, Sartre argues that if one is committed to one's own freedom, one should also be committed to assisting others choose their own freedom. Although Sartre warns that this brief defence may dilute or distort his philosophy,¹⁸ the ethics espoused in it are relevant to Treppie's choice to assist Lambert on his path to self-discovery. Treppie does not expect salvation to be bestowed by a higher power, or by a beneficent deity in the hereafter, as Mol does; he sees salvation as an individual's life project.

The idea of salvation is gestured toward in *Being and Nothingness* (1991 [1943]). In this text, Sartre speaks of "the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation. But [...] only after a radical conversion" (1991 [1943]: 412).¹⁹ Although he discusses the desire to assist others in attaining freedom, care for others presents a dilemma for the existentialist hero: "[w]hatever I may do *for* the Other's freedom [...] my efforts are reduced to treating the Other as an instrument and to positing his freedom as a transcendence-transcended" (410). In trying to assist others, the subject risks turning the other into an object and thereby foreclosing the other's capacity to act freely. Thus, Sartre concludes, "I shall never be able to accomplish anything except to furnish [the Other's] freedom with occasions to manifest itself without my ever [...] directing it or getting hold of it" (410). Treppie refers to Lambert as his "apprentice" (Van Niekerk 1999: 183), a machine he can "wind [...] up" (116) and suggests his affinity with "a blunt instrument" (329); however, in the fridge catechism Treppie temporarily suspends treating Lambert as an object or thing, and attempts to "furnish" Lambert with an opportunity to realise his own freedom.

1.3.2 Treppie's Trepanations

Treppie's existentialist approach relates to a long tradition of philosophy, dating back to Socrates, as "care of the self" (Flynn 2006: 1). Thomas Flynn notes that the Greek philosopher of the Hellenistic period, whether Stoic or Epicurean, was "a kind of doctor of

¹⁸ He later regretted the publication of this paper, as many of his views were misconstrued (Warnock 1991: xiv).

¹⁹ Sartre's promised elaboration on an ethics of salvation does not occur in this text or any other works; however, his reflections on the subject were collated and published posthumously in *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1992 [1983]).

the soul,” prescribing the proper attitudes and practices to foster health and happiness (5). This corrective aspect of the philosopher as physician is also the primary function of satire. Indeed, Alice Lotvin Birney, in her study of satiric catharsis in Shakespearean drama, likens the satirist to a physician whose purpose is to “purge [society] of what he diagnoses as moral ill through the bitter medicines of his stinging wit and harsh invective” (1973: 18). It is a remedy that “first aggravates the sore spot” (17).

In “Peace on Earth,” Treppie exposes the ills of apartheid ideology and Afrikaner cultural mythology in general by delving into the Benades’ family history of ideological interpellation, what Treppie refers to as their tendency to “trot like sheep after the fire in the cloud” (Van Niekerk 1999: 317). Treppie escapes to the toilet for his philosophising while the Jehovah’s Witnesses perform their proselytising ‘Bible study’ in the other room for the rest of the family. Mol and Pops are mesmerised by the spectacular descriptions of the Promised Land, and Lambert strums on his Jewish harp, with a “horse-high hard-on” (312) for the young Jehovah’s Witness woman. The Witnesses are reading Exodus, a story Treppie “knows off by heart” (312), and that triggers his interrogation of how Afrikaner nationalism exploited this biblical myth in the story of the Great Trek and the social engineering of the early twentieth-century urbanisation of the rural Afrikaner – a “new” Great Trek.

As satirist, Treppie is Van Niekerk’s tool in de-sublimating and de-idealising all that is sacred to Afrikaner cultural mythology. Treppie is an artisan – a fridge technician, but also a jack-of-all-trades. He is like Levi-Strauss’s *bricoleur*, who, using the tools and materials at his disposal, artfully manipulates symbols and cultural leftovers to create his own discourse and mythology. Treppie’s name, an abbreviation of Martinus, is akin to the Afrikaans word for a tool, “trepaan.” A trepan, in English, refers to a drill used for digging holes in mines, or a surgical instrument used for boring holes into the human skull, or other bodily surfaces, to relieve pressure as a result of some injury. Trepanation of the cranium has been practised since prehistoric times to cure a variety of ailments, such as head injuries, epileptic seizures, migraines and mental disorders. His nickname’s association with a trepan is appropriate as Treppie, much to his family’s frustration, constantly probes their perspectives on the world and their indoctrination into various belief systems, political and religious. Lambert admires Treppie’s ability to “talk a hole into Mol’s head” (116). However, Treppie’s trepanations are not simply for his own sadistic satisfaction. Although he appears to revel in exposing his family’s foibles, his underlying purpose is to ensure that they “still feel things” (116). He

admits that what would be “better for Mol” – to become insensitive – would be “worse for him” (116). By still being able to cause pain and offence, Treppie confirms Mol’s (and the rest of the family’s) humanity. While outsiders, such as their neighbours, the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the National Party representatives, treat the Benades as subhuman objects of ridicule, Treppie reveals that they still have souls capable of feeling. In the following analogy Treppie combines the mining and surgical associations of trepanation, likening his caustic humour to exploratory surgery, with Lambert acting as his trepan:

Basically, he has to make sure Mol and Pop and Lambert still feel things, otherwise he, Treppie, will be in his glory. It’s just that he has to dig deeper and deeper nowadays to find Mol’s feelings. First you get blood and shit and gore. Then only feelings. But it’s Lambert’s job, that. He doesn’t even have to open his mouth. All he does is wind Lambert up a bit and give him the tools. Then he runs on automatic. Lambert digs, and when the arteries are nice and wide open, then he, Treppie, can go and do some inspection, to see if there’s any gold-dust left in the dead mines. Pearls before swine. Who else can see them for what they are? (116)

The “gold-dust” he is looking for is their feelings, proof of their fundamental humanity. This dust is evidence of their souls. The value of this search and its rewards, he assumes, would be lost on Mol, Pop and Lambert. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns against “cast[ing] your pearls before swine, lest they tample them under their feet, and tear you in pieces” (Matthew 7:6). The idiomatic expression does not only indicate the porcine mindlessness and brutality of Treppie’s family members, but also points toward Treppie’s fear of making himself vulnerable by revealing his more humane impulses, lest they be mocked or diminished.

Treppie’s trepanations extend beyond exploring what makes his family members ‘tick’ by ‘aggravating their sore spots.’ He also probes and scrutinises the apartheid state apparatuses: the National Party and Afrikaner cultural mythology. Treppie uses the functioning of fridges as a metaphor for Afrikaner nationalism.²⁰ Treppie asks Lambert, “So you know how a fridge works [...] Then you should also know how the NP [National Party] works. Compressor: warm. Evaporator: cold. Thick gas, thin gas, round and round: prrrr, choory-choory-chip: off” (Van Niekerk 1999: 57). A fridge is a closed system that recycles the same gas. Treppie explains to Lambert, “how heat inside a fridge was like water that kept leaking into a canoe,

²⁰ I expand on H.P. van Coller’s observation that the Benades “funksioneer as ’n geslotee sisteem nes die yskaste” (function as a closed system just like the refrigerators” (2003: 59).

and how the heat was soaked up by the fridge's gas – just like you sucked up water from a leaking canoe into a sponge and then squeezed it out over the side, back into the ocean” (340). A fridge defies nature by slowing down the effects of time on organic matter. Fridges preserve food by keeping it cold and preventing decomposition as a result of bacteria. Similarly, one could read the National Party's political propaganda as tainted 'food' for the body politic. Treppie, ironically, calls the National Party, the proponents of racial purity, “a filthy lot” that should be washed with Sunlight soap to “keep the flies out” (57). The Benades, as inbred poor white trash, barely, if at all, belong to H.F. Verwoerd's imagined white Afrikaner *herrenvolk*. Poor whites were anathema to Afrikaner nationalism's eugenics of white biological and cultural purity and supremacy. In her study of the role played by the Carnegie Corporation *Poor White Study* (1927–1932) in classifying and controlling poor whites, Tiffany Willoughby-Herald, following Kennan Malik, notes how “poor whites have been conceptualized as the remnants of a flourishing white civilization, as evidence that white civilization is vulnerable to internal disintegration and degeneration and at the same time as a group that can be rehabilitated” (2007: 487).²¹ She describes whiteness, particularly Afrikaner white identity, as pathological, as a “diminished selfhood” (487), in that it denies its cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity (483). Furthermore, Willoughby-Herald notes how the racial profiling and segregationist policies in South Africa not only served to restrict non-white South Africans but also resulted in “detaining and containing the white body” (2007: 493). De Kock, in an article on “wild” or “counter” narratives of whiteness in South African fiction, also writes of the “burden of [...] enclosure” in restrictive identity formation (2010: 24). It is not only the National Party that is fridge-like, but also the Benade family members. The Benades' fridge ontology highlights their attempt to contain their “degeneracy” through the lie about Lambert's origins. Notably, like their fridges, the Benades are 'leaky,' and their secret of incestuous degeneracy cannot be contained indefinitely, as Lambert's eventual discovery of the “family secrets,” at the end of the novel, demonstrates.

The fridge analogy not only points to the insularity of white apartheid South Africa and Afrikaner nationalism's desire for racial and cultural purity (of which the incestuous Benades

²¹ In her article titled “South Africa's Poor Whites and Whiteness Studies: Afrikaner Ethnicity, Scientific Racism, and White Misery,” Willoughby-Herald argues that the Carnegie Corporation *Poor White Study* (1927–1932) “served as a lynchpin to the political consolidation of Afrikaner Nationalism in South Africa's era of grand apartheid in 1948–1994” (2007: 480). While the Carnegie Commission project was meant to reduce poverty among whites, Willoughby-Herald observes that it was clearly part of an international eugenics campaign supporting white supremacy and segregationist policies (490).

are the logical conclusion), but also highlights that despite the National Party government's unbanning of, and negotiations with, the African National Congress and other opposition forces, the National Party has not changed. Treppie scoffs at their new name, the 'New' National Party: "It's not new, it's the same old rubbish recycled under a new name" (Van Niekerk 1999: 325). In order to function effectively, a fridge must remain insulated, but this particular fridge recycles toxic fumes. Treppie refers to them as "The plural lying party, here a coup, there a coup, meanwhile they're cooped up with their own kind all the time, grabbing each other's balls" (325). Ironically, the way he describes the party is not too dissimilar to his own in-bred family cooped up in their little home in Triomf, perpetuating a lie about their normalcy. As a fridge reprocesses the same gas, so is the National Party run by the same cronies, and it has not changed its policies or political philosophy significantly. Treppie describes the party as corrupt and hypocritical, "Liars and thieves with their hands on their hearts" (325). In terms of the fridge analogy, the National Party's corruption is as toxic and potentially dangerous to the body politic as fridge gas is poisonous.

When he is not using metaphors of refrigeration to explain the deleterious effects of apartheid ideology, Treppie's other recurring trope is 'shit.' The sublimation of the excremental and simultaneous desublimation of religious and political ideology is the focus of "Peace on Earth." This chapter begins with Treppie sitting on the toilet, escaping the Witnesses' Bible Study to do his own 'spiritual'-interpretive practice, guided by toilet reading material: newspapers and a calendar reclaimed from his lesbian neighbours' trash.

The chapter opens with the following statement: "To shit is a fine skill, that's for fucken sure. And if anything, a turd is a work of art. So help him God" (311). Treppie, the 'DIY' philosopher, has to use whatever is at hand, and in Triomf, or "Shitfontein," as he renames it, this is "shit." Treppie performs his own purgation, mocking the Afrikaner state and church apparatuses and exposing the lies in which they are cloaked. He un.masks all the false idealisations created in the name of Afrikanerdom, and in a carnivalesque reversal idealises his own excrement and turns the "sacred cows" of Afrikaner cultural mythology into excrement.²² As Mircea Eliade observes, "degenerated or camouflaged religious behaviour

²² Buxbaum offers a more comprehensive consideration of the elements of Bakhtinian carnivalesque in *Triomf*. She comments on how Pop's death and Treppie's "disempowerment" and "disability" in the end present a "challenge to any official version of events, denying a smooth transition to another nationalist project" (2014: 226). In Buxbaum's reading, all possibilities of "renewal and rebirth" associated with carnival are "quashed" (226). This view is supported by lines from Treppie's "ice cream truck" song where he sings their fate of

[...] is no less to be seen in movements that openly avow themselves to be secular or even antireligious” (1964: 207). Although Mol and Pop are more conventionally religious, Treppie expresses, even if only in parody, a secular spirituality. In a recent article dealing with the notion of secular spirituality in Nadine Gordimer’s novels, Ileana Dimitriu notes that even “non-spiritual activities (sport and sex) are now viewed as manifestations of the sacred” (2012: 139). Following Lakoff and Johnson she defines secular spirituality as “embodied spirituality” and an “ethical relationship to the physical world” (2012: 139). Consonant with this ethical perspective, Treppie is against a morality based on a metaphysical beyond (Burger 2000: 7). Burger notes how Treppie is truly anchored in “liggaamlie belewenis, die hier en nou” (bodily experience, the here and now) by forcing Mol and Pop to look at the scars on his body (7). Treppie’s stomach and hips, “covered in nicks and grooves” (Van Niekerk 1999: 382), the result of a brutal beating delivered by his father as punishment for the siblings’ incest, can be read as a sign of the trauma caused by the social engineering that was meant to “save” poor whites from degeneration and create a superior Afrikaner nation. Old Pop’s abuse of his “own flesh and blood” (383) reveals the violence of white nationalism’s “internalized racism and self-hatred” (Willoughy-Herald 2007: 482). In Treppie’s “Sermon on the Mount” (under the Brixton tower) he blames his father not only for the physical damage done to him, but also the “ruination of his soul” (Van Niekerk 1999: 381).

Treppie is presented as a perverse Christ-figure, or the fallen angel, Lucifer. He was his father’s favourite, “a chip off the old block” (382), and the scapegoat for a crime the whole family are complicit in. However, he delivers the message that life is an “[a]rse end,” a “hell-hole, long drop” (379) and “he prayed for the End itself, without any mediation” (181). Like Christ, Treppie needs to show his wounds in order for his followers to see the truth; however, unlike Christ’s disciples, it seems unlikely that Mol and Pop are willing to face Treppie’s brutal truths.

In “Peace on Earth” Treppie’s soul-searching is expressed in terms of one of the body’s most abject functions: defecation. According to Treppie, “redemption is granted to the idle. To those who do fuck-all, with an open mind about the comings and the goings” (317). Treppie

“*dissolv[ing] like ice cream in the dirt*” (Van Niekerk 1999: 11). While the novel does not profess the ‘renewal’ of any form of nationalism, I will argue, contrary to Buxbaum, that there is a hint of some future orientation in the final lines of the novel.

flouts the Protestant work ethic espoused by Afrikaner Calvinism, and advocates the virtues of contemplation. However, Treppie's idling is not apathetic; his "open mind" is suggestive of the Buddhist attitude of mindfulness, which has been adopted as a therapeutic approach in clinical psychology. Mindfulness may be defined as "an open and receptive attention to and awareness of what is occurring in the present moment [...] that arises through intentionally attending in an open, accepting, and discerning way," an attention focused on "thoughts, emotions and memories," with the purpose of becoming aware of delusional ideations (Black 2011: n.p.). Treppie's mindfulness also relates to the existentialist caution against living in bad faith, which requires an awareness of how one is seen by others and a candid assessment of one's situation in life. Treppie tries to expose the false perceptions, misapprehensions and delusions of his family members through "shit-stirring," and the turd is his philosopher's stone, "[n]ot that," he admits, "his little bit of shit amounts to a 'beaten work of pure gold,' but it's better than nothing" (Van Niekerk 1999: 317). Treppie is not only a philosopher but also, even if only in parody, he likens himself to a mystic – an excremental visionary – and an artist.

Whilst on the toilet he pages through a calendar with pictures of art. After disregarding paintings by Vincent van Gogh and Georges Braque, he reveals his preference for a tapestry of the Madonna with a unicorn resting on her lap. The tapestry Treppie describes is Van Niekerk's fictional creation as it does not match exactly any of the tapestries from the late-fifteenth-century *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestry series in the Musée National du Moyen-Âge (formerly Musée de Cluny) in Paris or the early sixteenth-century *Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestry series held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.²³ Treppie brings the exalted Christian sacred art and Christian ideology low and exalts the excremental by likening the perfect stool to this work of art.

[A] masterpiece of a crap is one that works its way down from your guts in one piece like a tapestry, evenly textured and solidly braided, not too light but also not too dark. With all the colours blending but not so much that it gets boring. Delicate, bright flowers shining against the grass the white horse resting his horn meekly on the Madonna's lap. (311)

Treppie's stool becomes a thing of perfection, an artistic "masterpiece," balanced in terms of texture, proportion and colour. In Treppie's imagination the excremental becomes sublime,

²³ Neither of these tapestry series depicts the unicorn laying its horn on the Lady's lap.

even suggestive of religious or moral transcendence in the symbols of virtue and purity: the unicorn and the Virgin Mary. Deleuze's comment that in Francis Bacon's painting "[a]bjection becomes splendour; the horror of life becomes a very pure and very intense life" (in Johnson 2012: 127) resonates with Treppie's imagined faecal tapestry where art becomes a means of sublimating and purifying the abject.

The notion of purifying the abject is a central thesis in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*. According to Kristeva, "the various means of *purifying* the abject – the various catharses – make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion" (1982: 17). Treppie's comment that religion gives rise to "shithouses full of art" (Van Niekerk 1999: 311) is strikingly apposite in terms of the purgative effects of (sacramental) art. Kristeva goes as far as to state that "the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity" (1982: 17). Treppie's cleansing of his conscience for his and his family's complicity with Afrikaner ideology, like Aristotelian catharsis, is an "impure process that protects the abject only by dint of being immersed in it" (28). Treppie's 'confession' occurs whilst he is on the toilet, through scatological language and imagery, and involves recounting the history of Afrikaner ideological 'bullshit' that has shaped their lives. At the end of the chapter he imagines the emptying of his bowels as a sign of God's providence and redemption, like Elijah's ascension to heaven in a chariot of fire, swept up by a tempest (2 Kings 2:11): "Noises come from his body. Hark the mighty roars. [...] He feels his guts moving. Swing low, sweet chariot. Blessed is the stool's motion, happy in its peals, its psalms to the end of all meals" (Van Niekerk 1999: 328). Despite his generally nihilistic view of life, Treppie seems to hope for some kind of redemption. The question as to whether this redemption is finally realised will be discussed at the conclusion of this chapter.

As Treppie stares at the picture of the tapestry on the calendar he imagines the work that must have gone into creating this intricate piece of art. Although the weavers are unknown, Treppie imagines this intricate work was done by devout nuns, whose extreme fatigue eventually resulted in hallucinations. His assumptions reveal his intimate understanding of the power of ideology to control the lives of ordinary people. Treppie explains his preference for this work of art over the impressionist art of Van Gogh and Braque's Fauvism:

He'll take the holy virgin, any time, with her poor little horse and its single horn. All of it in invisible stitching. At least it looks like something. And he doesn't mind the fact that they don't know so nicely anymore exactly who made it. If you asked him, a whole swarm of nuns must've sat working on those little flowers till their tongues started hanging out from tiredness and they got completely cross-eyed from concentrating on all the tiny stitches. So that after a while they began to see visions, and that was when they started stitching in the Mother of God in her blue dress, and her weird little horse, on top of the flowery lawn. Mystics can't be choosers. And neither can the constipated. It's a cross and it's a calling. To look at what doesn't exist, and to sit without results – both are ways of escaping the fine-grinder. (311)

Treppie's postulation about the nuns suffering through their Christian calling can be read as an allegory of the invisible workings of ideological state apparatuses upon the individual. In the case of the weaving nuns, this would be the late medieval church. Like these humble female mystics who have been "called" by God, the Benades – whose surname is a "homophone for the Afrikaans word, *benede* (below, beneath)" and symbolic of their "underclass status" (Irlam 2004: 703) – have been hailed or interpellated by apartheid ideology. Treppie's humorous play on the expression "beggars can't be choosers," "[m]ystics can't be choosers," suggests the desperate inevitability of lives dedicated to some fantasy, and invokes Louis Althusser's understanding of the subject of ideology as a "subjected being, one who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission" (1971: 169). Thus the nuns' divinely inspired "vision" of Mary with a unicorn resting on her lap is really a product of already predetermined ideological material. The unicorn was a symbol of Christ and the scene of the unicorn in the Madonna's lap an allegory of the Incarnation (Nari 2000: 1482). According to Althusserian theory, ideas do not originate in individuals but are rather the product of the subject's imbrication in class society, within a set of ideological state apparatuses with all the symbolic material that is associated with them.

Treppie's family are like religious fanatics with their blind belief in Afrikaner ideology. Treppie describes them as "trot[ting] like sheep after the fire in the cloud" (Van Niekerk 1999: 317). The fire in the cloud Treppie refers to is an allusion to the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21–2) that was a symbol of God's providence to the Israelites and led them to the Promised Land. The way the nuns sit cross-eyed with their tongues hanging out, focusing on the little details of the tapestry, is the almost constant tableau of Mol, Pops and Lambert, who are enthralled by ideology and participate in its rites and practices, whether it is Bible Study with the Jehovah's Witnesses or participating in

Afrikaner cultural celebrations. As Althusser argues, ideology has a material existence in an individual's practices: a subject's "*ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals*" (1971: 169).

Helize van Vuuren's observation that the Great Trek is an "internalised metaphor" in *Triomf* (1999: 717) is particularly apposite to Treppie's constipated toilet contemplation, which recalls the various permutations of this political myth. Whilst sitting on the toilet Treppie recalls the Great Trek centenary celebration of 1938, a symbolic re-enactment of the Afrikaners' migration from the Cape into other parts of southern Africa to flee the yoke of British imperialism. As part of this celebration eight ox-wagons named after Voortrekker heroes travelled through white towns and villages until they reached a prominent hill overlooking Pretoria. There, to commemorate the victory against the Zulu Kingdom at Blood River on 26 December 1838, more than 100 000 Afrikaners attended the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone for the Voortrekker Monument. Treppie notes how everyone was so "hypnotised by the Wagons. High on the Great Trek" that they failed to notice a dog kicked to death by the oxen leading the wagons (Van Niekerk 1999: 318). After the parade Treppie notices that "no one even bothered to pick up the poor thing" (318). The cruel death of this pathetic creature and the crowd's obliviousness to the fact highlight the power of ideology to mesmerise its subjects. The dog's violent death beneath the brute force that drives the wagons, symbolic 'cradles' of the nation (Thompson 1985: 39), reveals the violence that underpins Afrikaner nationalism. The dog may serve as a metonym for white apartheid South Africa's racial others, but the Benades' dog-like behaviour (their incestuous relationship, constant fighting and underclass status) also aligns them with dogs. In fact, they are often presented as more abject than their own dogs, which originate from the "kaffirdogs"²⁴ (Van Niekerk 1999: 1) of Sophiatown. The Benades are on the very margins of whiteness. They are the corporeal leftovers of whiteness. Even the coloured prostitute Lambert receives for his fortieth birthday rejects him, snapping, "You're not even white, man, you're a fucken backward piece of low-class shit, that's what you are. Useless fucken white trash!" (448). The dog caught under the feet of the oxen may also represent the Benades themselves. In his review of the novel, Rob Nixon notes that the "Benades emerge as partly self-destroying and partly casualties of history, ironically *downtrodden* by apartheid's grand plan for Afrikaner uplift" (my emphasis, 2004).

²⁴ This is a racist epithet for dogs (purportedly) of mixed breed that roamed freely in black townships and settlements in South Africa.

This grand plan, the urbanisation of rural white Afrikaners, ironically leads to their social and moral degeneration. The move to the city for the Benades only brought poverty and cramped living conditions which, along with a misguided understanding of family solidarity, eventually led to incest between the young Benades. When Treppie remembers the consequent use of “another great trek story” by the 1948 Nationalist government, led by D.F. Malan, he realises how they have been misled by the party. He refers to the so-called “Purged” National Party of 1948, with its project to continue the urbanisation of poor rural Afrikaners, as “[p]ure, undiluted shit!” (Van Niekerk 1999: 324). Treppie exposes the capitalist agenda behind the myth of social redemption:

Come again, he said. It was a Great Trek back under the English yoke. Only now the yoke had a drill-bit and its name was Anglo.²⁵ But Pop and Mol told him he must shuddup, they wanted to listen.

How they listen, if anything gets said about the Great Trek, the Promised Land, Everyone-Together-Through-Thick-And-Thin. How they listen!

Whether that place is full of milk and honey, or full of petrol and oil and bricks and mine dumps, it makes no difference. And if, on top of it all, the voice promising everything sounds like a dominee then they’re all ears. Fired up. Ready for take-off. (324).

According to the Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, society is fundamentally antagonistic at its core, and the idea of a naturally harmonious, peaceful and democratically evolving society is the product of ideological fantasy (1992 [1989]: xxix, xxviii, 125–7). Žižek defines ideology as the fantasy that structures reality. However, for him there is no objective reality behind ideology:

Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel [...]. The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel. (45)

²⁵ The multinational mining company, Anglo American Corporation, was, arguably, one of the “biggest economic beneficiaries of apartheid” (Ashton 2011: n.p.). It capitalised on the anti-apartheid disinvestment campaign of the 1980s by taking control of 85% of the companies and 60% of the wealth of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange by the 1990s (Ashton 2011: n.p.).

This “real kernel” Žižek refers to is what Jacques Lacan termed *das Ding* (the Thing), and later, *objet petit a*: a pre-symbolic abyss that exists at the boundary of the symbolic order, and is the object-cause of desire. According to Lacan it is “an object that is nowhere articulated, it is a lost object but paradoxically an object that was never there in the first place to be lost” (1992 [1986]: 58). It something, or, rather a “*no-thing*,” that we unconsciously believe will give meaning to existence. Treppie’s description of the ‘New’ National Party as a “brandless substance,” a “[n]ameless horror in sackcloth of hair” (Van Niekerk 1999: 325), suggests his awareness that the ideology that structures their lives is a terrifying absence – a precarious fantasy that shields its subjects from a void at the core of being. The *objet petit a* is what Žižek uses to define the “sublime object of ideology.” His theory that ideology saves us from a horrifying meaninglessness also resonates with a disturbing revelation made by Pop that contributes to Treppie’s anxiety. In Shoprite, Pop, who is becoming increasingly frail and preoccupied with death, gives a sermon to the baked beans:

You beans, Pop said, you might fancy yourself in your tomato sauce, But I say unto you, let someone just add some pigfat and then you’ll be worth bugger-all. ’Cause it’s all just a matter of pigfat and pulses. Which means it’s all about nothing. Poof! The next thing you know, someone farts, and then someone else says sies, what’s that smell, and then that’s it, you’re finished. Nothing! Finished, out, gone! Pffff! No one can escape this trinity of beans, farts, and death. Amen. (Van Niekerk 1999: 314)

Treppie thinks this nihilist philosophy about life “sounds nice and sharp,” but unlike Pop who is horrified by this realisation, Treppie views “nothingness” with sardonic humour and creates “perspectives” for his family to live by. Treppie’s only effective weapon against “nothingness” is “shit,” or more specifically, “shit-stirring” (317). He is unable to alchemically transform shit into “a beaten work of pure gold” – the Menorah (the seven-armed candelabrum in the tabernacle) that the Jehovah’s Witnesses have been reading about in Exodus. However, his illumination of the Benades’ complicities with the lies of apartheid is “better than nothing. Now and again it’s Quality Street shit and that’s the best he can hope for. For an oke like him, sitting in a place like Triomf it’s quite good enough” (317).

1.3.4 Excremental Ecstasy and the Dionysian Sublime

Although Treppie is content with imperfection, at the end of the chapter the long-awaited movement of his bowels becomes a heaven-sent object of perfection. At first he likens this arrival to the deliverance of Elijah's chariot, accompanied by angelic chorus, "happy in its peals, its psalms to the end of all meals" (328). He makes "confetti" out of newspaper in anticipation of this messianic moment. He imagines his stool arriving as a bride proceeding down the aisle, parodying Richard Wagner's "Wedding Chorus" from *Lohengrin*: "Triomf, Triomf, here comes the bride, big, fat and wide" (328). His reference to a bride, in terms of the prevalent Judeo-Christian eschatological imagery in this chapter, resonates with the Bride of Christ, a metaphor for God's chosen people and the New Jerusalem, mentioned in Revelation 21:1–4:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Van Niekerk provides an immensely humorous and provocative parody of John's vision in Revelation. Treppie takes the place of God, sitting upon his "throne" (a euphemism for the toilet) and heralding the arrival of a new (e)scatological bride – a new society. Although it is not explicit in the above passage, earlier in Revelation marriage between the Lamb (Christ) and the Bride (the Church) is used as a metaphor for the consummation of God with his chosen people (Revelation 3:12). However, in Treppie's revelation the bride is grotesque and it is the expulsion of her, rather than union with her, that is the cause for celebration. He also does not wipe away a tear as God does in Revelation, promising the end of all suffering; rather, he "wipes his arse," mocking the possibility of heavenly bliss promised in Revelation (Van Niekerk 1999: 328). Treppie equates this bodily purgation to "the seventh day, the day of rest" (328). In biblical terms the seventh day is associated with divine perfection, completeness, the arrival of the New Jerusalem, and an end to suffering. The chapter ends

with the purgation of his bowels and Treppie feeling, for the first time, “[e]mptied and unburdened. Everything well. Peace on earth” (328).

Treppie may have purged the Benades’ complicity with the lies of the past (and present), but his peace is momentary as his bowels will inevitably fill up again. Indeed, he continues to suffer from constipation later in the novel. Furthermore, everything is not well with the Benades. Pop’s death is imminent and, significantly, his passing coincides with the end of the old political order. Treppie’s final declaration of “[p]eace on earth” suggests a relief from suffering, and the promise of harmonious co-existence between the Benade family members. However, peace in the Benade home is short-lived. Lambert fails his sexual initiation. His prostitute flees, tripping him up by pulling his pants down around his legs. In a drunken rage he incinerates his fridges, metaphorically foreclosing any hope of entry into the symbolic order. He also uproots and destroys their postbox – proof of their existence and status as members of society, albeit very marginal ones. The destruction of the postbox, which the Benades constantly battle to keep rooted in the ground, and the burning of the fridges, anticipates their final fall into disgrace, their own personal apocalypse when contract painters discover a set of keys and hand them to Lambert. With Pop asleep and Treppie on the toilet, Lambert is accidentally delivered what he unwittingly but aptly refers to as the “keys to [his] existence” (455). In the drawer Lambert discovers a family photograph, taken on the 1938 Voortrekker centenary, and a letter from Pop senior to his wife intimating the incest between their children and warning her to keep them apart for “[o]nly a monster will be born from this sort of thing” (463). Reading these words, and seeing his own monstrosity for the first time, results in Lambert launching a tirade against his family, firstly killing Pop by breaking the drawer of secrets over his head, then crushing Treppie’s fingers, stabbing Mol in the side, and finally breaking his ankle by kicking a prefab wall instead of the dog.

Despite the calamity that follows “Peace on Earth,” the chapter ends on a high note with Treppie experiencing a moment of ecstasy, transported beyond the cares of his everyday existence. Of course, it is almost impossible to read Treppie without a hint of irony, and it is difficult to determine whether this is a truly sublime moment or a parody of one. As usual Van Niekerk never allows for a simple either/or interpretation. It is impossible not to laugh at Van Niekerk’s irreverence in comparing the ‘dropping a load’ to religious transcendence. But it is equally impossible to deny that within the scatological humour lies Treppie’s sincere hope for a reprieve from suffering, an ‘unburdening’ of the lies and ideological ‘shit’ that

keep him uncomfortably constipated. This sublime moment is thus strangely both comic and sincere. Treppie begins the chapter by positing a stool as an artistic creation and ends the chapter by producing a work of art, sublime and salvific, comparable with Nietzsche's view of Dionysian art as "a saving sorceress with the power to heal" (1999: 40).²⁶ Paul Guyer, tracing the history of German philosophy of the sublime, sees the Dionysian as Nietzsche's version of the sublime. According to Guyer, the "presentation of the Dionysian [in art] is sublime" (2012: 116). It is an "experience of reconciliation in which the individual is subsumed into a larger reality and the cares of the individual existence [...] are lost in the absorption of the individual into the underlying oneness" (116). Nietzsche's sublime captures the contradictory nature of existence, its absurdity. Aptly, Nietzsche's sublime is an experience of "the transcendence of rationality rather than of transcendent rationality," as in Immanuel Kant's formulation (102). Yet, like Kant, Nietzsche views the sublime as an affirmative experience resulting in human redemption through "transcending the limits of individual reason and identifying with the absurd and contradictory character of existence" (102). Nietzsche imagines the Dionysiac sublime as a visual transformation of Beethoven's "Hymn to Joy":

Now, hearing this gospel of universal harmony, each person feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbour, but quite literally one with him, as if the veil of maya had been torn apart ... Singing and dancing, man expresses his sense of belonging to a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and talk and is on the brink of flying and dancing, up and away into the air above ... he feels himself to be a god, he himself now moves in such ecstasy and sublimity as once he saw the gods move in his dreams. Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art [...]. (2007 [1870]: 121)

Nietzsche's Dionysiac moment shows an uncanny resonance with Treppie's comic-sincere religious transcendence at the end of "Peace on Earth," accompanied by angelic chorus. Treppie seems to lose his ability to talk, to make sense. He transcends reason and identifies with the absurd. The whole chapter is dedicated to highlighting the ironies and absurdities in the Benades' lives as a result of the ideologies that have shaped them. Treppie focuses not

²⁶ Burger observes how Treppie's interrogative voice and his artistry in writing a poem about their day at the Westdene dam can be related to Dionysian aesthetics. He focuses on how Treppie's Dionysian language exposes the individual humanity of the Benades against the threat of their being subsumed into mere generalisations. Through this poem about an ordinary day at the dam, Burger argues, Treppie allows us to see the Benades' intersubjectivity, their common humanity, instead of being blinded by generalisations (2000: 18). The parallels Burger makes between Treppie and Nietzsche's philosophy of art and the human condition can be taken further to highlight the redemptive and sublime possibilities in Treppie's creative Dionysianism, evident in his abject art.

only on the Benades, but begins by looking in the newspaper for stories about the “odd little fuck-ups in the lives of underdogs,” in order to show that the Benades “aren’t alone in the world” (Van Niekerk 1999: 316). Treppie follows this with a history of Afrikaner propaganda, returning to the specifics of their lives, and culminating in his realisation of the arbitrariness and meaninglessness of words: “The whole world is just names and nothing is what it is and everything’s what it’s not, it’s all in the mind!” (327). Treppie kicks the newspapers, throws them around and becomes delirious: “Words swim before his eyes. Names whirl around his head” (327). Words flow in free association, muddling the newspaper headlines of South African politics with his own personal history into a prose poem: “The Freedom Front’s got lead in its head. Hells bells in the house of Shell. And Goldstone’s teeth are but a few. See how the train rides, how the train rides, all aboard the gravy train. Civil Co-operation Chowder. Consensus-Atlantis-hortus-conclusus. The apple of his father’s eye, his mother’s darling, Sophia-Maria-Maryna, pretty girls in a row” (328). This verbal diarrhoea finally gets “his guts moving” (328). Treppie’s artful play with words resonates with Nietzsche’s assertion that “[a]rt alone can re-direct those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live; these representations are the *sublime*, whereby the terrible is tamed by artistic means, and the *comical*, whereby disgust at absurdity is discharged by artistic means” (Nietzsche 2007 [1872]: 40). Thus, Guyer concludes, “sublime art retains the terror and absurdity that the comic, fully discharging these, does not” (2012: 115).

The ending of “Peace on Earth” is comical in its parody of the Christian eschatological vision, but, I would argue, it does not fully discharge the sense of terror and absurdity at the Benades’ lives. Treppie’s moment of transcendence is temporary, limited, and not entirely cathartic. The reader may also be aware that the absurdity and tragedy of the Benades’ existence has not reached its apotheosis, as Lambert has not yet discovered the ‘family secret.’ Furthermore, the idea that Treppie’s defecation should put an end to strife in the Benade home is absurd in itself. Treppie’s sublime moment resonates with Kristeva’s assertion that modern literature is characterised by a “sublimation of abjection” (1982: 26). In his analysis of the postmodern sublime, David B. Johnson includes Kristeva’s theory of abjection as a “perversion of the sublime” (2012: 129). Johnson describes her sublime as “a more ambivalent, pessimistic, and menacing gift: [...] the *jouissance* of an eminently fragile and blasted existence, ‘a ridiculous little infinite,’ as Kristeva writes, quoting the French

author Louis-Ferdinand Céline” (129). Literature of abjection, notes Johnson reading Kristeva:

gives us the power [...] to laugh in the face of what disgusts and terrifies us – “a piercing laughter” [Kristeva 133], “the laughter of the apocalypse” [134]. But this laughter overcomes nothing, neither the strictures of symbolic discourse (it only points, flashingly and transgressively, to their instability) nor the frailty of the human animal (it only remarks its absurdity). (129)

Treppie’s triumph: the arrival of his stool, certainly seems “a ridiculous little infinite.” Even as it gives the power to laugh in the face of the Benades’ suffering and abjection, it raises the question as to whether this perverse sublime allows Treppie, and the Benades, to overcome anything. According to Johnson, Kristeva’s perverse sublime offers no “hope of transcendence” (129). However, I would contend that Van Niekerk’s novel as a whole remains far more ambivalent. She presents a different kind of transcendence, not a lifting up in the metaphysical sense, but in an affirmation of this world – the world of the Benades’ abjection.

1.4 “No more North”: An Alternative Transcendence

Both Mol and Treppie are faced with the same question Nietzsche posits in *The Gay Science*: “How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not?” (1974 [1887]: 239). The way they respond to this dilemma is slightly different. Mol is a romantic idealist. Her love of roses can be associated with her preference for seeing the world through ‘rose-tinted glasses.’ Mol relies on fantasy to make reality bearable. Treppie, on the other hand, as Burger observes, plays with language in order to make sense of reality. Unlike Mol, he does not wish to ‘rose-tint’ reality, but rather bares reality in all its absurdity and grotesquery. Like Nietzsche, Treppie’s consolation, in a world without God and where there are no absolute truths, is philosophy: the art of reflecting on and critically examining reality. Nietzsche’s answer to his question regarding reversing life’s ugliness is for us to become artists or “poets of our life – first and foremost in the smallest, most everyday matters” (240).

This is the quality of the *Übermensch* or overman who liberates him/herself from the ideologies and value-systems that seek to define him/her, and creates his/her own values. Treppie’s bold assertion, in defiance of an Afrikaner Calvinist work ethic, that “redemption is

granted to the idle. To those who do completely fuck-all, with an open mind” (Van Niekerk 1999: 317), is not far off from the Nietzschean ethos of thinking critically and independently.

Nietzsche envisioned redemption on earth through self-transformation, noting in *The Will to Power* that “man becomes the transfigurer of existence when he learns to transfigure himself” (1968: 434). Through his philosophising in “Peace on Earth,” Treppie transfigures the ‘shit’ of their lives into art, into something transcendent, but entirely unlike Mol’s creation of an imaginary and better metaphysical counter-world. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes, “[i]n man *creature* and *creator* are united,” but the *Übermensch* is able to transform the abject qualities of the creature, “material, fragment, excess, clay, dirt, nonsense, chaos” into the “creator, form-giver, hammer-hardness, spectator-divinity, and seventh day” (1966: 225). Richard Schacht describes Nietzsche’s Dionysian sensibility as a “this-worldly alternative to (or kind of) religiousness,” very different from Kierkegaard’s “radical God-centered Christianity – or, on the other hand, from the flatly secularist, utterly de-divinized worldviews of Sartre and Camus” (2012: 131). Following Paul Tillich, Schacht calls Nietzsche an “*ecstatic naturalist*” (132). Schacht states: “In the spirit of Zarathustra’s proclamation that ‘body am I entirely, and soul is only a word for something about the body,’ one might say that for Nietzsche ‘divine’ is only a word for something about life and the world” (132). Indeed, in a later note, Nietzsche provocatively states that philosophy “is a voluntary quest for even the most detested and notorious sides of existence” (1968: 536). Here he implies that the apotheosis of the artist-philosopher lies in a full embrace of the Dionysian. Treppie is an extreme devotee to the most detestable in the Dionysian. He is an “*ecstatic excrementalist*,” as he finds the sublime in the everyday abjection of his and his family members’ lives, albeit a sublime tempered by satirical humour. He explains to Mol that they are social outcasts, like the Indian caste of untouchables who “wiped off their shit with their hands” (Van Niekerk 1999: 277). He notes that since the Jehovah’s Witnesses are “interested in their souls, not their excrement [...] their souls were probably lodged in their excrement, otherwise he also couldn’t figure out what the Witnesses thought they were looking for here at the Benades” (277). Treppie’s description of an embodied and base soul, undoing the binaries of body/soul, matter/spirit, and abject/divine, is evocative of Nietzsche’s “this-worldly” spirituality.

Treppie proves his self-transformation at the end of the novel when he declares, “No more North” (474). Mol echoes Treppie with her modified precursor, “Before heaven’s gates. As

she predicted. North no more” (474). Mol’s choice to stay is predicated upon her belief in a metaphysical beyond and a new ‘true north’: her “Man of Stars.” Despite Pop’s death, Lambert’s having his foot amputated and Treppie’s being declared unfit to work for the Chinese because his fingers were irreparably damaged, Treppie’s abrogation of North is optimistic in embracing the reality of their world and situation in the present. Earlier Treppie comments on the tendency of the ‘herd’ to yearn for an ideal beyond the here and now: “some people painted their walls white and others moved to greener pastures, but in the end everyone, without exception, just looked North and fucked forth, as if their lives depended on it” (466). Treppie chooses to become the exception to this rule, and liberates himself from the Afrikaner history of ‘great treks,’ in declaring, “No more North.” His affirmation of the here and now, faithfulness to the earth beneath his feet and his *amor fati* (love of fate) are indicative of Treppie’s Dionysian sensibility, or even religiousness. His “no,” like Nietzsche’s, does not “halt at negation [...]. It wants rather to cross over to the opposite of this – to a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection – it wants the eternal circulation: – the same things, the same logic and illogic of entanglements” (1968: 536). Treppie chooses to endure and embrace the facticity of their situation in the radically contingent and multiple society of South Africa post 1994 with all its uncertainty, and with cognisance of their limitations and marginality. Treppie’s “No more North” is an acceptance of their lot in life, in all its abjection and brokenness. Treppie chooses the eternal return of the same, an acceptance and “love of what we are in any event stuck with” (Schacht 2012: 133).

It is not only Treppie’s words that are significant, but also the direction of his gaze at the end of the novel. Treppie, like Mol, is gazing skyward and toward the horizon as the constellation of Orion appears to descend into the toilet overflow pipe. As mentioned previously, Orion’s fall may imply the debunking of Mol’s hopes of redemption in a metaphysical beyond; however, another way of reading this final image, through Treppie’s existentialist vision, is that the metaphysical is brought back down to earth. By looking up, Treppie shows a future orientation to new connections beyond the boundaries of Triomf and the typically insular Benade existence, an openness to the world, the cosmos. For a moment, Treppie is the overman who transcends the boundaries of the self. This simple gesture of looking up and outward subtly points to a new mode of being for Treppie, and the Benades, to engage with a world beyond the boundaries of their prefab wall, beyond the stifling insularity of whiteness as defined by apartheid ideology.

Chapter Two: *Agaat*

2.1 Introduction

Agaat (Van Niekerk 2006 [2004]) centres on the complex relationship between Milla de Wet, a white farmer woman afflicted with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS (also known as Lou Gehrig's or motor neuron disease), and Agaat Lourier, her adopted daughter, housekeeper and nurse. Narrated by Milla, on her deathbed, this novel is obsessively concerned with disease, the degeneration of the body, and minutiae of burial and funeral arrangements, as well as the nature and destination of the soul, guilt and reconciliation. Patrick Flanery, in his review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, notes that the "deathbed scenes take place in 1996, the year in which South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation hearings began" and that Milla's search for reconciliation with Agaat represents a more general desire for reconciliation across races (2007: 19). Before outlining the focus of this chapter, it is necessary to highlight some of the key critical responses to the novel.

With the publication of *Agaat* – written as a postcolonial *plaasroman* (farm novel) – Van Niekerk enters contested ideological terrain. Nicole Devarenne highlights the genre's ideological function in "justifying colonial subjugation and white supremacist claims to Afrikaner ownership of the land" (2009: 627). However, *Agaat* re-writes and inverts the ideological assumptions upon which the *plaasroman* is based: patriarchal sovereignty, patrilineal inheritance of the land, marginalisation of the racial other. Van Niekerk's reversal of the gender, racial and power relationships of the normative *plaasroman* has been the focus of much criticism of the novel (Visagie 2005, Prinsloo 2006, Coetzee 2007, Prinsloo & Visagie 2009, Devarenne 2009, Van Houwelingen 2012). In view of this genre's historical and political import, *Agaat* has raised debate surrounding the future of Afrikaner identity and culture (Rossouw 2005, Anton Van Niekerk 2005, Visagie 2005, Burger 2005). While, the central issues raised in this debate will be highlighted later in the chapter, a discussion of the *plaasroman* and its political implications is not the focus of this thesis. Indeed, Willie Burger (2005) cautions against reductive political readings that ignore the depth and complexity of the text. The broader social and ethical themes in the novel are revealed in analyses of the complex family relationships in the novel, particularly the mother-daughter relationship (Wessels 2006, Sanders 2008, Stobie 2009, Rossmann & Stobie 2012, Jacobs 2012, Buxbaum 2013). In addition, Agaat's position as subaltern, her capacity for subversion and

expression, as well as her symbolic association with Afrikaner cultural renewal has been explored by a number of commentators (Visagie, 2005, Sanders 2008, Carvalho & Van Vuuren 2009, Stobie 2009, Olivier 2011, Rossmann 2012b, Van Houwelingen 2012).

Notably, the novel lends itself toward psychoanalytical readings, such as those by Burger (2005, 2006, 2009a), Mark Sanders (2008) and Gerrit Olivier (2011). Burger's Lacanian readings of *Agaat* reveal the thematic concern with the relationship between self and other, the way in which the self is imagined in and through the other, and the possibilities of communication between self and other (2005, 2006, 2009a). Burger (2006) argues that Milla and Agaat remain in a pre-symbolic, imaginary order, as Agaat only communicates through the imitation of Milla's own language and Milla's affliction renders her mute. While Burger highlights the difficulties of communicating through language, he claims that the end of the mother-daughter narrative, in which Milla dies holding Agaat's hand, suggests that there is "more to be said" about the possibilities of knowing, and communicating with, the other through the body (2006: 192). The significance of communicating through the body, through corporeal imagery, and, especially, through touch, is a lacuna addressed in this chapter.²⁷

Following Burger's and Sanders's readings, I explore the notion of ontological lack inherent in the self and in the symbolic order, and the belief that this lack can be filled by the other. In particular, I elaborate on Mark Sanders's Kleinian reading of the mother-child relationship in the novel, and its associations with mourning and melancholia. In this chapter, notions of lack, mourning and loss are elucidated through psychoanalytical theory (particularly the writings of Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan and the Lacanian thinker, Slavoj Žižek).

Agaat was originally published in Afrikaans in 2004, 10 years after the first democratic elections. It is a melancholy tale that reflects a post-democracy *Zeitgeist* of loss, fractured national identity divided along ethnic lines, and a fundamental feeling of ambivalence, which stand in contradistinction to the utopian, nationalist rhetoric of a "rainbow nation" or African Renaissance. Natasha Distiller in her article "Mourning the African Renaissance" points out that "notions of holistic return betray their fractured points of origin" (2006: 50). She states that the "African Renaissance as a concept, in its contradictions and its conceptual failures,

²⁷ Buxbaum, in her recent doctoral thesis (2014), also explores the capacity for communication through the body or embodied language, through the lens of Elizabeth Grosz's theories on embodied subjectivities. In her reading of *Agaat*, Buxbaum is concerned with the interstices of bodies and space (2014, 2011).

points to an unintegrated traumatic loss at the centre of a particular kind of neo-colonial subjectivity; it makes visible the unnameable trauma of an unspeakable loss (even if what was lost only ever existed as a fantasy, as a pre-colonial ‘Africanness’ must remain)” (51). Following Freud’s theories on mourning and melancholia, Distiller suggests that the contemporary *Zeitgeist* is one of melancholia. She contrasts “healthy” mourning, where one is eventually able to overcome one’s attachment to a love-object, to melancholia, where the lost love-object becomes incorporated into the ego. As a result of narcissistic projection the individual develops “a strong fixation to the loved object” (Freud in Distiller 2006: 52), to the extent that it becomes “indistinguishable from the ego itself” (Distiller 2006: 52). In Distiller’s summation melancholia is “an unconscious loss, one that is not known and so cannot be acknowledged and properly mourned; a narcissistic over-identification with the lost object; and a profound ambivalence about this lost object” (52). What Distiller describes as occurring in the national consciousness, one can see in the microcosm of Grootmoedersdrift and its melancholy characters: Milla, Agaat and Jakkie.²⁸

Milla’s relationship with Agaat is characterised by the blurring of the boundaries between self and other, and by conflicting feelings of love and hate, typical of melancholia. In “Moral Sadism and Doubting One’s Own Love: Kleinian Reflections on Melancholia,” Judith Butler suggests that “the incorporative fantasy central to melancholia is precisely the mechanism of melancholia’s undoing” (1998: 184). In melancholia the lost object is introjected and interiorised as a psychic object (180). The aim of this cannibalistic fantasy is the preservation of the object; however, paradoxically, in consuming the introjected object it is lost anew. As a result the ego feels accountable for this loss and is filled with guilt and remorse, causing the ego to feel increased responsibility for saving and preserving the other. In an act of self-sacrifice the ego turns the aggression it feels towards the other onto itself, so that it may maintain its relationship with the other. Butler refers to this as “moral sadism” as it is “motivated by a desire to preserve and sustain that lost other, to reverse or forestall the loss of the object precisely in order not to become an ego without an object attachment, an ego in an objectless world, an ego who will perish from lack of love” (186–7). Thus Butler sees melancholia as a way of embracing the other, of preserving alterity. Butler’s argument is

²⁸ Tracy Symmonds’s (2013) M.A. dissertation offers a Freudian reading of mourning and melancholia and its association with difficulty of communication in *Agaat*. Whereas Symmonds relies on Freud, and the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, I find Klein’s theories on the mother-child bond, as well as Slavoj Žižek’s reading of Lacan, more apposite for my study. Mark Sanders’s article (2008) introduced me to the usefulness of Klein’s theory in illuminating the complex unconscious drives in the mother-child bond in the novel.

perhaps overly optimistic, as salvation comes at the price of a highly ambivalent and sadomasochistic contract between self and other. Nevertheless, the psychoanalytical theories of Melanie Klein and Butler provide a useful lens for understanding the ambivalent and sadomasochistic relationship between Milla and Agaat. (These theories are useful in elucidating the mother-child relationships in the novel, but where necessary I have referred to other theorists to shed light on the issues and motifs in the novel.)

This chapter is divided into three sections, each providing an analysis of the main characters: Milla, Agaat and Jakkie. In the first section, “‘*chew me until i bind*’: Sacrifice and Cultural Renewal,”²⁹ I explore Milla’s unconscious fantasy³⁰ of herself as the *pharmakon* (sickness and cure) in her stream-of-consciousness passages. Milla is presented as an earth mother, in her invocation of the Demeter-Persephone myth, supplicating for rebirth and renewal and introducing a new maternal genealogy that transgresses the patrilineal *plaasroman* (farm novel).

In the second section, titled “Agaat: Traversing the Fantasy,” I discuss the characterisation of Agaat, which is presented almost entirely through Milla’s unreliable focalisation. Through Milla’s eyes Agaat can be seen as an evocation of the Lacanian Real in her ambivalent status as sublime object (the *objet petit a*), but also the Thing,³¹ a terrifying figure of radical alterity. Although, for Milla, she remains an enigmatic and equivocal character, she demonstrates moments of unqualified compassion. I consider that one way of understanding Agaat’s reversal from the terrifying Real back to Milla’s sublime object in her death-scene epiphany is to consider Agaat as Milla’s analyst, a role Burger identifies Agaat as playing (2006:

²⁹ This section was published as an article co-authored by my supervisor (see Rossmann & Stobie 2012).

³⁰ In this study I use the word fantasy, instead of Klein’s term “phantasy.” The “ph” is meant to indicate “unconscious processes” (Mitchell 1986: 22). For Klein, phantasy emanates from the infant’s unconscious, pre-linguistic and instinctual inner world and reveals itself in dream, play and neuroses. Juliet Mitchell explains: “phantasy emanates from within and imagines what is without, it offers an unconscious commentary on instinctual life and links feelings to objects and creates a new amalgam: the world of imagination” (1986: 22). While this definition is applicable to Milla’s stream-of-consciousness passages, it is problematic and confusing to use both “phantasy” and fantasy. I have thus chosen to use the term “unconscious fantasy,” as opposed to “phantasy”; however, where theorists have used the word I have maintained their terminology.

³¹ According to Jacques Lacan, *das Ding* (the Thing) is associated with the Real, a pre-symbolic abyss that exists at the boundary of the symbolic order, and is the object-cause of desire. Sean Homer succinctly defines it as a “no-thing” that only becomes something through the subject’s desire: “the desire to fill the emptiness or void at the core of subjectivity and the symbolic [...] creates the Thing” (2005: 85). Lacan eventually replaced the concept of the Thing with the *objet petit a*, which is also defined as the object-cause of desire. For Žižek, the Thing is what remains outside language; it is “purely ontic,” whereas the *objet petit a* is a gap within the symbolic order (Žižek 1994: 181); it is a ‘left-over’ of the Real in the subject and in the Other. I discuss these terms in more detail in the section titled “Agaat: Traversing the Fantasy.”

191).³² The psychoanalytical process, according to Jacques Lacan, is essentially an encounter with the Real (1977 [1975]: 205). Žižek adopts the Lacanian term, *la traversée du fantasme* (traversing the fundamental fantasy),³³ to refer to this circuitous journey into the unconscious that reveals the fundamental fantasy that underpins and structures our reality. This section is divided into seven subsections that trace Milla's first encounter with Agaat, her expulsion, rejection and demonisation, her totemic association with the sacred Emperor Butterfly, and finally Milla's gestures toward reconciliation. On an unconscious level (evident in her stream-of-consciousness passages), and later on a conscious level (in the present of the text), Milla realises the wrongs she has committed against Agaat and tries to make reparation through a motif of self-sacrifice. In the present of the text, only days before Milla's death, Agaat prepares a last supper for Milla, which becomes a metaphorical communion between mother and daughter where Milla imagines herself as the unpalatable meal Agaat must ingest.

Despite their various manipulations of each other, their obstinacy and trifling attempts to settle scores, the fictional narrative of Milla and Agaat ends in a telepathic reconciliation, in which Milla and Agaat truly "see" each other, resurrecting the mother-daughter bond, and allowing Agaat to become Milla's philosopher's stone and guide to the afterlife.

The final section of this chapter, "There's another story here: Skewing the Frame," explores the role of the frame-narrator, Jakkie de Wet (Milla's son, and Agaat's surrogate son).³⁴ Without the frame narrative the tale of Milla and Agaat is almost unequivocally an allegory of Afrikaner cultural redemption and renewal. However, Jakkie breaks the frame of this comforting masterplot of salvation, by introducing doubt. He functions as a postmodern *eirōn*, not too dissimilar to Plato's Socrates, who through irony questions Milla's dominant discourse of reconciliation and Agaat's potential as a symbol of Afrikaner cultural

³² Burger states that Agaat presents herself like the psychoanalyst who keeps herself entirely in the background, never confronting her patient (Milla) "met haarself, met haar eie idees, met haar eie wêreld nie" (with herself, with her own ideas, with her own world) (2006: 191). Although Agaat can be likened to a psychoanalyst, I will argue that she does eventually reveal herself.

³³ Lacan uses this phrase specifically at the end of his eleventh seminar (1977 [1975]: 273). Although this is the only time it is used explicitly, the term is central to understanding the psycho-analytical process. Traversing the fantasy is outlined and used commonly by psychoanalysts. See Richard Boothby (2001) and Bruce Fink (1995). The concept of fantasy is central to Žižek's account of how political ideologies function. Fantasy, according to Lacan and Žižek, is not opposed to reality, rather it is what structures reality, produces desire and conceals the Real (the lack) at the core of ideology, the symbolic order and subjectivity. To traverse the fantasy is to disclose this lack, or arbitrariness. Žižek provides a lucid delineation of the relationship between 'reality,' fantasy and desire in "The Seven Veils of Fantasy" (1998).

³⁴ This section is an adaptation of a journal article, published in *English Academy Review* (see Rossmann 2012b).

regeneration. He unravels the narrative closure presented by Milla's final stream-of-consciousness passage and forces the reader to admit the unsettling ambivalence and undecidability of the novel.

Before entering into a close textual analysis, it is necessary to provide a brief outline of the novel. *Agaat* tells a tale of unusual family intrigue that centres on the primary relationship between Milla and her foster daughter/nurse, Agaat, and the two women's jealous love of Milla's biological son, Jakkie. Other than the framing prologue and epilogue narrated by Jakkie, the story is told from Milla's perspective. Paralysed, mute and in the last stages of a degenerative disease, the 70-year old Milla reflects on her life, and particularly her fraught relationship with Agaat, the surrogate daughter relegated to the roles of housekeeper, farm manager and nurse. Agaat enters Milla's life in 1953 during D.F. Malan's tenure as Prime Minister, the champion of Afrikaner nationalism and the initiator of the laws that would institute racial separation. Milla, then a young married woman in an abusive relationship and unable to have a child of her own, rescues a young coloured child with a deformed arm from extreme poverty and abuse. Despite her mother's protestations and the general disapproval of the bigoted farming community to which she belongs, Milla raises Agaat as her own, educating her in the science and skills of agriculture as well as Afrikaans culture, heritage and religion. After Milla eventually falls pregnant with her own child, Agaat is expelled from the farmhouse to an outside room and re-designated the housekeeper; however, it becomes increasingly evident that in the running of the home, farm and family, Milla is entirely dependent upon Agaat. Indeed, in the final stages of her illness, Milla becomes very literally dependent on Agaat for the most basic bodily functions.

2.2 “chew me until i bind”: Sacrifice and Cultural Renewal

In *Agaat* Marlene van Niekerk presents the future of Afrikaner culture in a new matrilineal and racially hybrid genealogy. Van Niekerk disrupts and subverts the dominant patriarchal, patrilineal and racial epistemes upon which the *plaasroman*³⁵ is based by leaving the farm,

³⁵ According to the conventions of the 'normative' South African farm novel, the farm is typically left to a white male heir of biological descent. See Loraine Prinsloo (2006) for a comparison of *Agaat* with 'normative' farm novels like C.M. van den Heever's *Laat Vrugte* (1939), which anticipates *Agaat* in terms of its strong (albeit marginal) matriarch, *ouma* Willa, and its concern with the relationship between land ownership and identity.

not to her son and putative male heir, but to the coloured housekeeper, Afaat.³⁶ This matrilineal genealogy occurs through the self-sacrifice of the white matriarch, Milla de Wet, or rather, Redelinghuys, the maiden name that is inscribed on her tombstone. The allusive prose passage that is the focus of this section is written in the style of a prayer or lament with its mournful meditation on the onset of disease and decay in the soil and farming stock that Milla regrets having not saved from abuse and denigration, as she herself failed in fending off her abusive husband and manipulative mother. The lament becomes an appeal for a beneficent successor to care for and “breathe” life back into the soil. In this section I explore how Milla is presented as an earth mother, in her invocation of the Demeter-Persephone myth, supplicating for rebirth and renewal. Here the earth mother figure is described as “sick” and “fallow,” and yet awaiting a catalyst for regeneration (Van Niekerk 2006a: 35). I argue that she presents herself as a *pharmakos*, ritual sacrifice or scapegoat, whose purpose is, according to René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*, “to restore harmony in the community, to reinforce the social fabric” (2005 [1972]: 2005). Consequently, the death of the white matriarch serves symbolically to reunite the divisiveness caused by the structural violence of apartheid and allow the renewal and regeneration of the land, Afrikaner culture and, arguably, the South African nation.

The extract that serves as the focus of this section is from the first stream-of-consciousness passage in the novel. The stream-of-consciousness passages form one of four alternating narrative strands in the novel; the other three include Milla’s first-person narration in the present of the text (set in the year of her death, 1996), her memories of past events written in the second person, and her diary entries from the 1950s and ’60s. Significantly, this passage is set in 1996, the year of Milla’s death and the inception of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, which permitted the exposure of the pathological nature of apartheid society. Tim Woods notes that in South Africa, in literature and in the public sphere, “social transformation has been constantly cast in the metaphor of healing a national trauma” (2007: 200). The poet Ingrid de Kok refers to the TRC hearings as a “work of mourning” that requires “healers” to “mediate between the discourses of the past self and the present self” (1998: 60–1).

³⁶ Although it may be argued that Jakkie is the agent by which Afaat receives the farm, it is my view that the mechanism of transfer of ownership is not of primary importance in Milla’s narrative. Rather, we are guided by the recurring motif of self-sacrifice in this narrative and the predominant feeling-tone evident in Milla’s narration, which highlights her desire to offer propitiation for the harm done to Afaat.

In this first stream-of-consciousness passage Milla's sick body is directly associated with the illness and affliction of the land and its creatures. The passage begins with the question, "*how does a sickness begin?*" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 35), and follows with a list of various animal and plant pathologies. The first sickness listed is botulism, a rare paralytic disease that afflicts the animals on Milla's farm. The bacteria known as *Clostridium botulinum* grow ideally in soil that is bereft of oxygen and rich in phosphorus. Jak, who accidentally shot some of Milla's cows whilst using tins cans for target practice in the pasture, is blamed for triggering the illness as the decomposing carcasses provide the phosphorus necessary for the production of the botulism toxin. Botulism tends to occur in phosphorus-deficient animals that, in order to satisfy their craving for phosphorus, "eat bones or soil which contain the botulism bacteria and toxin" (Kirk & Adaska 1998: n.p.). Agaat leads Milla out to where the cattle are grazing, where Milla discovers this shocking cannibalistic scene:

There against the brambles the pregnant cows were standing and eating white ribs, the carcass of a cow that had been lying there for a long time. The white shards were sticking out of their mouths as they were chewing. You gazed at the drooling and the crunching, too shocked to put one foot in front of the other. To one side the cows' off-colour calves were standing neglected, watching. [...] Blommetjie had already burst open. You could see the dead foetus of her calf. Blommetjie, a great-granddaughter of Grootblom, another of the Grootblom clan from your mother's old herd. (Van Niekerk 2006a: 230–1)

The horror Milla experiences not only reveals her shock at the loss of the animals she has known since childhood, her maternal birthright, but also marks a confrontation with the "utmost of abjection," that which erodes the boundaries between ingested and expelled, inside and outside, dead and alive (Kristeva 1982 [1980]: 4): pregnant cows, erupted carcasses, drool, skeletons, a dead foetus. Notably, the abject is distinctly associated with the feminine and maternal body. A mother herself, Milla's "shock" reveals her uncanny identification with her infected and dying herd. With one "hand on the flank" and another "on the little crown between the ears," Milla weeps for the "meek caramel-coloured mothers" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 234). Milla describes Jak's ability to use his Simmentals as dairy cows, help them calve and then have them slaughtered as "treason" (252). The cow is Milla's totemic animal, a symbol of the feminine and maternal. When Milla, in labour and unable to make it to the hospital in time, instructs Agaat on how to assist with the birth, she says, "just do everything you'd do with a cow" (180). Agaat, encouraging and crooning, uses the same words passed on by Milla's father to her: "little buttermilk stand ready [...] /mother macréé

little mótherców” (181). Rosi Braidotti points out that “most abject beings, animals and states are also sacred, because they mark essential boundaries” (1994: 128). The mother as “life-giver” is at the “interface between life and death” and is thus a primary figure of abjection and also the sacred (128).

The botulism that ravages Milla’s herd of Jerseys, and later in the novel the tulip poisoning that almost destroys Jak’s new herd of Simmentals (Van Niekerk 2006a: 252), are reminiscent of the Old Testament plagues visited upon the wicked as some form of divine punishment. Milla’s grief-stricken cry that a “weeping and wailing it was in those days on Grootmoedersdrift” (233) echoes the words from the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more” (Jeremiah 31:15). As Rachel mourns her children, so Milla mourns the loss of her cattle as if they were kin.

According to Girard, in archaic societies human violence is controlled by limiting its effects to ritual sacrifice, whilst in modern societies there is no differentiation between sacred violence and wanton violence (2005 [1972]: 199). Violence in modern Western society, Girard warns, is “limitless” (253). Without distinctions violence becomes “contagious” and “spreads throughout the community” (51). Girard proposes that, unlike incest and patricide motifs, where violence is limited to a single individual, such as the case of Oedipus, the motif of the plague “illuminates [...] the collective character of the disaster, its universally contagious nature” (81).³⁷ The death of Milla’s cattle can be seen as a metonym for the social malaise and reciprocal violence endemic to apartheid South African society. The botulism epidemic is set in 1960, a year that can be described as a nadir in South African history, in terms of resistance to the racial segregation and discriminatory policies which had been consolidated during the 1950s under the apartheid government. The diary entry prior to the discovery of the cattle disease is 16 October, 1960. Historically this is shortly after white South Africans voted in a referendum to become a republic, a vote won by a mere 52% majority (Saunders & Southey 2001: 144). The fear of black and white English-speaking South Africans of separation from the Commonwealth and consequent international isolation

³⁷ Girard’s theory relies on an engagement with, and critique of, Sigmund Freud’s theories, including the Oedipus complex and his theory of collective murder in *Totem and Taboo* (1913). He criticises Freud for not seeing that Oedipus is a prime example of the scapegoat – “a repository for all the community’s ills” (2005 [1972]: 81) – and thus also evidence of collective violence. The collective nature of violence merely appears more overtly evident in a plague.

was realised when President H.F. Verwoerd withdrew South Africa's application for membership of the Commonwealth in 1961 due to international opposition to the government's segregationist policy (144). Separation from the Commonwealth created a sense of political isolation in which (for those who opposed apartheid) it seemed that South Africa's independence thwarted international intervention in the government's racist policies. The year 1960 was particularly fateful for the non-white population: it began with the anti-pass law campaign that resulted in the Sharpeville Massacre on 21 March and was followed by the banning of the African National Congress in April.³⁸

The whole cattle disaster is staged as a lamentation couched in terms of religious and national symbolic significance. The scourge on Milla's herd presents an occasion for a more profound collective mourning on the part of those whose freedom has been denied by the restrictive pass laws and who have in effect been rendered vassals to the ruling white minority. Agaat directs a team of convicts hired to assist in clearing the field of the cows' bones. As they work she leads them in a hymn, originally written by Martin Luther, derived from Psalm 130, in which David pleads for his own redemption and that of his people, the Israelites.

Hope, Israel in your sorrow,
trust, o nation that grieves;
his favour light'ns the morrow,
his grace your grief reprieves.
Then shines a sweet salvation:
all Israel is free
of trial and tribulation.
Do like, Lord, unto me! (Van Niekerk 2006a: 233)

This hymn becomes Agaat's personal expression of injustice and supplication for "salvation." Ironically, and in a form of mimetic doubling, in singing this hymn Agaat and the convicts appropriate the founding myth upon which the Afrikaners based their entitlement to the land: a story of "tribal salvation" in which the wandering Afrikaner clans, like the Israelites, find their Promised Land (Coetzee 1988: 50). The hymn uncannily returns to haunt Milla, but now with a difference, as in Agaat's "mouth it was a battle hymn [...] and it was directed at you and you felt how she was piling up a case against you. It was a case for which she could

³⁸ While the future of black liberation in South Africa appeared morbid in 1960, Harold MacMillan's "Wind of Change" speech to the South African parliament in February 1960 (signalling a watershed in British acceptance of African nationalism and self-governance) along with the Sharpeville Massacre became catalysts for increased international opposition to apartheid, through a variety of means.

locate her injustice in the very hymns of your own church, in the very mouths of the prophets of the Old Testament” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 233). Agaat, in her mimetic replication of Milla’s culture, language and religion, thus introduces an element of strangeness and difference in her re-signification and appropriation of the hymns of the *volk*.

For Freud the uncanny (*unheimlich*) possesses “the double semantic capacity to mean its opposite, signifying at once the homely, familiar, friendly, comfortable, intimate and the unfamiliar, uncomfortable, alien and unknown” (Chisholm 1992: 436). Freud sees figures or expressions of uncanniness as related to the phenomenon of the ‘double.’ Agaat has become Milla’s double, “originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an ‘energetic denial of the power of death’” (Freud 1957 [1915, 1917]: 235). However, the double threatens to efface the subject and thus “from having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (235). “Death is her objective [and] [s]he has prepared it excellently” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 17), Milla states matter-of-factly of Agaat’s preparations for her demise.

Whilst Agaat may be the harbinger of death, she also serves a positive function in “observing and criticizing the self” (Freud 1957 [1915, 1917]: 235). The postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, following Freud, thus posits that the uncanny creates a space for re-evaluating the authority of the coloniser and his/her cultural superiority. Bhabha draws attention to the uncanny ambivalence of culture:

Culture is *heimlich*, with its disciplinary generalizations, its mimetic narratives, its homologous empty time, its seriality, its progress, its customs and coherence. But cultural authority is also *unheimlich*, for to be distinctive, signifiatory, influential and identifiable, it has to be translated, disseminated, differentiated, interdisciplinary, intertextual, international, inter-racial. (1994: 136–7)

Thus culture is “homely” and comforting in its repetition of the same, and in the shared meaning it is given by those who belong to it, but it also “unhomely” because its significance is open to the interpretation of those others to whom it does not belong. Agaat, in her mimetic replication of Milla’s culture, language and religion, thus may introduce an element of strangeness and difference in her re-signification and appropriation of the hymns of the *volk*. Bhabha argues that the mimicry upon which colonial assimilation is based is inherently ambivalent, as in order to maintain its racial hegemony the colonised’s resemblance to the

coloniser can never be exact: “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (361). Agaat’s songs and her deviation from Milla’s monotheistic Calvinism suggest that Agaat does present some potential for change;³⁹ however, the extent of Agaat’s difference is the subject of debate, and will be explored in more detail in the discussion of the role of the frame narrative.

The botulism epidemic serves as a warning: a culture that is too homogenous and that does not allow for difference only feeds off itself and dies. The cannibalism of Milla’s pedigreed Jersey cows may imply a form of cultural entropy. Melissa Steyn notes that Afrikaners face “a profound existential crisis” in the “new” South Africa where they fear their language, religion and identity will be “annihilated, swamped or eroded” (2004: 18). Milla’s reflection after watching her cannibalistic cows, that “death itself [has] nutritional value” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 233), anticipates her own offering of her body as fallow land – an alternative to entropy and annihilation. Milla glosses the term “fallow” as a “state of pseudo-death [in which] you restore your substance” (113), and thus her death does not signify a final consummation or end, but rather cyclical renewal.

J.M. Coetzee, reading Emile Zola, notes that “society itself is an organism,” and that in literature “the degeneracy of individuals is in fact a symptom of the sickness of the social body” (1988: 142). Milla sees sickness as insidious and contagious, a defilement that infects all living organisms from microscopic bacteria in the soil to insects, plants and animals: “*How does a sickness begin? botulism from eating skeletons but where do the skeletons come from? Loco-disease nenta preacher-tick-affliction smut-ball bunt black-rust glume-blotch grubs beetles snails moths army caterpillars [...] soil sickens slowly in hidden depths*” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 35). The origin is ubiquitous. The defiling agent, Paul Ricoeur finds, “harms by invisible properties, and that nevertheless works in the manner of force in the field of our undivided psychic and corporeal existence”; it is “quasi-physical,” “quasi-moral” (1967 [1960]: 148–9). Thus, as the entire community is degenerate and “polluted,” it requires a

³⁹Cheryl Stobie explores the representations of religion and spirituality in the text in her article titled “Ruth in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat*” (2009). Stobie identifies parallels between Van Niekerk’s novel and the Book of Ruth, noting the subversive potential of Agaat’s pantheistic religion. She also relates the “radical representation of the godhead within the novel” (2009: 68) to Marcella Althaus-Reid’s *Bi/Christ* (2001), which challenges heteropatriarchy.

scapegoat, which becomes society's violence and dissent incarnate (Girard 2005 [1972]: 291). Girard proposes that the sacrifice of the scapegoat "serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence" (8); "the victim is considered a polluted object, whose living presence contaminates everything that comes in contact with it and whose death purges the community of its ills" (100). Thus the *pharmakos* (sacrifice) is a *pharmakon* (sickness and cure), "a volatile elixir, whose administration had best be left by ordinary men in the hands of those who enjoy special knowledge and exceptional powers – priests, magicians, shamans, doctors, and so on" (100).

The administration of the *pharmakon* is left to Agaat. She is depicted as a kind of sorcerer with an intuitive relationship with nature. Milla describes her as "witched" and her voice as "incantatory" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 154, 683). Not unlike the Greek Fates who are depicted weaving and holding the figurative thread of life, from the inception of the narrative we are informed of Agaat's skill at embroidery. Milla describes her as her "deathbed accompanist" and "embroiderer of deathbed stories" (395). The shroud Agaat embroiders for Milla merges biblical scenes with images from nature, particularly fauna and flora found on Milla's farm. The shroud reflects the centrality of agrarian life in Agaat's mythology. Her *Hulpboek vir Boere in Suid-Afrika (Handbook for Farmers in South Africa)*, a gift from Milla, is treated as a sacred text. In a final intimate church service around Milla's bed, attended by the farm labourers and their families, Agaat chooses to read a section from the handbook titled "Soil," which deals with the effects of erosion, instead of reading from scripture (651). As Cheryl Stobie notes, Agaat "practises a kind of nature mysticism allied to the elements, particularly fire, but also associated with animal sacrifice and butterflies, symbolising metamorphosis" (2009: 65). She is able to summon up the elusive Emperor Butterfly, which is central in connecting Milla, Jakkie and Agaat. The butterfly is also the symbol of Psyche, the Greek goddess of the soul, who represents spiritual reincarnation. Psyche was incarnate as a butterfly, as early Greeks believed that human souls would occupy flying insects when they passed from one life to the next (Seigneuret 1988: 199).

In this passage Milla imagines an answer to the question posed to Agaat by pointing to words on a chart: "Guilty. I am. I shall be. But. How am I to. Die. Question mark" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 438). Later in self-reflection she laments, "*oh my soul in me there is not room for you to mortify yourself*" (622). Her quest for mortification has dual significance as an act of contrition and atonement for the sin of forsaking Agaat, and as a literal desire to decay and

return to organic matter. The “*long-suffering*” soil contaminated by bacteria, fungi and a range of bugs is a projection of the abject female body. Although Milla’s harsh treatment of Agaat cannot be denied, Milla, repeating the Golden Rule (“*i have done as was done unto me*”) realises that she has replicated the ills done unto her by her mother, the “*disillusioned despot*” (35).

Van Niekerk’s experimentation with the *plaasroman* deviates from typical personifications of the earth. According to Coetzee, “if the pastoral writer mythologises the earth as a mother, it is more often than not as a harsh, dry mother, without curves or hollows, infertile, unwilling to ask her children back even when they ask to be buried in her, or as a mother cowed by the blows of the cruel sun-father” (1988: 9). Although Milla has suffered under the abuse of her husband and claims unconsciously that she did not “*strike back*” (2006a: 35),⁴⁰ she does, even if only in fantasy, offer the greatest sacrifice for reconciliation: herself, and, by extension, the Afrikaner (agri)culture she comes to represent. Consolidating and summoning her forces together she awaits an alchemical or divine transformation:

i clamp myself gather my waters my water-retaining clods my loam my shale i am fallow field but not decided by me who will gently plough me on contour plough in my stubbles and my devil’s-thorn fertilise me with green-manure and with straw to stiffen the wilt that this wilderness has brought on this bosom and brain? who blow into my nostrils with breath of dark humus? (35)

Milla’s body becomes the menopausal earth-mother whose womb of “*water-retaining clods*” and “*loam*” may, if nurtured with tender (ostensibly feminine) care, be revitalised and still offer a “*belated harvest*” (35). Milla presents her body as an offering, in order that she might yet contribute to some communal enrichment. She asks: “*who sow in me the strains of wheat named for daybreak or for hope? [...] who will harvest who shear who share my fell my fleece my sheaf my small white pips?*” (35). The wheat and pips (or seeds) are symbols of the mother and daughter goddesses of agriculture and death: Demeter and Persephone (Hard 2004: 128–9). Unlike in Judeo-Christian myths where the earth is paired with a male “fecundator,” here both earth and fecundator are feminine. In “The Forgotten Mystery of Female Ancestry,” Irigaray sees the mythological couple of Demeter and Kōrē/Persephone as

⁴⁰ While in this stream-of-consciousness passage Milla presents herself as ‘turning the other cheek’ to Jak’s abuse, Buxbaum suggests that she does in fact strike back by “rewriting the narrative of their sex life as one in which she embraced the violence, her psychological manipulation of Jak, by which she ‘replaces his guts with her projects’ [(Van Niekerk 2006a: 25)]” (2014: 166).

paradigmatic of the mother-daughter bond, which formed a “natural and social model” in which the couple was the “guardian of the fertility of nature [...], and of the relationship with the divine” (Irigaray 1994 [1989]: 12). In this myth, used commonly to explain the changing seasons, Hades steals Persephone to the Underworld to be his bride, leaving Demeter in grief and resulting in the barrenness of earth. The subsequent reunion of the mother and daughter signals Spring and a restitution of harmony and plenitude on the earth. In her reading of this myth, Irigaray sees Hades as representative of the destructive forces of patriarchal power in which the mother-daughter bond is sacrificed and subverted in order to satisfy male desire. In this patriarchal economy women are objects of commerce between men and must substitute their identification with each other for a desire directed towards men: their fathers, husbands and sons. In Van Niekerk’s novel Milla submits to the patriarchal law and expels Agaat, her first child, in her joy at finally producing a child of her own and a male heir. In the phallogocentric order a woman’s identity is dependent on her relationship to a man. As a “sex which is not one,” women and their relationships with each other remain unsymbolised – they exist in a state of *dereliction* outside the symbolic order (in Whitford 1991: 77). Abandoned and without hope, they exist in “interminable rivalry” as they can only occupy the position of mother by substitution (78).

However, Irigaray encourages the reimagining of a new female social contract that allows for contiguity rather than substitution. She also calls for an attempt to symbolise the mother-daughter bond and for women to have “a religion, a language, and [...] a currency of their own” (Irigaray 1993 [1987]: 76). She suggests that if “a woman were to celebrate the Eucharist with her mother, giving her a share of the fruits of the earth blessed by them both, she might be freed from all hatred or ingratitude toward her maternal genealogy” (21). In a state of humble contrition, Milla imaginatively presents herself as the offering, a fallow ground awaiting rejuvenation. Her question, “*who [will] sow in me the strains of wheat named for daybreak or for hope?*” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 35), implies Agaat as the agriculturalist who shares her love of, and devotion to, the land. However, Milla does not simply wish to bequeath the land, but hopes that she may be *incorporated* into something new.

In the final stream-of-consciousness passage that relates Milla’s death and passage to the afterlife, this possibility of being with rather than replacing the mother is presented. Milla’s sacrifice is not an act of self-annihilation, but rather a fantasy of transubstantiation and

mending of the broken mother-daughter bond. The constant refrain of “*who*” in the first passage is echoed and finally answered:

who breathes beneath me as if I'm lying on a living bedstead my pulse ignited with another pulse my breath to the rhythm of another my insight capsulated in sturdy scaffolds my sentences erected on other sentences like walls built on a rock? who?

where are you agaat?

here I am (Van Niekerk 2006a: 673)

Agaat’s imagined response continues with a repetition of Ruth’s words of allegiance to her mother-in-law Naomi: “*where you go there I shall go/ your house is my house/ your land is my land/ the land that the Lord thy God giveth you*” (673).⁴¹ Milla’s Eucharistic supplication, “*who will chew me until i bind*” is not answered directly, but it is implied. It is through her coloured daughter and mimetic double that Milla’s transubstantiation occurs.

In *Agaat*, Van Niekerk exchanges the patriarchal Judeo-Christian religious discourse, at the core of Afrikanerdom, for an alternative belief system that is based on a pre-Christian, ecologically aware and feminine theosophy.⁴² The first and last stream-of-consciousness passages suggest a participatory social contract of women-amongst-women (to borrow Irigaray’s phrasing), and continual spiritual evolution that re-imagines an Afrikaner identity that is not based on the exclusionary politics of apartheid ideology or on masculine linear time. Van Niekerk’s novel resonates with what Melissa Steyn notes as a general disenchantment with the Afrikaner worldview of apartheid in the public sphere, in particular “its faith in patriarchal religious foundationalism,” resulting in a need for the “rehabilitation” and reinvention of Afrikaner identity and the mythologies upon which it is based (Steyn 2004: 150).

The unconscious fantasy presented in Milla’s stream-of-consciousness passages is utopian in its wish fulfilment of Milla’s desire to make reparation and be reconciled with the daughter she cast out. These passages also present Milla as the victim, in their record of her suffering as the result of her physical degeneration as well as her psychological anxiety and guilt over

⁴¹ Stobie (2009) explores this exchange between Milla and Agaat in terms of its allusion to the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi.

⁴² Van Niekerk also draws on a range of other world myths and belief systems, including Egyptian eschatology, Norse myth and shamanism.

the wrongs she has committed against Agaat. Whilst the reader may feel pity for Milla, it cannot be forgotten that she is also Agaat's oppressor and can only be redeemed through admission of her contrition. In the present of the text Milla reveals her remorse and bad conscience:

Oh, my little Agaat, my child that I pushed away from me, my child that I forsook after I'd appropriated her, that I caught without capturing her, that I locked up before I'd unlocked her!

Why did I not keep you as I found you? What made me abduct you over the pass? What made me steal you from beyond the rugged mountains? *Why can I only now be with you like this, in a fantasy of my own death?*

Why only now love you with this inexpressible regret?

And how must I let you know this? (my emphasis, Van Niekerk 2006a: 540)

Due to her paralysis, Milla cannot utter these words to Agaat. According to Stobie, this is a "mental confession" and a "sign of her heartfelt penitence" (2009: 65). Stobie substantiates this view by summarising J.M. Coetzee's argument in "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoévsky" (1992), that "a truthful confession which transcends self-interest can only occur at the brink of (or after) death, when self-preservation is no longer a possibility" (Stobie 2009: 64). However, I argue that this "mental" acknowledgement of Agaat's suffering is insufficient. It needs to be followed by a more overt gesture of contrition, which is evident at the last supper Agaat prepares and shares with her. In order to elaborate on Stobie's cogent identification of a model of "acknowledgement of transgression, confession, penitence and absolution" within the novel (2009: 67), I explore how these motifs occur in other parts of the text. Furthermore, it is necessary to assess critically Milla's partial and essentialised view of Agaat, especially since Agaat's suffering remains eclipsed by Milla's narration and her presentation as a martyr in her stream-of-consciousness passages. Indeed, Agaat's grief remains largely unsymbolised as she is given no narrative voice until the Epilogue, where, in her fairy-tale cosmogony, she states that "*Nobody noticed anything of Good's mourning because she cried without tears*" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 689). In order for there to be true contrition, Milla must admit the extent of her abjection of Agaat.

In the following section I explore the more fraught relationship between Agaat and Milla expressed in the present of the text and the retrospective retelling of how Milla came to

“appropriate” Agaat in the second-person narrative passages. These narrative strands highlight the othering and abjection of Agaat and reveal Milla’s less than benevolent motives. In Milla’s eyes Agaat shifts from the idealised Good child to the malevolent maid; she oscillates between exacting and pernicious nurse and compassionate carer; and finally, she is Milla’s saviour and guide to the metaphorical Elysian Fields of her “*Overberg*.” In order to achieve her unconscious fantasy of redemption, Milla needs to confront the fantastical figure she has constructed and transform her from idealised or abject object to subject.

2.3 Agaat: Traversing a Fantasy

Through Milla’s focalisation, Agaat appears as a contradictory amalgam of images of abjection, supreme evil, compassion and supernatural powers. She is represented as a phantasmagorical character, “a shifting series of phantasms, illusions, or deceptive appearances, as in a dream, or as created by the imagination; a changing scene made up of many elements; an exhibition of optical illusions” (Webster 1981: 711). Milla calls her a witch, a thousand devils, Satan, and even a vengeful goddess. Jakkie refers to her as Frankenstein and a Cyborg (Van Niekerk 2006a: 608–9, 677). And yet her name originates from the Greek word meaning “good,” which the *dominee* says is a “holy brand” and “an imminent destiny [...] to do good, to want to be good, goodness itself” (487); however, her more beneficent characteristics are veiled, effaced or only glimpsed from an oblique angle as she is denied her own narrative voice. Agaat is Jakkie’s *femme inspiratrice*, at times a macabre spectre in Milla’s eyes, but also her “deathbed accompanist” (395) – a more ambivalent and unpredictable *amicus mortis* (friend unto death)⁴³ than Joop in *Memorandum*. She acts as Milla’s proxy in a ‘dress rehearsal’ of her burial and also serves as Milla’s guide to the afterlife in her death-scene epiphany.

Milla’s confusion in trying to understand who or what Agaat is – her continued fascination and exasperation in trying to make sense of her – resonates with the Lacanian Real, “that which is both inside and outside the subject, resisting the Symbolic’s endeavours to contain it” (Wright & Wright 1999: 3). The Real is the black hole at the centre of the symbolic order and the subject, which paradoxically supports social reality but also undermines it (Homer

⁴³ A term employed in *Memorandum* to refer to the relationship between the characters, Mr X and Mr Y, as well as between Wiid and his librarian, Joop.

2005: 81). The Real, or the Thing as the Real object, is “the cause of the most fundamental human passion” (Lacan 1992 [1986]: 97), or Žižek’s gloss, the “irreducible kernel of *jouissance* that resists symbolization” (1999 [1989]: 14).

This ontological lack at the core of subjectivity is anathema to the subject who believes that there must be something more and something better, to such an extent that she gives the void consistency, “retrospectively turn[ing] nothing into something” (Homer 2005: 2005). This special ‘something’ – an object of fantasy – that fills the gap in the self is the *objet petit a*, or the “Real object” (Žižek 1992 [1989]: 163). In effect the fantasy itself becomes proof of the Real, an “embodiment of the lack [...] in the symbolic order” (163, 170). Žižek refers to this object of fantasy as the “sublime object of ideology.” An object whose “sublime features” are only apparent in “an interspace, in an intermediate state, viewed from a certain perspective” (170). The illusory and interstitial quality of the sublime object reverberates with Agaat’s characterisation as a liminal being: a coloured woman (neither black nor white), both insider and outsider in her roles as maid, nurse, foster daughter, surrogate mother, proxy-farm manager and, eventually, substitute heir.

In Elizabeth and Edmond Wright’s eloquent definition, the sublime object is that which we “most ardently desire, imagining it to be in the possession of the Other. This object, beyond all else, is what is unconsciously believed will fill the void at the core of being” (1999: 3). Thus Agaat comes to be Milla’s *objet petit a*, her sublime object. Agaat is like the paradoxical sublime, which according to Žižek embodies itself “in some miserable, radically contingent corporeal leftover” but also appears as chaotic and boundless nature, “where the aesthetic imagination is strained to its utmost, where all finite determinations dissolve themselves” (Žižek 1992 [1989]: 207, 203).

Agaat’s enigmatic character and mysterious role in the narrative may be better understood through an understanding of the Real and its effects as the *objet petit a*, or sublime object of ideology. In the following section I explore how Agaat, who begins as a vivid evocation of the Real, becomes Milla’s treasured *objet a*, the object-instrument of Milla’s *jouissance*, a narcissistic illusion that conceals the traumatic strangeness of the Thing. However, by casting Agaat out and relegating her to the role of servant, Milla destroys her fantasy construction and consequently unmask and unleashes the radical alterity of Agaat as the Thing.

The sado-masochistic relationship between Agaat and Milla bears some uncanny resemblances to the relationship between the Lady and supplicant in the courtly love tradition. Agaat, like the Lady of courtly love, becomes Milla's "spiritual guide into the higher sphere of spiritual ecstasy" (Žižek 1994: 89). Following Lacan, in "Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing," Žižek argues that the "idealization of the Lady, her elevation to a spiritual, ethereal ideal" is actually a "secondary phenomenon: it is a narcissistic projection whose function is to render her traumatic dimension invisible" (90). She becomes sublimated to "the level of the Thing, of the black hole, around which desire is organized" (90). According to Žižek, what Lacan means by sublimation "is shifting the libido from the void of the 'unservicable' Thing to some concrete, material object of need that assumes a sublime quality the moment it occupies the place of the Thing" (96). Agaat is thus a negative feature that functions as a positive one. The sublimation of Agaat is explored through her totemic association with the Blue Emperor Butterfly, a symbol of the soul in the novel.

Furthermore, Žižek observes that as the metaphysical Ground the Lady is "supreme Good," but as the Real, an elusive surplus, "the Lady *qua* Thing can also be designated as the embodiment of radical Evil" (98). Although Milla christens Agaat with a name that has its etymological origins in the Greek word "*agathos*," meaning good, it is the potential for evil that Milla experiences when she casts out Agaat. Consequently, at certain moments in the text, Agaat is described by Milla as evil incarnate.

Although Agaat remains elusive and equivocal to the very end, she exhibits unqualified moments of compassion. I consider one way of understanding Agaat's reversal from the terrifying Real back to Milla's *objet a* in the end is to explore Agaat's role as Milla's analyst. In Lacanian terms psychoanalysis is defined as an encounter with the elusive Real, and one encounters the Real through traversing one's fundamental fantasy (Lacan 1977 [1975]: 205). Through a process of re-enactment the analyst encourages the analysand to reveal the fundamental fantasy that structures her reality, her *objet a*, "the secret treasure, *agalma*, what we consider most precious in ourselves" (Žižek 1999 [1994]: 276). This is "the fantasmic 'stuff of the I' [that] confers on the ontological void that we call 'subject' [...] the semblance of a fullness of being" (276). By returning to the creation of the fantasy object with retrospective clarity, the analyst forces the patient to see for the first time that this object's fullness is also a veneer that masks its own lack. Through her ritualistic reading of Milla's diaries and her encouragement of communication, through their almost telepathic eye signals

and the use of an old alphabet chart, Agaat forces Milla to traverse and expose her fundamental fantasy. The process can be seen as the work of mourning, which involves the re-living of memories of the lost love-object, reality testing and finally the reinstating of the ambivalent lost object (Klein 1988 [1940]: 344–7). It is through this process that Milla (and the reader) are brought to *notice* Agaat and her suffering. One may argue that the whole fictional narrative is guided by the nurse/analyst, Agaat, sitting behind the scenes (but also at the centre of the action), probing her reclining patient to enter into the painful process of delving into her unconscious motives. It is therefore Agaat who is the force driving Milla's narrative, through its circular detours, to its climax.

2.3.1 Birth of a Fantasy

The description of Agaat in Milla's very first encounter with her and in Agaat's own fairy-tale cosmogony (told in the Epilogue) is evocative of the Real. In Agaat's version, Milla can at first "*make out nothing, but when her eyes got accustomed, she saw a pitch black hole. [...]* And in the corner of the hearth sat a pitch-black something" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 685). In Agaat's tale Milla refers to Agaat as "*the thing*" (685). She is covered in lice and dirt, and her body smells of iron, blood and soot. She is an abjected corporeal leftover. Milla's first encounter with Agaat reverberates with the impossibility of the encounter with the Real. We know that the Real exists because we experience it on a visceral and corporeal level and it enters discourse as a sign, a gaze or a disembodied voice (Žižek 1999 [1989]: 15). Agaat appears to Milla as a no-thing, a sound floating freely and emanating from the "cavern" of Agaat's body. According to Mark Sanders, one of the origins of Agaat's name, "Asgat," refers to "the hole that is not only an anus but gap, an absence, a zero" (2008: 25). This observation of the "hole" in Agaat's name resonates with the definition of the Real, as does his observation of the pre-symbolic guttural 'ggggg-sound' within her name which he refers to as "a sonic remainder at and from the beginning that is not reducible to a name" (25). The sound seems to originate from all boundless nature or some nameless interspace:

This time you heard the ggggg clearly, like a sign it sounded, like a rill in the fynbos, very soft, and distant, like the sound you hear before you've even realised what you're hearing.

That was the beginning. That sound. You felt empty and full at the same time from it, felt sorrow and pity surging in your throat. Ggggg at the back of the throat, as if it were a sound that belonged to yourself.

You stood back and clasped your arms around your belly. You put your hands to your face as if you wanted to trace with your fingers the expression that you felt there to make sure.

You didn't want to go home straight away, wanted to hold it fast a while longer. In such a mood you could only arouse suspicion in your mother's house. And you wanted to gather it, fold it away inside yourself in a place from which you could safely retrieve it, at night in your bed, in the half-hour of privacy while you were having your bath, on your evening walk. (Van Niekerk 2006a: 657)

Agaat's presence is a reminder of the void that is intrinsic to being as well as the fantasy of an object who fills this gap; and the pre-symbolic guttural sound she issues is a reminder of the Real. Agaat, paradoxically, is a reminder of the wound that results from entry into the symbolic and what fills it, which is why Milla feels "empty and full at the same time." As a representation of the Real, Agaat becomes Milla's *jouissance* (enjoyment or accurately, pleasure in pain) as Milla is overcome by sorrow and pity as well as joy. Milla is overwhelmed by a feeling of plenitude, of limitless synchronicity with the natural world, which she feels when she is near Agaat. Agaat is the object of Milla's *jouissance* – the pleasure in pain associated with sexual pleasure or religious ecstasy. It is significant that she wants to enjoy this scandalous pleasure, which she must hide from her mother, in those moments of sensual seclusion: in her bed, alone in the bath and in nocturnal reverie (657). As the *objet petit a*, Agaat is "the kernel of being," a kind of secret treasure that confers on the subject the "semblance of a fullness of being" (Žižek 1999 [1994]: 280). Milla feels as if the sound almost "belongs" to her. She wants to "gather" and "fold" the feeling it evokes inside herself. It is as if she literally inserts the very essence of Agaat's being inside herself in a kind of retroactive conception of Agaat as her own. The sound becomes an almost divine annunciation and Agaat comes to fill the barren Milla's maternal *jouissance*. She holds her belly – a space previously marked by absence – which has now transformed into a site of pleasure, evinced by the entirely unanticipated expression of joy on her face. Milla's sudden intuitive confirmation of maternal *jouissance* is a product of access to the impossible Real, which affords immediate access to the body, an immediacy sacrificed in entering the symbolic where words replace unmediated access to reality.

After Milla first discovers the young Agaat, she goes to a dam to reflect on her encounter and try to come to some decision about what to do with the child. There she sees the whirligig beetles swimming on the water: “the water insect and its little twin shadow, the hooked scribble-claws, broader around the ankles as if wearing boots, with also their reflections, and between the two sets of claws, between above and below, a single ripple inscribing the surface of the water” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 658). It is significant that Milla’s description of the “little twin shadow” is an ominous likeness to Agaat with her one deformed arm and her ubiquitous school shoes, and also a likeness to Milla in the final stages of physical atrophy. Milla likens the overlapping circles the whirligigs create in the water to a fugue – a contrapuntal musical composition – thus unwittingly presenting Agaat as her counterpoint.⁴⁴ However, a fugue also is also a psychological term for a long period of amnesia, and thus the image predicts Milla’s selective forgetting of her appropriation of Agaat. The image of the whirligigs with their twin shadows becomes a narcissistic projection of Milla’s ideal of finding completion through an other. The mirror reflection masks her ontological lack and gives a false sense of mastery to the inherently fragmentary nature of the self. Consequently, Milla feels as if she has “found” herself. Her unspoken explanation to her mother for her inexplicable joy on arriving home after discovering Agaat reveals her nascent narcissism: she wants to say to her mother, “I myself happened, my almost forgotten self” (658). The whirligigs highlight the fantasy of a unified ego, the fantasy of completion, but Milla’s unwitting comment on them also unveils the fantasy and the trace of the Real as Milla notices that the circles the whirligigs create “vanish without ever having been anything” (659). The circles created by the beetles suggest the circuitous route of psychoanalysis, as the fundamental fantasy can never be reached directly; it is only attainable “by way of an incessant postponement” and can only be seen from an oblique angle (Žižek 1994: 95). For that is the paradox of *jouissance*: once obtained, it disappears. Its pleasure is in its inaccessibility, and it can only be reached through the infinite succession of symbolic desires.

Milla raises Agaat as her own child and treats her as contiguous with herself, as two halves forming a functioning and harmonious whole. She tells Agaat, “Together we make up a whole person with two strong hands” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 572). However, after seven years

⁴⁴ Willie Burger (2005) provides a groundbreaking and insightful exploration into the symbolic significance of the whirligig beetle in the narrative. In his article, “Karnaval van die Diere: Die Skrywende Waterkewer Eerder as die Jollie Bobbejaan,” Burger views the water’s reflective surface as representing the power of writing and language in enabling communication between self and other. I contribute to Burger’s reading by considering the significance of the fugue-like nature of the whirligigs’ movements.

Milla falls pregnant and without explanation expels Agaat from the main house to a room in the backyard, and provides her with a maid's uniform and her own separate enamel dishes. The promise of a biological child and heir to the farm now becomes Milla's new object of desire, resulting in the rejection and abjection of her first child. In Agaat's autobiographical fairy-tale the moment of expulsion is also the metaphorical death of the treasured *objet petit a*, the fantastical Good child of Milla's *jouissance*, and the emergence of Agaat as radical evil:

Óut she said to Good. Óut of my house, from now on you live in a little room outside in the backyard.

Take your things!

Here's your suitcase!

[...]

From now on you're my slave. You'll work for a wage.

And Good's heart was very sore. But not for long and then it grew as hard as a stone and black as soot and cold as a burnt-out coal. And she took the suitcase filled with the dresses and shoes and things of the child she'd been and went and buried it deep in a hole on the high blue mountain across the river. And piled black stones on top of it. And trampled it with her new black shoes and cocked her crooked shoulder and pointed with her snake's-head hand and said:

Now, Good, you are dead. (689)

Thus in Agaat's story Milla is responsible for the death of "Good" and her transformation into a hard black stone, suggestive of the recalcitrant Real. Milla does not fully acknowledge her role as catalyst in this metamorphosis into the uncanny spectre of the Real, the Thing. The fantasy of fulfilment and harmony Milla constructs is bared when the *objet a* is removed to reveal the Thing it conceals. The Thing can be viewed as "positive in so far as it is the being outside our knowing, but it is still felt as negative because its effects are *most palpable when it is disregarded*" (my emphasis, Wright & Wright 1999: 4).

2.3.2 Fallen Angel

The loss of the loved object, Agaat, can be related to Klein's theories on mourning and melancholia. Klein sees mourning and melancholia in adults as a replication of the initial childhood feelings of separation from the mother during weaning. According to Klein (following Freud), one creates replicas of one's loved objects within oneself as "internal objects" in one's inner psychic reality. Thus the loss of an actual loved one corresponds with a loss of internal ideal objects. Furthermore, the loss of a "good" object makes the mourner feel that bad objects predominate, and "reactivates" early childhood feelings of persecution and punishment. These are also accompanied by feelings of guilt inverted into anger and rage from the lost object, which for Milla would be compounded as she is responsible for Agaat's dejection as the ideal "good" object. Klein states that in adult mourning, early persecutory and depressive anxieties belonging to the paranoid-schizoid position are aroused. Klein explains that the child is torn by contradictory feelings of love and hate (associated respectively with the life drive and death drive) toward the loved object (usually the mother). Thus love and hate are inherent forces of unconscious fantasy life. The death drive is experienced as an "uncontrollable [force] that threaten[s] its own annihilation" (Alford 1990b: 41). The child cannot bear its own capacity for aggression against others so he or she projects the potential to do harm outwards, where it is experienced in a paranoid fashion: as an attack on the infant from the outside, that is, from the loved object. Klein describes the origin of these "enemies" to the self – projections of the child's own death drive onto the other – and the persecutory anxieties they create:

From the beginning the ego introjects objects 'good' and 'bad,' for both of which the mother's breast is the prototype [...]. But it is because the baby projects its own aggression on to these objects that it feels them to be 'bad' and not only in that they frustrate its desires: the child conceives of them as actually dangerous – persecutors who it fears will devour it, scoop out the inside of its body, cut it to pieces, poison it – in short, compassing its destruction by all the means which sadism can devise. These imagos, which are a phantastically distorted picture of the real objects upon which they are based, become installed not only in the outside world but, by the process of incorporation, also within the ego. (Klein 1988 [1935]: 262)

Klein's observations on the child perpetuate themselves in adult life. In addition, her theories have been applied productively to critical social studies and the functioning of groups. The Kleinian psychoanalyst, Hanna Segal, observes that groups cope with their capacity for destructiveness by splitting, "the group itself being idealized and held together by brotherly

love, and collective love of an ideal, whilst destructiveness is directed outwards to other groups [as] our group or ideas must be felt to be perfect,” whilst the enemy “must be presented as an inhuman monster” (Segal 1995: 194, 197). This splitting assists in explaining racism. The institution of apartheid turned the topography of fantasy into lived geography, the effects of which are allegorically evident in Agaat’s expulsion from the main farmhouse to the small room outside. In order for the utopian fantasy of apartheid to work it had to disavow a part of itself: the racial other.

In his psychoanalytical theories on ideology and racism, Žižek (1992 [1989]) observes that for the Nazis the conceptual figure of the ‘Jew’ as an object of fantasy was a precondition for anti-Semitic ideology. The ‘Jew’ serves a purely structural function in securing an ideological fantasy (99). According to Žižek the “basic trick of anti-Semitism is to displace social antagonism into social antagonism between the sound [...] social body, and the Jew as the force corroding it, the force of corruption” (125). The ‘Jew’ is thus a projection of society’s always already divisive nature. In other words, writes Žižek, “what is excluded from the [socio-symbolic order] returns in the Real as a paranoid construction of the ‘Jew’” (127). This conceptual figure of the ‘Jew’ can be equally applied to all constructions of society’s others, particularly during apartheid. Thus Agaat, as the racial other, becomes a paranoid construction and a fantastically distorted imago – Milla’s “negative, perverted double” (129).

Like Klein’s theory, which posits a fundamental ambivalence and antagonism in the mother-child relationship, Žižek states that society itself is fundamentally antagonistic at its core. Whilst Klein is arguably more optimistic about the capacity for individuals to integrate their naturally ambivalent feelings and eventually make reparation for harm done in the paranoid-schizoid position, Žižek argues that the idea of a naturally harmonious, peaceful and democratically evolving society is the product of ideological fantasy. Ontological antagonism is evident on Grootmoedersdrift where Milla’s parents’ relationship is marked by conflict and the domination of her father by her mother. Milla’s relationship is even more fraught, as she manipulates and emasculates Jak, and Jak in turn physically abuses Milla in a vain attempt to assert his masculinity. The young Agaat is born out of an abusive relationship and is sexually abused by her father and brother. Indeed, Milla’s act of kindness in removing Agaat from this situation is marred by her anger and force in trying to subdue the traumatised child. Milla threatens horrific punishment if Agaat attempts to escape and return to her hole in the hearth. She promises to have her flogged until her “backside comes out in red welts” and then “tie a

rope around [her] neck and tie [her] to a pole like a baboon” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 669). The fantasy of harmony Milla imagines in her relationship with Agaat is shattered when she casts Agaat out, thus returning the farm to its essentially antagonistic state. However, Milla does not admit the tragic effects of her own cruelty towards Agaat and instead projects her malice onto Agaat who, at significant moments in the text, falls from her state as “Good” to the Evil incarnate.

After Agaat’s expulsion to the backyard Milla becomes increasingly suspicious of Agaat and her motivations, imagining her at times as a vengeful saboteur and the mastermind behind various misfortunes that occur on the farm. Milla’s paranoid projections become extreme when she overhears a telephone conversation between Agaat and Jakkie, a conversation from which she is excluded and in which she and Jak are berated by their son. We are only privy to the responses Milla overhears, but it is evident that Jakkie is concerned that Agaat is being mistreated and taken advantage of by Milla and Jak. Agaat’s responses convey the fact that she has resigned herself to a future of servitude. She states that it is her “obligation” to care for Milla (549). The consequent events reveal that in this conversation Jakkie is confiding in Agaat his decision to desert the air force and leave his country immediately, thus missing the ostentatious twenty-fifth birthday feast Agaat, Milla and Jak have arranged. The decision to leave is an emotionally fraught one, and Agaat consoles Jakkie as a mother does her child, saying “hush, hush, don’t cry” (549). The intimacy between Agaat and Jakkie, and Agaat’s privileged position as confidante and favoured mother/sibling, become immediately apparent to Milla, who responds with rage, grabbing Agaat by her dress and shaking her. She asks:

Who are you? How many thousands of devils are you? For what do you pretend to be a holy angel of light? Dear, good Agaat of Grootmoedersdrift who doesn’t grumble and doesn’t grouse no matter what! Who’ll take care, who knows her place, who doesn’t interfere! Who’s only too grateful! Who’s so very religious! Who are you trying to bamboozle? You’re a Satan! It’s my child! Mine! Mine! Do you hear me! So why don’t you just tell him what’s happening here? Or do you want to entice him away further and further? He knows you’re lying! He knows! He knows! You think up a different story for each of us here according to your convenience. Witch! You’re a witch and you’re witching us here! If I’d only known, if I could only have known what I was doing that day when I took you in here. A curse you are. I hate you. (551)

Her accusations are fantastic in the extreme. She accuses Agaat of being more than a witch and a deceiver; she is “Satan” incarnate. Milla’s response reveals her envy of Agaat and her central cause for resenting her: that Agaat has cunningly conjured her son’s affections. It is

impossible to gauge the degree of Agaat's culpability in "stealing" Jakkie's affections and whether this is a premeditated act of malice on Agaat's part. Agaat took over the care of Jakkie as a baby as Milla suffered from post-natal depression. Agaat also, seemingly magically, is able to breastfeed Jakkie, as Milla could not. Absent during that crucial early attachment phase, Milla is never able to resume a position as the primary care-giver. In the epilogue Jakkie admits that his biological mother was "[s]o vaguely present in my life, compared with Gaat" (680). Sanders, utilising Kleinian theory, notes that Milla's "persecutory phantasy of retribution through dispossession [...] of her child" is triggered by Milla's dispossession of her "first child," Agaat, through casting her out of the house (2008: 20). Strangely, Milla's fantasy of persecution becomes "the retrospective justification for Agaat's initial dispossession by displacement from the house: Agaat is wicked, and will thus have deserved to be cast out" (20).

Milla's cry "It's my child! Míne! Míne!" highlights her fear that Agaat is somehow enjoying the precious mother-son relationship that should be hers. Julia Kristeva observes that in the Judeo-Christian tradition, motherhood is the principal sign of *jouissance*, the pleasure associated with the female body. Milla's obvious distress, envy and anger are caused by a belief that Agaat has usurped her role as mother, stolen her *jouissance* and excluded her from the primary dyad that gives a woman authenticity. In addition, Žižek notes that *jouissance* is not only associated with the feminine other, but also with the racial other and "is one of the key components of racism," as the other is presumed to have access to excessive enjoyment and is responsible for the theft of one's own enjoyment (1992 [1989]: 187, 90). For the "obsessional neurotic," notes Žižek, "the traumatic point is the supposed existence, in the other, of an insupportable, limitless, horrifying *jouissance* [and] the stake of all [her] frantic activity is to protect, to save the Other from all [her] *jouissance* even at the price of destroying [her]" (186–7). Thus, after Jakkie's birth Milla obsessively spends her life spying on Jakkie and Agaat. She jealously eavesdrops on their conversations, and when Jakkie is in the air force she unseals and reads the letters Agaat writes to him. One particular letter Milla jealously covets, as she notes it was like a "love letter compared to yours" and "you didn't want to let go, there was a tenderness and an obsession to these formulations after which you hungered" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 452, 453).

When Milla is in the last stages of motor neuron disease and is only able to communicate by blinking when Agaat points to letters on her childhood alphabet chart, Milla once again

interrogates Afaat about stealing the maternal pleasures she feels were rightly hers. She questions Afaat about her well-nigh magical ability to lactate and breastfeed Jakkie: “DID YOU REALLY HAVE MILK WHEN YOU LET JAKKIE DRINK FROM YOU, question mark” (490). However, Afaat’s magical nurturance is seen as contagion and witchcraft as she asks Afaat “WITH WHAT SUPERSTITIONS DID YOU INFECT JAKKIE, question mark” (446). Milla is jealous that Afaat has breastfed her son and thus literally replaced her on a biological level. However, she will not admit her culpability in turning Afaat into a bitter and vengeful woman through depriving her of the Kleinian “good breast” (the tender, caring, nurturing mother) she deserved as a child, and supplanting her with her birth child. Afaat’s appropriation of Jakkie, according to Sanders, is an act of retribution and reparation for Milla’s initial act of casting her out (2008: 29). Milla’s fear of Afaat is typical of Melanie Klein’s paranoid-schizoid position, which is characterised by a fear that others will do unto us as we have done unto them, that they will respond with “a greed and aggression equivalent to our own” (Alford 1990a: 182). Fred Alford in his reading of Klein argues that this position reflects “the morality of *lex talionis*,” a primitive system of justice based on the Old Testament principle of “an eye for an eye” (182).

2.3.3 Afaat and the Sublime Emperor Butterfly

Milla not only resents Afaat for providing physical sustenance to Jakkie but also for replacing her as his guide to the wonders of the natural world, of which the most cherished and esteemed wonder is the emperor butterfly. Milla once again interrogates Afaat through the alphabet chart: “WHY DID YOU NEVER TELL ME THAT YOU HAD SEEN T. BLUE EMPEROR BUTTERLY IN T. FOREST, question mark. I WAS THERE BEHIND T. ROCK FIG I SPIED ON YOU I SAW EVERYTHING, exclamation mark. STOLE HIM FROM ME, exclamation mark” (Van Nieker 2006a: 490). The butterfly is sacred, according to Milla. It is a shamanic guardian spirit or power animal that binds mother and child like the relationship between the shaman mentor and her novice. In a diary entry of 1954, a year after Milla has taken Afaat in and when Afaat is six years old, Milla records her conversation enlightening Afaat about the numinous purple emperor butterfly:

The jewel of the forest. Apatura iris. The eye that guards the secret of the soul. Only good people get to see it. Has Mêmê seen it yet? asks Afaat. She looks at me like that, I can’t lie. I hope to see it in my lifetime, I say. We can come every day, she says,

how many days are a lifetime? If we find it, then we catch it and put it in a bottle and then it can't escape, she says. Cruel little grin. Where does it come from? I mustn't forget that this child led a different life before I found her. No, I tell her, a butterfly is like the soul of a person, it dries out in captivity. (571)

Milla presents the butterfly as a symbol of the soul and thus a sublime object. However, the tragic irony of the parallels between the butterfly and Agaat's abduction and domestication appears to be lost on Milla at this stage. Agaat's desire to "catch" and appropriate the butterfly is a learned response from her adopted mother, who caught and appropriated her. Stobie argues that Milla shows "a certain degree of insight and sympathy" (2009: 63) when Agaat asks Milla to provide a definition of the word "holy" and Milla says it is "everything that's wild everything that's free" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 627). Agaat responds to this definition by implicitly accusing Milla of sacrilege when she says, "But you caught me and tamed me" (627). Milla's reaction, "So I pressed her close to me, shame" (627), is mildly placating. However, it is only later, when Agaat is in her late thirties and Jakkie is about to leave the country, that Milla realises that she is responsible for implanting a "heart of stone" in Agaat (554).

Milla's description of the butterfly evokes all the associations of a grail. The summoning and sighting of the butterfly is described by Milla as a lifelong quest. It is precious and mystical; it is only seen by those pure of spirit; and to see it is to receive an illumination, to undergo a religious experience. In its circuitous inaccessibility we find the butterfly – a common insect – elevated to the dignity of the Thing, a substitute for what they pursue: the soul, which is everything and nothing. Later, when the roles are reversed and Agaat has become Jakkie's surrogate mother, Milla is reduced to the infidel spying on Agaat and Jakkie in their quest to find the butterfly. However, Agaat seems to possess an uncanny access to the butterfly as she too – a servant and ordinary woman – is sublimated to the dignity of the Thing. Milla's clandestine observation makes Agaat appear as the shaman guiding her initiate in the arts of communicating with the spirit world. Agaat, as shaman, serves as a kind of priest, healer and prophet. These attributes of the shaman are evinced throughout the narrative, and detected at an early stage by Milla. Milla hears rumours from the other servants that Agaat was born with a caul and later wonders if she "has second sight" (625). By the time Agaat is a woman in her thirties Milla "[counts] on her [...]. To make things happen in [her] family, or not happen. Or to stop things from happening. Or to predict things. Rain, wind, floods. She could read your mood like the sky" (411). Milla sees Agaat as a pagan priest summoning the powers of

nature. She also assumes she is clairvoyant, but her prophetic powers are turned into an indictment of sabotage when the ailing and mute Milla asks, “WHY ARE YOU ON T. SCENE SO SOON AT EVERY DISASTER WONDER ABOUT YOUR TRUE COLOURS” (447).

Agaat teaches Jakkie to make a special concoction of banana and rum used to attract the butterfly. This concoction is presented as a sacrificial offering, which Jakkie has to taste to ensure its suitability, as Agaat states that the emperor butterfly “likes little goblins like you to mix his food” (297). Agaat’s mythology of the butterfly is more complex and elaborate than Milla’s. She anthropomorphises the butterfly into an omniscient deity called the “Eye of Everything” who is “[b]lack like the dark moon from outside” and “blue November-sky from the inside” (298). This butterfly deity invokes the attributes of a combination of ancient Egyptian gods. He is reminiscent of the Egyptian sun god Ra, who is depicted as a creating eye (the sun), and also of the Goddess Maat as the personification of justice (Kemp 2007: 8). He is also ambivalently associated with darkness (the new moon) and bright summer light and is thus, perhaps, closer to Osiris, who usurped the attributes of all the Egyptian gods and is symbolically associated with the moon and the sun, darkness and light, death and rebirth (Budge 1999 [1960]: 177, 293). Similarly, Agaat’s “Eye of Everything” is a creator-destroyer: “just like the fire like great love it’s all & it’s nothing & your soul perishes in the flames” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 298). Just like the Thing the butterfly can never be viewed directly, only “as its own shadow – if we cast a glance at it directly we see nothing, a mere void” (Žižek 1994: 95). The butterfly as a product of metamorphosis is emblematic of Osiris’s power of resurrection and reincarnation. Like Osiris, who is titled the “Lord of Souls” or “Hidden Soul” and described as “a shining Spirit-body, the Governor of Spirit-bodies” (Budge 1999 [1960]: 137, 59, 60), the butterfly is guardian of the secrets of the soul. Agaat’s description of the butterfly fits the paradoxical nature of the sublime object which, states Žižek, “in the very field of representation, provides a view, in a negative way, of the dimension of what is unrepresentable” (1992 [1989]: 203). Following Lacan, Žižek states:

We must remember that there is nothing intrinsically sublime in a sublime object [...], a sublime object is an ordinary, everyday object which, quite by chance, finds itself occupying the place of what he calls *das Ding*, the impossible-real object of desire. The sublime object is ‘an object elevated to the level of *das Ding*.’ It is its structural place – the fact that it occupies the sacred/forbidden place of *jouissance* – and not its intrinsic qualities that confers on it its sublimity. (194)

Whilst Milla, hiding in the bushes, inaccurately attributes the sound of fluttering to a thrush, like a clairvoyant Agaat anticipates the butterfly's arrival and whispers, "He's coming!" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 298). After preparing the fermenting banana offering and getting Jakkie to taste it, Agaat teaches Jakkie to summon the butterfly through meditation:

Close your eyes said A. to Jakkie. Bring him nearer with your will.

So there we sit the three of us with closed eyes & I add my will to theirs to make a miracle happen & there it happens!

The first thing I see when I open my eyes is Jakkie's face with a shiny spot reflecting from the lid onto him. But it's not only shiny it's blue as if a little window has opened on his forehead. There the butterfly is poised on the shiny lid & eats banana with its wings spread wide so that the one side shows blue. *Apatura iris* the giant purple emperor butterfly. There the two of them sit with the sun on their heads & the blue reflection leaps from Jakkie's forehead to A.'s cap & the butterfly opens and closes its wings [...]. The span of its wings greater than you can imagine. As large as two open hands with crossed thumbs. *Nymphalidae* the family of carrion eaters. (298)

The apparition of the butterfly is, as Milla states, a "miracle," a hierophany. The seemingly magical arrival of the butterfly and Agaat's ease at summoning it, whilst Milla has spent her lifetime attempting to do so, suggests that Agaat has a special affinity with the insect, as a shaman does with his or her power animal, or the Thing with the Real. The butterfly's revelation of itself to Jakkie and Agaat is similar to a shamanic initiation. The way the reflection from the butterfly's blue wings falls on Agaat's cap and Jakkie's head as if it were laying its hands upon them implies their selection by the spirit power and it endowing its powers upon them. Their illumination by the sun also suggests an epiphanic moment. The butterfly's power as guardian of the soul is consonant with the shaman's role as a retriever and restorer of lost souls (Smith 2007: 32). According to Eliade, the shaman is not only believed to "perform miracles of the fakir type, like all magicians" but "beyond this, [she] is a psychopomp" (1964: 4). In Milla's death-scene epiphany, Agaat guides Milla to the afterlife. She imagines Agaat parting her "*shoulders like wings*" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 673), repeating the way she taught Agaat as a child to save the butterflies that were "trapped by rain" (646), and thus allowing her soul to ascend to the afterlife, her "*overberg*" (674).

As a sublime object, Agaat is a figure of fascination, mystery and horror. She is not only represented as a shaman but also as a goddess figure. In her myth of origin Agaat is

associated with the Wise Virgin and the Good Shepherd, images that she embroiders on her and Jakkie's pillow slips. She is a Great Mother or Mary figure, but an ambivalent and paradoxical one. She is not only the humble servant and gentle nurturing mother and nurse, but is also aggressive, powerful and vengeful. In an article titled "Devotional Ambivalence: The Virgin Mary as 'Empresse of Helle,'" Kate Koppelman studies a late medieval tale that reveals that, contrary to common perception, Mary was not simply "a passive font of mercy and grace [that] acted only as a direct suppliant to a higher divine order"; she was also "self-willed," "reproachful," "a celestial judge" and "a quene of vengeaunce" (2001: 68; 69). Koppelman identifies a narrative in which Mary is able to descend to hell and bargain with the devil in order to reclaim the soul of a monk and then, after saving his soul unexpectedly, enacts her vengeance upon him, taking his life for betraying her. Koppelman notes that it is the unpredictability and inaccessibility of the divine being that is "truly terrifying, truly capable of inspiring horror" (75).

Like the ambivalent Mary figure, the butterfly is not simply presented as a creature of benign beauty; it is horrifying and threatening with its gargantuan wingspan (an obviously fantastical exaggeration by the author) and its carnivorous appetite. The butterfly as a carrion eater also feasts upon the abject bodies of dead animals. Braidotti notes that abject beings are also sacred because they mark "the boundary of origin, that is to say, the interface between life and death. [...] They correspond to hybrid and in-between states, and as such they evoke both fascination and horror, both desire and loathing" (1994: 128). The butterfly is exemplary of intermediary states and is thus an appropriate totem for Agaat who, as a coloured woman (a racial group defined as neither black nor white under apartheid's pseudoscience of racial codification) is ideologically associated with in-between states. In terms of her situation in the homestead of Grootmoedersdrift and the larger farming community, her position is doubly ambivalent as she belongs neither with the coloured servants nor with the "white" family from whose home she has been expelled. Furthermore, coloured identity is scandalously hybrid because of its association with miscegenation.

Braidotti notes that the "insect as a life form is a hybrid insofar as it lies at the intersection of different species: it is a winged sort of fauna" that "lies in between the imaginary and the scientific" (1994: 128). Jakkie accurately identifies Agaat's composite identity when he refers to her as "Frankenstein's monster" and an "Apartheid Cyborg [...] assembled from loose components" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 608–9, 677). Like Frankenstein's monster, or the cyborg,

she exists at the interstice between science and imagination. She is a protean being, the product of a cultural bricolage, a remodelling of her mistress's cultural texts, merging nature mysticism with Milla's Afrikaner Calvinism. As a subaltern servant/surrogate daughter-mother she also exists at the interstice between the domestic and the foreign. She breaks down the boundary between Real and symbolic with all her non-sense rhymes, riddles and incomprehensible songs, which elude Milla (and the reader), and stretch meaning to a boundless interminability. Her non-sense saturates the text to such an extent that the politico-religious totalitarian ideology underpinning Milla's universe reaches a kind of psychotic breakdown. Žižek explains the relationship between the Real and the symbolic by referring to a painting by Mark Rothko, an exponent of American abstract expressionism. In *The Naked Unframed Icon of my Time* (a black square on a white background), Žižek notes, 'reality' (the white background) "derives its consistency and meaning entirely from the 'black hole' [the Real] in its centre" (Žižek 1999 [1989]: 22). For Žižek the painting is emblematic of the battle to keep the symbolic order separate from the Real, to prevent the Real from "overflowing the entire field," for if the distinction is lost, "we are precipitated into psychotic autism" (23).

2.3.4 (Un)holy Communion⁴⁵

Through Agaat, Van Niekerk merges Western Judeo-Christian religious mythology with African cosmology. The invocation of Osiris in the theology of the emperor butterfly is not the only reference made to Egyptian mythology. Milla directly refers to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, which she misnames "The Book of Death," after Agaat has prepared her "last meal" (Van Niekerk 2006: 581). In Milla's mind this is a final communion and she is the body and blood that Agaat consumes. The images of Christ's last supper and the crucifixion are combined with Egyptian funerary rites and eschatology. The Egyptian funeral liturgy consisted of presenting a wide array of food and wine offerings as well as flowers, oils and certain clothing to the deceased for his journey to the afterlife, as it was important that the dead wanted for nothing in the afterlife. Each item was presented in a form of prayer with refrains. The friends and relatives also partook of the meal in the presence of the deceased "in order that they might cement and seal their mystic union with the dead" (Budge 1999 [1960]:

⁴⁵ Parts of the section were presented at the Interdisciplinary.Net conference on "Evil" (Prague) and published in an eBook (see Rossmann 2011).

208). Agaat prepares a feast for Milla with similar ritualistic aspects: “Damask, flowers, wine, candles, silver, crystal, porcelain. Four courses at the foot of my bed” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 581). As Milla watches Agaat eat she identifies that this shared meal is hallowed:

My mouth cannot speak, now epicurean.

Eat me a psalm of pumpkin and sweet potato, the orange and the ochre, dig a pyramid over me, an underground silo, pierce peep-holes for the stars, mill the angles of the moonbeams in the grooves.

Is the right oar in the rowlock, and the left, is it there, is it greased? What about the meat with the shiny fatty rind, has it been wrapped for me in muslin? Who gets the knuckle bone? Who delivers the dumplings? Where in heaven’s name to go with the cabbage rissoles?

What to do with the baked bat?

The cave wall suppurates.

Pick the umbrella membranes off the wing-spokes with your teeth!

Because she must become other and roast through all the way to the pips and dispose of her whole self and selfishness must become her own master no longer hunger after otherman’s heart or liver no longer thirst after otherman’s tears full-steam ahead to the whiter of the twin lights beware of the black and red roofs of damnation thus is it written in the Book of Death. Where did I read it?

I get between her teeth. My body, my blood. She traces the four quarters of the wind on her bib, with her fork she sounds a gong of crystal.

She gets up from the table.

Look, it is finished she says. (584)

Milla imagines herself as the cosmic womb: simultaneously a tomb, a repository or “silo,” a “suppurating” uterine-cavern, a cauldron providing nourishment and a celestial barque leading to rebirth. Appositely, this scene is preceded by Milla’s memory of the occult associations surrounding Agaat’s appetite. Once relegated to servant status Agaat is made to eat separately and her gastronomic proclivities become cloaked in tantalising mystery and terror. As a child Jakkie invents a riddle (an adaptation of the Little Red Riding Hood’s interrogation of the wolf) in which he imagines she drinks snake venom and eats “steamed frog [and] baked lizard,” amongst other things (462). Milla, spying on Agaat, notes that she sits to a meal as if she were eating “boiled human flesh” and drinking blood (582). Now, in

the present of the text, Milla's silent entreaty, "eat me a psalm," is an implicit acknowledgement of how the most ordinary act (eating), which attests to Agaat's humanity, had become othered and monstrous. This base act is now seen as good, even spiritual – a blessing. For the first time, since Milla expelled Agaat to the outside house, Agaat eats before and with Milla. Agaat also uses her secrecy as an act of power and self-preservation. Ancient African cultures believed that the soul could escape out the mouth and that it was therefore perilous to eat in the presence of an enemy (Frazer 1993: 198–9). This notion is not implausible as the novel centres on symbols of the soul and the sanctity of the soul. There is a mutual humility as well as a base carnality in this solemn sacrament. Agaat presides as a pagan priestess marking the four cardinal points. These pagan aspects are merged with Christian symbolism, as the sounding of the gong, like that in the Catholic Mass, marks the moment of transubstantiation, the moment when the words of consecration descend into the bread and wine: *Et Verbum carofactum* (and the Word became flesh) (Campbell 2004: 158). The gong sounds the presence of the numinous – the cannibalistic rite that mystically unites mother and child. In various African and South American cultures the heart or liver of an enemy, which was believed to be the seat of the soul, was devoured in order to imbue the eater with the qualities of its original owner (Frazer 1993: 496–7). But here Milla offers Agaat her roasted bat wings as a substitute for these vital organs, organs that are used in making "humble pie." The membranous wings reflect the depleted and impoverished state of the melancholic ego and highlight Milla's humbling of herself before Agaat.

The bat has particular symbolic significance to Milla and Agaat. In her first drawing Agaat depicts Milla with wings, because Agaat sees her as her "angel" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 623). However, Milla criticises Agaat for giving her "spindly black wings," which can only belong to Lucifer (623). Ironically, Milla's tragic fall bears similarities with that of Lucifer, the ambitious archangel who was driven out of heaven to become lord of Hell and humankind's tormentor. Lucifer's name, meaning "bringer of light" and morning star, makes him ambiguously Christ's double (Jung 1995: 45, 53, 113). Lucifer's association with light also makes him an appropriate icon for Agaat, who is a lover of fire, and it is Milla who utilises and encourages this love. Agaat's moral universe is not based on the dualism of Milla's Christian religion: she does not associate darkness with ugliness and evil, and light with beauty and good. She is as equally fascinated with bats as she is with butterflies. Indeed, the emperor butterfly is symbolically ambivalent in its association with day and night, and fire as destruction but also revelation. Both the bat and butterfly are intermediary and ambiguous

creatures, one a flying worm and the other a flying mouse. Both are also symbols of the soul; however, the bat is a spectral creature found haunting caves and is thus associated with restless souls (Gordon 1993: 52). The bat's association with vampirism makes it a fitting totem for Milla, who has used Agaat and Jak for her own gain, yet Milla now offers herself as the feast.

Milla's grotesque image of Agaat roasting herself "through all the way to the pips" in order to "dispose of her whole self and selfishness" is in the spirit of paintings by Hieronymus Bosch or Francisco Goya. What Milla imagines is a gruesome, horrifying and comic scene: Milla, the 'old bat,' now served up on Agaat's platter. At the same time, the scene is also profoundly moving as the word "suppurate" suggests Milla's abjection as the dying crone, as well as an act of purgation. The weeping of Milla's wounded uterine-cave implies the moral cleansing of the accumulated ills committed against Agaat, and the festering resentment she has harboured against her. This very visceral lamentation reveals her acknowledgement of that which she has denied Agaat and after which Agaat has hungered: love, freedom, and a compassionate mother who would permit her tears so she would not "thirst after otherchild's tears" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 584). Agaat's words, "it is finished" (584), refer literally to the shroud she has completed for Milla, but bear a deeper significance in their echo of Christ's last words on the cross, which are in some translations, "it is fulfilled." Like Christ, or rather the Virgin Mary as "Empresse of Helle," Agaat must enter the grave, triumph over death and emerge transcendent. The completion of the shroud also signals, in Hegelian terms, Agaat's sublation of her mistress. When Agaat was a child and had learnt the basics of embroidery Milla gave her the precious Glenshee linen as something to aspire toward. Now she reminds Milla: "Do you remember the cloth? The Glenshee linen? For one day when I'm master, you said. First the history of South Africa you said, and then heaven" (585). She must symbolise the material world and the spiritual realm in order to reverse the master/slave dialectic. Milla's hunger for Agaat, her desire to *consume* her and *absorb* her, to see herself in Agaat and make her her *objet a*, resonates with Butler's definition of *Aufhebung* as a "developing sequence of desire," "consuming desire, desire for recognition, desire for another's desire" (1999 [1987]: 43). However, Milla does not challenge Agaat's supersession in the end, but, at least imaginatively, willingly sacrifices her position in the symbolic order. In their shared communion she humbles and purges herself of her sins committed against Agaat before offering her bereft self as sustenance. But this *Aufhebung* – meaning simultaneously raising, annulling and preserving – cannot lead to any illusion of filling the void of subjectivity, as

what Milla offers Agaat as sustenance to fill the void of the Real is merely another void. Instead of the substantive offering of “otherman’s liver” and “otherman’s heart,” she offers pure surface, the mere membrane of a bat’s wings. Agaat enters the symbolic through the completion of her good works symbolised on the shroud, but in entering the symbolic one always sacrifices access to the corporeal immediacy of the Real. This is what Žižek refers to as the illusion of *Aufhebung*, that “language compensates us for the loss of immediate reality (the replacement of ‘things’ with ‘words’) with sense” (1994: 271). The “completion” offered by sublation is a fantasy because the symbolic sense is “never ‘all’; it is always truncated, marked by a stain of non-sense” (1994: 271). Milla perceives the irony, humour and poetic justice in Agaat’s achievement. Seeing Agaat dressed in the shroud, ready to make her journey to the grave, she thinks, “Oh, my most macabre Agaat!” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 585).

Milla offers her empty self so that Agaat may not be driven by the same omnivorous desire to seek completion and recognition through an-other, but this maternal desire to save Agaat from her own lack is impossible, as noted by Jakkie in the Epilogue. Commenting on the sado-masochistic relationship that continues even after Milla is buried, he notes that the “lessons of the masters [are] engraved in her” and that her mourning of Milla will not cease (Van Niekerk 2006a: 682). Despite the fact that the “promised land is hers [...] her creator is keeping remote control. Six feet under” (682). Milla’s incorporation into Agaat reflects the inherent ambivalence of *Aufhebung* as simultaneously raising, cancelling and preserving, thus perpetuating the intersubjectivity between self and other beyond the grave.

2.3.5 Return to the Cosmic Egg

Agaat’s journey to the grave is forestalled by a lengthy intermission, which narrates various “endings” in Milla’s life. The first section recollects, in second-person narration, Jakkie’s twenty-fifth birthday feast: the last time Milla sees Jakkie, as he secretly defects to Canada the night of the party. This is followed by the penultimate stream-of-consciousness passage which highlights the moribund state of Milla’s soul, which is described as “dense,” “black,” “impermeable” and unable to lift itself or mortify itself (622). She despairs of a spiritual ascent. This plea for mortification (already discussed in terms of Milla’s first stream-of-consciousness passage) – with its associations of subjugation, humiliation, decay and even gangrenous flesh – recalls Milla’s grotesque image as the suppurating cave. This dire

rumination on death is followed by the final series of diary entries, which record Milla's growing love and attachment to Agaat, her concern as well as her joy in teaching Agaat to speak, write, recite rhymes and dance. Together they share the wonders of nature. Milla seeks comfort from Agaat, climbing into bed beside her after Jak's abuse. These diary entries reveal Agaat's innocence, and her love and devotion to her "Méme," but also begin to reveal Milla's unthinking selfishness in disguising her pregnancy and not preparing Agaat for her sudden rejection.

The final chapter returns to Milla's memory of Agaat's descent to the grave, a memory so vivid and peculiar, particularly as Milla imagines she accompanies Agaat, that Milla cannot determine whether it is reality or fantasy: "Did I dream it? [...] Did I see it?" (643–4). Fantasy plays a significant role in the novel, not only in the stream-of-consciousness passages that reveal Milla's guilt and desire for reconciliation, but throughout the novel in Milla's vivid and bizarre imaginings of Agaat and the processes of her declining body. The centrality given to fantasy and the workings of the unconscious in Van Niekerk's novel accords with the import psychoanalysis gives to the unconscious. Fantasy is "not simply a work of imagination as opposed to hard reality"; but rather, "the little piece of imagination by which we gain access to reality" (Žižek 1999 [1999]: 121).

Milla imagines herself as a ship sailing through the cemetery and into the grave with Agaat's cap, "a mainsail above the waves" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 644). She imagines the "great hourglass of the firmaments" above her and a song "of which the ending is like the beginning. Arising muffled from a dark place?" (644). It is reminiscent of a Medieval riddle rhyme, and invokes archetypal images and symbols of the eternal return and *axis mundi*, such as the world tree, Yggdrasil, and the cosmic egg. The refrain, "A tree grows in the earth/ And blooms in beauty/ O tree!" (644), begins and ends the song and at its centre is a dove's egg, symbolic of the cosmic void or world navel out of which all life emerged. In her dream Milla imagines that she too is singing the song and that later the "words submerged in the depths soared up and from the heights floated over the yard, a great coloratura voice out of the mountain, words that tied the long rope of cause and effect together in a noose" (644). It is as if the whole cosmos sings in a chorus that speaks of the interconnectedness of all things, bringing together earth and sky, life and death. In the song a laughing child and a woman are metonymically connected to the egg and are cradled in the tree. According to Carl Jung, the tree of life "symbolizes that entity from which Christ had been separated and with which he

ought to be connected again in order to make his life complete. In other words the *Crucifixus* is the symbol of uniting absolute moral opposites” (Jung 1995: 76). Consequently, Milla’s dream is a vision of reconciliation with her opposite and her double, Agaat. All elemental nature exists in balance in this tree vision. The tree brings back all that is lost in terms of the mother-daughter union and the fractured maternal genealogy. Their metonymic connection suggests a continuous contiguity rather than metaphorical substitution. Milla’s summation at the end of the song echoes the lines from T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding”: “In my end is my beginning” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 645). The notion of the eternal return, of circularity rather than linearity, resonates with the maternal genealogy and reflects the cyclical pattern of the narrative. It also anticipates the ending of Milla’s narrative, which is also the beginning: the tale of how Milla came to claim Agaat.

The morning after Agaat’s *danse macabre*, Milla exclaims at Agaat’s apparent transformation: her footfall is lighter, as if “she’s lost weight overnight”; she notices how light her hand is, “how different are her palms!” (645). By her footfall Milla can tell Agaat is “setting her mind on opening [her] eyes” (643), and thus metaphorically preparing her for a final revelation, an awakening.

In transforming Agaat from the Real object into a subject, Milla must acknowledge the void that Agaat came to fill: “She must acknowledge the structural place of the fantasy in [her] subjecthood” (Žižek 1999 [1994]: 269). In re-membering (and telling) the story of how Agaat came to be hers, Milla reveals the hidden mystery of Agaat’s origin, acknowledges her as a subject and simultaneously concedes the void Agaat filled. Agaat’s beginning is Milla’s “beginning,” when she “happened” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 658), her fantasy of wholeness. The admission of their intersubjectivity – implicit in the song of the eternal return, apparent in her reminiscence of their first encounter, and later made explicit in Milla’s death-scene epiphany – is the end of her narrative and life. It is something she admits she could not record in her diary, something she “quarantines” (653). Agaat is Milla’s *objet petit a*, her *jouissance*. But Agaat also serves as Milla’s analyst as she reads her her diaries and causes her, through self-reflection, and Agaat’s various strategies of prevarication (delaying presenting the maps, her indirect and abstruse responses to Milla’s question in the form of quoting from the farmer’s manual, amongst other things), to interrogate her motives and intentions in her appropriation and rejection of Agaat. This process of re-enactment and re-examining is foregrounded on the first page of the fictional narrative when Milla states that Agaat’s reading Milla’s diaries out

loud to her has become one of their daily rituals. Afaat recites from them as if they were “rhymes [...] or a lesson” and then asks Milla “if it was good like that, whether [she] can remember what happened” (9). Like a scrupulous analyst she also annotates the diaries, which centre on Milla’s relationship with Afaat. She diagnoses the content of the journals as pathological as she places the inscription to the diaries, where Milla self-righteously professes that her raising of Afaat was “*directed by the Almighty God*” (10), next to Milla’s table of sickness which lists her symptoms, medicines and therapies, thus attesting to the fact that, as Milla notes, “the two documents belong to the same order of truth” (10). Afaat’s enigmatic silence is similar to that of the analyst, who remains impassive in order “not to give direct recognition to [the patient’s] superficial self-perception, to frustrate his demands for recognition and narcissistic satisfaction” (Žižek 1999 [1999]: 109). The whole point of the analyst’s passivity for the patient is that the patient remains within a “transferential attitude towards the analyst” (110).

Afaat’s (intentional or unintentional) postponement of revealing the sought-after maps strategically induces the explication of the narrative of the fraught mother-daughter relationship and Milla’s active engagement with the real issues of her conscience (through memory, imagination and vitriolic exchanges through their almost telepathic eye-communication or spelled out on the alphabet chart). Milla’s paranoid quest to get Afaat to show her the maps of her farm conceals and provides suspense for the revelation of the real story and the real object of her desire: Afaat. Milla’s narcissistic desire for her maps is reduced to a scatological absurdity, “a poop for a peep,” “anagnorisis [as] catharsis” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 397). Afaat will only show them on condition Milla produces a stool, a belaboured process that is told over the space of ten pages (397–407), during which Afaat recites all the place names, mocking the hegemony of cartography and the totalitarian rule of the country’s colonisers through mimicking Nazi salutes and marching with a feather duster. However, it is after this that Milla admits, “I want to talk. There’s a lot to talk about. Now that I have the old alphabet chart” (432).

According to Žižek, the analyst “steals the kernel of our being” through traversing the fundamental fantasy (1999 [1994]: 276). Observing the Eucharistic element in Lacan’s definition of the analyst, Žižek compares the relationship between *The Silence of the Lambs*’ (Demme 1991) Hannibal Lecter and Clarice Starling to that between analyst and analysand, since Lecter promises to assist Clarice to capture ‘Buffalo Bill’ if she confides in him her

fundamental fantasy (the crying of the lambs). Thus, states Žižek, “the *quid pro quo* is, ‘I’ll help you if you let me eat your *Dasein*’” (277). Žižek concludes that Lecter is not actually as sadistic as the Lacanian analyst, as Lecter compensates Clarice for her *Dasein*, whereas in psychoanalysis the analyst demands monetary recompense for “delivering our *Dasein* on a plate” (277). However, Aagaat demands no material recompense and proves to be a more charitable analyst than even Lecter.

Through traversing her fundamental fantasy Milla enters a process of realisation: at their Eucharistic last supper she realises how she has othered Aagaat into a cannibalistic monster and rendered her as the horrifying Real; she acknowledges the Real within herself in imagining herself as the “baked bat” (a substitute to “humble pie”), and through descending into her own grave, and is prompted by the song, “of which the ending is like the beginning,” to remember the blissful contiguity she shares with Aagaat. Through traversing this fantasy Aagaat is metamorphosed from evil incarnate to a paradoxical saviour figure who rescues Milla from drowning in the depths of her ocean-grave. The dream of entering the grave and the song of the eternal return is a reminder that for both Milla and Aagaat death is not the end, but renewal. Milla notes that Aagaat “arose out of that grave of mine last night. She went up into the mountain. Now it’s my turn, now she’s come to fetch me from the water. I strain to keep up, to get where she is, do my bit” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 646).

2.3.6 “I see yóú”: Resurrecting the I/Eye of the Other

Milla’s ascension requires her literally and figuratively to open her eyes and truly see Aagaat for the first time. In her state of neural and muscular atrophy Milla cannot do this without the assistance of Aagaat. The opening of her eyes is likened to the memory Milla has of the young Aagaat parting the wings of butterflies drenched by rain so they might fly again, effectively enabling their resurrection and ascension. The sight of the “cloud [of] shimmering” butterflies over their heads results in what Milla declares a “miracle”: Aagaat’s first smile (647). The memory of the butterflies, with their profound significance throughout the novel as symbols of the soul and their appearance at key moments of intimacy, adds to the anticipation of this moment of revelation. The opening of Milla’s eyes has dual significance in the process of recognition and the formation of the “I” in the mirror stage and as a window to the soul. In terms of the latter, the metaphor of eye-soul-butterfly is particularly apposite.

The tricky manipulation of Milla's eye makes the possibility of revelation a real gamble, for in order for Agaat to reveal her self (soul), Milla must strain to play her part in opening her eye/I to the other:

Now it's my turn. My upper lash is pulled up, fingertips pull down the lower lid. My eye is lost, I can't find the seeing-slit.

Come, eye, come!

There it is!

I see you!

And I see *yóu!*

In the staring eye she puts some drops. The lids of the other one she sticks open, above and below, with strips of plaster. At first her eyes are only on her hands where she's working. She takes her time. I wait for her look at me again. Both my eyes feel stretched open slightly too wide.

I must look to her like an extremely surprised person.

That brown case full of my things, remember? It was as if I'd buried it there yesterday. As if it'd been sulphured.

I can't close my eyes to listen better. I must look at her, her face is right above mine. She looks at me as one would look at a dam full of water. She doesn't prick through my cornea. She doesn't penetrate me with a blunt object. She doesn't fish in vain for the end of the rainbow.

She's accepted that it's beyond her, me and my dying.

She smiles at me.

I see my reflection in her eyes.

Everything is still there, she says, exactly as you packed it. (647–8)

Thus the return of Agaat's smile signals an equally miraculous moment, the moment of Agaat's resurrection, metaphorically suggested through the exhuming of her brown suitcase filled with the symbolic material of her childhood, which she buried on the mountain as a sign of her symbolic death. The fact that this buried treasure remains unspoiled after so many years reveals (as in Milla's first stream-of-consciousness passage) the soil as a symbol of preservation, restoration and regeneration. The burial of Agaat's beloved childhood objects

coincides with her exile from the symbolic order and her metamorphosis into the uncanny spectre of the Real. In this scene, self and other finally “see” each other as mutually authoring. However, Milla’s emphasis in “I see yóu,” and her acknowledgement that Agaat is her mirror surface as she sees herself in Agaat’s eyes, suggests Milla’s acknowledgement of her myopia, her objectifying of Agaat as both the idealised *objet petit a* and later the monster-object or the Thing. Through opening the suitcase of treasured things – a compilation of Agaat’s original totemic objects (the moleskin and the whirling wheel), the gems of a naturalist (shells, stones, dead insects, bones and eggs) and gifts given to her by Milla – Agaat reinstates for Milla the good child she rejected, a complex assemblage of bits and pieces derived from her mother, but also of other organic elements. This arbitrary collection of bugs and other organic matter, a “treasure trove” typical of any child, also demystifies the notion of Agaat as a terrifying Thing or secret *agalma* and sublime *objet a*. When Agaat opens the suitcase, Milla is not confronted with a terrifying monster or mythical Eldorado, but rather traversing the fantasy, as Žižek posits, reveals “an acceptance of the fact that *there is no secret treasure in me* at all,” it is a “purely fantasmatic” construction (Žižek 1998: 196). For the first time Milla sees Agaat clearly.⁴⁶ She sees Agaat’s interests, loves and frailty, not the wild recalcitrant creature requiring domestication, but a gentle and sensitive being. Agaat’s rhetorical question is a revelation of her subjectivity, “I was terribly timid, wasn’t I?” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 648). In “Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing,” Žižek notes that the only way for the Lady to escape the deadlock that defines her as paradoxical monster/sublime object “is to stretch out [her] hand [...] and to ‘return love’” (1994: 164). This reversal, states Žižek, “designates the point of subjectivization: the object of love changes into the subject the moment it answers the call of love” (164). It is only through this reversal that genuine love emerges, “not when I am simply fascinated by the *agalma* in the other, but when I experience the other [...] as frail and lost,” when she confesses her lack (164). “And perhaps,” adds Žižek, “the long-awaited moment of highest fulfilment” is when the Lady “renders *Gnade*, mercy” (164). This does not imply her surrender, but is simply a sign of love, the “‘miracle’ that the Object answered, stretching its hand out towards the supplicant” (164). In the gift of revealing her buried self and smiling at Milla as a sign of true affection Agaat becomes a subject and renders mercy upon Milla in her final moments. She reaches out to her, not as the nurse/analyst performing obligatory tasks, but in a gentle act of compassion.

⁴⁶ It is not only Milla’s fantasy of Agaat that is unveiled, but also Agaat’s fantasy of her Mistress’s power and plenitude, as Milla notes that she does not “fish in vain” to find the “end of the rainbow” in her (Van Niekerk 2006a: 647).

Contrary to the view of Agaat as the unknowable analyst behind the scenes (Burger 2006: 191), in opening her suitcase she finally reveals something of herself, her ideas, her own world.

Agaat saves the best for last and pulls out of the suitcase her two original totemic objects: the moleskin and her wheel and stick: “Feel, she says, there’s nothing as soft as a moleskin” and she “nestles it in [Milla’s] neck” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 648). Where words have proven painful, touch communicates mercy; through allowing Milla the comfort of her moleskin, Agaat embraces Milla as she once did as a child. Like the mole, Agaat was also a solitary underground creature that bared its teeth when threatened, especially when she was violently “*plucked [...] out of the hearth-hole,*” as Agaat remembers in her fairy-tale (686). However, Agaat returns cruelty with compassion. She rolls the wheel over the “incline of [Milla’s] body” and “over the skin of [her] belly” (648). Agaat plays simultaneously the role of good child and good mother to Milla by comforting her in her time of need. Klein notes that by reversing a situation, in unconscious fantasy one “re-creates[s] and enjoy[s] the wished-for love and goodness” of one’s parents (1988 [1937]: 312). According to Klein, by playing the loving child and parent, in retrospect, the harm done in the past may be undone. Through this act of reparation, Agaat is once again recalled as the good child. As the wheel rolls over Milla’s body she remembers how Agaat used to run “Down the road to open the gate for me so long, with her white ribbons fluttering and her white bobby socks and her green dress. And her wheel and stick” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 648). The open gate is an invitation, an opening up to alterity, to Agaat, and to the absolute Other, death. This act of compassion pre-empts Milla’s death-scene epiphany in which Agaat cradles Milla and is her “*rod,*” “*staff*” and “*whirling wheel*” (673).

Before Milla dies and imagines her journey to the afterlife, she recalls with clarity her encounter with and eventual violent abduction of Agaat. Through this re-enactment of the beginning of the mother-daughter relationship, through reliving the original trauma at the heart of Agaat’s subjectivity (and Milla’s), although it is never told to Agaat directly, Milla is permitted catharsis. This act of purgation and purification is symbolically suggested in the transformation of the whirling wheel into a “twirling of the stick in the hole” and the allusion to ritualistic purification through fire as Milla imagines her bed become a pyre, a “fireplace [...] a stealthy little smoke arising” (648).

The soul-searching of the psychoanalytic process resonates profoundly with the epigraph to the English translation of the novel, aptly chosen by Michiel Heyns from T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding":⁴⁷

And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue. (Van Niekerk 2006a: n.p.)

The answer that Milla finds in the Real is also found in Eliot's poem: "The only hope, or else despair / Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre – / To be redeemed from fire by fire. / Who then devised the torment? Love" (Eliot 1979 [1944]: 42). Agaat is a fire lover. She learns to speak by imitating the bellows. Milla tells her that her "mouth is a spark, the roof of your mouth is fire, the shaft of the flame is your tongue!" and when Agaat dances her imitative fire-dance Milla tells her, "You're the fire" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 528).⁴⁸ Fire is destructive, but also purifying and associated with the sun as a symbol of life and regeneration. Thus Agaat offers Milla an ambivalent redemption. It is only in the impossible Real, in death, that Agaat gives Milla the assurance of answering her call. In traversing the fantasy Milla is "more profoundly claimed by the fantasy than ever, in the sense of being brought into an ever more intimate relationship with the Real core that transcends [imagining]" (Boothby 2001: 275), for it is in her final death-scene epiphany that Agaat does not devour Milla's *objet petit a*, her *Dasein* and reason for being, but returns it to her by responding "*here I am*" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 673).

2.3.7 Mercurial Agaat: The Philosopher's Stone⁴⁹

Jung identifies parallels between psychoanalysis and alchemy. Milla's accomplishment of union with Agaat resonates with Jungian individuation, which involves delving into the unconscious to encounter one's shadow and find the *complexio oppositorum* (the union of opposites), analogous to alchemy. Thus the psychotherapist must possess the magical powers

⁴⁷ Heyns's decision to include allusions and direct references to Eliot's poetry not in the original Afrikaans has been discussed in the introduction. (See Heyns 2009.) For a further discussion on the inclusion of Eliot in the novel see Frank England (2013).

⁴⁸ See Buxbaum (2014) for a discussion of fire as a recurring motif in *Triomf* and *Agaat*.

⁴⁹ This section forms part of a paper presented at the Interdisciplinary.Net conference on "Evil" (Prague) and published in an eBook (see Rossmann 2011).

of Mercurius. Like the paradoxical Mercurius, the guiding spirit of alchemy (and for Jung the archetypal spirit of the unconscious self), Agaat governs the elemental opposites: passive earth and water versus active fire and air. Like Mercurius she presides over the “dry and earthy, the moist and viscous” and offers salvation through both (Jung 1995: 42). In her death-scene epiphany in the final stream-of-consciousness passage, Milla pleads for an alchemical reconciliation of her opposites, which implies Agaat (the hearth of ice and fire) as Mercurius, the philosopher’s stone: *“forehead of flame eyes of soot mouth from which glowing coals crumble roaring of flames lamenting and wailing cast me in a hearth of ice press my front in the snow roll me into a snowball one side of me the other side of me my cold and my hot my wet and my dry who can reconcile my moieties?”* (Van Niekerk 2006a: 672). Like Mercurius she is figured in Milla’s fantasy world as “death and resurrection, visible and invisible, hard and soft; [she] descend[s] into the earth and ascend[s] to the heavens [...]; [she] is known and yet [does] not exist at all” (Jung 1995: 43). The mercurial qualities of the unconscious are to some extent resonant with the Lacanian Real. It is only through confronting the Real in herself that Milla finally sees and knows Agaat, not as the Real and fantastic creation of the unconscious, but as human, fallible and “timid.” In an essay titled “The Fight with the Shadow” (1946), originally presented on the BBC, Jung warns that the “evil” of Nazi Germany will readily be repeated unless individuals become aware of their own shadows: “The world will never reach a state of order until this truth is generally recognized” (1995: 178). Anticipating Žižek’s pessimistic view of the fundamental antagonism at the core of society, Jung states that human aggression is “ineradicable,” but suggests that surely it is “better to know that your worst enemy is right there in your own heart” (179).

The final line of the last stream-of-consciousness passage, which presents Agaat and Milla hand-in-hand, provides the utopian ending that is so deeply desired by the reader who sees this reconciliation as an allegory for reconciliation between the races and the yearned for ideological fantasies of social harmony inherent in the notions of the Rainbow Nation and the African Renaissance. However, the sublime moment of reconciliation should not be read as the disintegration of difference, but rather the ineradicable ambivalence of opposites, temporarily held in suspension. The fictional narrative, narrated by Milla, provides a dangerously seductive closure and synthesis to a dialectical relationship between self and other that is felt in the novel as a whole to be far more fraught and equivocal. It is the frame narrative that introduces a voice of dissent to this impossible almost-happy ending.

2.4 “There’s another story here”: Skewing the Frame

In one of the first critical responses to Marlene Van Niekerk’s *Agaat*, Johan Rossouw (2005) reads Jakkie’s emigration and renunciation of his birthright – the family farm and, by extension, South Africa – as an allegory for Afrikaner cultural suicide. Although Rossouw foregrounds the fact that he is only looking at one aspect of the novel, his nihilistic interpretation sparked a critical debate and a spate of rebuttals to his argument.⁵⁰ Rightly, Burger (2005), in response to Rossouw’s argument, cautions against readings of the novel that simply further political agendas and offer little in terms of nuanced textual analyses. Andries Visagie (2005) also challenges Rossouw’s argument, stating that the latter lends far too much credence to Jakkie’s point of view, simply because he has the last word. Visagie asks whether it is justifiable to lend too much weight to a perspective that occupies relatively insignificant textual space (25 pages in the Afrikaans and 26 pages in the English translation, out of a novel that is roughly 700 pages long). He suggests that the negligible textual space offered to the frame is a strategy employed by the author to encourage prejudice against Jakkie’s perspective. In mitigation Visagie cites Louise Viljoen: “Ek wou vir [Jakkie] sê: ‘Hou jou mond en gaan weg. Wat wéét jy van wat ek saam met hierdie twee vroue deurgemaak het?’” (“I wanted to say to [Jakkie]: ‘Hold your tongue and go away. What do you know about what I have gone through with these two women?’”) (2005: n.p.).

The amount of textual space afforded to the story of Milla and Agaat (692 pages in the original Afrikaans text and 665 in the English translation) certainly encourages a greater degree of sympathy towards the female characters. However, unlike Visagie, who sees the complex and profoundly moving fictional narrative as a strategy to ensure the reader’s distanciation from the frame-narrator’s point of view, I contend that the frame is an essential narrative tool that disrupts the powerful mythologies presented in the mother-daughter story. Jakkie ‘skews’ the frame by encouraging the reader to question and critically ‘re-view’ the perspectives of both Milla and Agaat. Although we remain somewhat distanced from Jakkie by an initial allegiance to the redemptive fictional narrative, his detached ironic voice

⁵⁰ The primary forum for this debate was the online Journal, *Litnet*; however, Rossouw’s article continues to be foregrounded in arguments surrounding the novel’s significance in the socio-political milieu. See articles by Anton van Niekerk (2005), Andries Visagie (2005), Willie Burger (2005), Loraine Prinsloo and Andries Visagie (2009).

introduces a necessary caveat to the liberatory potential of Milla’s fantasy of reconciliation with Agaat in the final stream-of-consciousness passage.⁵¹ Furthermore, Jakkie questions the extent of Agaat’s capacity for subverting Milla’s dominant discourse and becoming a vitalising force for Afrikaner culture.⁵² According to Melissa Steyn, Afrikaners face “a profound existential crisis” in the “new” South Africa where they fear their language, religion and identity will be “annihilated, swamped or eroded,” resulting in a need for the “rehabilitation” and reinvention of Afrikaner identity and the mythologies upon which it is based (2004: 158). In *Agaat* Van Niekerk re-imagines an Afrikaner identity that is not based on the exclusionary politics of apartheid ideology, in terms of race and gender: Agaat’s inheritance of the farm, instead of Milla’s biological son’s, can be read as suggestive of this progressive shift. Visagie hails the novel as a “Kultuurdokumentasievir die Toekoms” (“Documentation of Culture for the Future”) that portends the survival of Afrikaans language and culture (2005: n.p.). Burger (2009a) also celebrates Van Niekerk’s extensive knowledge of, and innovative play with, Afrikaans language. Indeed, in his introduction to the *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap* special issue on Van Niekerk he identifies the primary aim of her novel (and oeuvre) as (following Milla’s intention with Agaat) “[o]m die kommunikasie op gang te kry” (to get communication going) between self and racial other (2009a: 2). Thus an innovative use of language offers hope for some knowledge of the other, and presents new ways of thinking. Sanders summates the vitalising force the text represents for Afrikaner identity: in *Agaat* “the African [Agaat] becomes (super-) Afrikaner, or, through Agaat’s part in the formation of Jakkie, the Afrikaner becomes African” (2008: 28), thus redeeming both the future of Afrikaans language and culture as well as enabling modes of belonging for the white Afrikaner. It should be noted that readings of this kind focus primarily on the fictional narrative. Without denying the validity and prescience of these arguments, I believe it is equally important to draw attention to the novel’s undecidability – an element that cannot be denied when reading the novel again through the

⁵¹ Extensive reference has already been made to Stobie’s in-depth analysis of the complex mother-daughter relationship in terms of the invocation of the biblical story of Ruth in the narrative. Stobie refers to Agaat as a “saviour-figure,” as a “symbol of hope” and reconciliation between the races that offers a “progressive way into the future” (Stobie 2009: 67, 68). Certainly, Milla’s death-scene epiphany in the final stream-of-consciousness passage, in which the white matriarch envisions her departure to the afterlife hand-in-hand with the young Agaat, is a poignant expression of reconciliation, even if only in fantasy.

⁵² Despite the fact that her utterances are either reported or recorded by the two focalisers, Milla and Jakkie, Alyssa Carvalho and Helize van Vuuren extol Agaat’s “resourcefulness” and “creativity” as a communicator and argue that she is able to subvert Milla’s dominant discourse through alternative methods of communication (song, rhyme, fairy-tale, dance, embroidery, inscription and quotation) (2009: 53).

critical eye of the frame narrator. This section of the chapter re-examines some of these redemptive possibilities through the frame narrator's more equivocal perspective.

As the ironic dissenter who switches positions and allegiances, Jakkie's function is to break the frame of the narrative. Frank Kermode claims that master plots are comforting and often difficult to dispute because they constitute "the mythological structure" of society (in Abbott 2002: 44). It is not surprising then that Jakkie's role in the frame tends to be sidelined as he unnervingly interrupts the master plot of redemption. As a postmodern *eirōn* Jakkie plays a similar role to Socrates in Plato's *Dialogues* and uses irony to play "upon his interlocutors' discourse in order to draw it out, to develop its possibilities in a dialogue destined to end in aporia" (Lang 1988: 38).

The frame is written in the style of a Socratic *elenchus*, a process of refutation or cross-examination where irony is used to prompt self-reflection, expose hypocrisies and awaken an awareness of dogmatism (Colebrook 2004: 37). This is Jakkie's "alternative reply" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 4): a series of rhetorical questions, paradoxical statements, digressions and allusions made to seemingly unrelated cultural texts and social contexts. In this way Jakkie draws attention to the ironies in his own life, the worldviews of his family and the socio-political landscape of South Africa. He does not draw any conclusions and offers little explanation of his numerous intertextual allusions. Furthermore, Jakkie's questions are characterised by a pursuit of the ethical domain, as they probe the morality of his family (and *volk*). Like Plato's Socrates,⁵³ Jakkie is evasive and his discourse is uncertain and inconclusive. Gregory Vlastos, in *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, observes that while *elenchus* is "adversative, pervasively negative in form, its aim was strongly positive: to discover and defend true moral doctrine" (1991: 14). Concomitantly, Jakkie's use of irony resembles Socrates's complex irony which does not simply involve saying one thing and meaning another, but rather involves subtly suggesting an alternative moral meaning, placing the "burden of interpretation" upon the reader (Vlastos 1991: 44). Thus irony becomes an ethical pursuit – what Vlastos refers to as the "burden of freedom" (44) and Claire Colebrook (reading Vlastos) "ethical pedagogy" because it prompts "reasoned rather than received definitions (2004: 28). Socratic irony is not only a play with language that leads beyond fixed

⁵³ I am referring to the *character* Socrates, as presented in Plato's *Dialogues*. It is beyond the scope of this chapter (or thesis) to argue the distinctions between the historical Socrates and the representation of him in Plato's texts.

definitions, notes Colebrook, it is “a way of life”: Socrates “lives and acts [...] as a character in constant creation” (2004: 35).

While Jakkie is certainly not the equivalent (in wit or virtue) to Plato’s Socrates, he bears some uncanny resemblances to the classical *eirōn* as defined in well-known literary dictionaries. According to the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* the *eirōn* is the “dissembler” of Greek comedy, “a man who ducked his responsibilities as a citizen by pretence of illness”; he is “non-committal,” an “underdog, a feeble but crafty and quick-witted character” who outsmarted the loud-mouthed braggadocio (Cuddon 1999: 428). In M H Abrams’s gloss he is a “dissembler, who spoke in understatement and deliberately pretended to be less intelligent than he was, yet triumphed over the *alazon* – the self-deceiving and stupid braggart”; he is a “self-derogatory and understating character” (2005: 142, 306). In both Cuddon and Abrams the *eirōn* and irony, in their etymological association, are linked to dissembling. Bearing in mind the limitations and scope of literary dictionaries, it is worth delving into the etymology of these words. Vlastos challenges the “virtually canonical” view of Socratic irony as meaning deception, whether malicious or benign (1991: 13).⁵⁴ Defending Socrates against the defamatory associations of the word *eirōn*, Vlastos notes the “wide semantic field” of the word, which was used as a term of denigration or abuse in fourth and fifth century Greece, but came to lose its “disagreeable overtones” in first century Rome in the Latin, *ironia*, a word used by Cicero to describe Socrates’s “urbanity, elegance and good taste” (1991: 28–9). Vlastos accredits this paradigmatic shift to Socrates’s deployment of irony. In addition, arguing for the moral integrity of Socratic irony, Vlastos states that it is always “serious in its mockery” and “dead earnest in its playfulness” (29). Although Jakkie pales in comparison with Socrates, the preeminent “moral philosopher,” the frame narrative is marked by moments of earnest ethical searching.

Definitions of the *eirōn* in literary dictionaries may over-simplify a complex and enigmatic literary and historical figure; however, they may prove useful here as rough (albeit imperfect) guide to the frame narrator’s role and function. Jakkie is no Socrates, but he literalises some of the less complimentary qualities of the *eirōn* glossed by Cuddon and Abrams. Jakkie is a deserter from the South African air force as well as from his birthright as heir to the family farm (and implicitly Afrikaner culture) seeks asylum in Canada in 1985. Disparagingly, he

⁵⁴ Vlastos admits in the introduction to *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, that “[m]any of his proposals are controversial, some highly so” (1991: 19).

remembers his father who “drilled the shit out of me” and tried to “make a man of me” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 8). He describes himself as “frail” as “cut grass” and as “attract[ing] other vulnerabilities” (2). Jakkie foregrounds his marginal position as “a farmer seeking asylum” in Canada (1). He faces an identity crisis (“What was I? Who was I?”) and is accompanied by feelings of guilt for his complicity with the apartheid government as a soldier, as well as guilt for “saddling” Agaat with the responsibility of looking after the farm and family (1).

According to Linda Hutcheon, in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, self-deprecation is a political strategy that “acknowledges the opinion of the dominant culture – even appears to confirm it,” to prevent alienating the members of the majority (1994: 50). Indeed, Melissa Steyn has found that Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa perceive themselves as marginalised in relation to the dominant culture of “both the African Other, who possesses demographic power, and the English Other, whose brand of whiteness comes with a powerful global backing” (2004: 146). Jakkie also supplants himself in a country that Hutcheon herself describes as suffering from a “collective cultural inferiority complex” but that has made a virtue out of its “fence-sitting, bet-hedging sense of the difficult doubleness of being Canadian yet North American, of being Canadian yet part of a multinational, global political economy” (Hutcheon 1991: vii). Hutcheon’s (arguably problematic) view of Canada as caught between the ideological boundaries of North/South, resonates with South Africa’s economic and socio-political position.⁵⁵ Jakkie’s fence-sitting cosmopolitanism – nostalgic for his ethnic African/Afrikaner origins and yet plugged into a more global perspective – and his self-effacing attitude may actually make him, the narratives he critiques, and thus the novel as a whole more accessible to a broader local and international audience.⁵⁶ In view of the novel’s recent publication in America, it is significant that Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, in her conversation with Van Niekerk at the PEN World Voices Festival, was extremely sympathetic towards Jakkie’s character and accorded him the most time and attention in her promotion of the novel (Morrison & Van Niekerk 2010).

⁵⁵ Hutcheon’s view of Canada as situated ideologically between the North and South or West and East may not be naturally assumed by all readers. Despite Canada’s colonial past, its current economic power makes it more commonly associated with the rich North.

⁵⁶ Conversely, Jakkie is not an “everyman” and his self-reflexivity, postmodern equivocation and distance may appeal more to an academic reader.

Jakkie exists at the margins of his culture: “[i]n two places at once, as always,” and “ambivalently birthed” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 1, 7) to a white and a brown mother.⁵⁷ Although he is an expatriate, he is also an ethno-musicologist, invested in studying his birth-country’s culture, language and folklore. Jakkie presents himself as an itinerant subject, a “Nomad without a flock. Safer like that. A listener outside the tent, an ear, an eye, that’s all, that’s enough” (7). He attempts to free himself from the homogenising and restrictive narratives of nation, yet realises the difficulty in maintaining the balance between objectivity and empathy when he asks: “But who can play the ethnographer at his mother’s deathbed?” (7). In the Epilogue he assesses this quandary: “How can Grootmoedersdrift determine my idea of myself? Unavoidable. And yet, the meaning of my existence is elsewhere, always and in principle elsewhere even if I were to stay here, in a realm of thought where thoughts assess themselves, the region where you always listen at a distance” (682). Despite his exile, he is aware of the impossibility of transcending cultural definition.

Nevertheless, emotionally and intellectually he strives to distance himself from this place and its people. He admits that “[h]aving grown up in shade of Church and State ... Took me years to fashion my own rhymes to bind the sweetness, the cruelty in a single memory” and “fantasise an alternative reply ... for my interlocutors” (4). His distance could be viewed pejoratively as a lack of engagement with, or even disdain for, his country, people, and the post-apartheid crisis of identity experienced by white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans. Conversely, Hutcheon notes that “distancing reserve can also be interpreted as a means to a new perspective from which things can be shown and thus seen differently,” encouraging “an impressive tendency to broaden the view, leading to the perception of incongruities on a wider and wider scale” (1994: 49). The frame narrative is potentially the realm for “broaden[ing] the view” of Milla’s narrative monopoly. It is the realm where Jakkie offers his, often equivocal, comments on his mothers, his father, and even himself. His comments are often satirical and filled with numerous ambiguous intertextual allusions that keep the reader guessing.

When Agaat makes everyone sing the third verse of the old South African anthem in the new post-apartheid context, Jakkie thinks, “Wake up and smell the red-bait” (Van Niekerk 2006a:

⁵⁷ Jakkie’s “brown” mother is Agaat. In Afrikaans coloured people were also referred to as *bruinmense*, brown people. Agaat, as previously mentioned, becomes Jakkie’s nanny and second mother. Agaat’s connection to Jakkie almost equals Milla’s on a biological level as she is, miraculously, able to breastfeed Jakkie when Milla cannot.

675). Ironically, he appropriates this “ill-judged exclamation” from his father – the ardent nationalist with the “Toastmaster bravado” (681). Red-bait is a sea quirt or ascidian, common along the southern African coastline, and as the name suggests, is used extensively as bait by anglers. Typical of bait, and most decomposing organisms, it develops a particularly foul odour. The preference of the olfactory stimulus of putrid red-bait instead of the obviously more pleasant wake-up call of coffee suggests that this community should prepare itself for a more shocking awakening. It also implies the revelation of something repulsive, and associates this community’s patriotism with death and decay. It is a fitting exclamation for the community who are unaware of the ironic untimeliness of their singing of this patriotic blood oath. The year of Milla’s death is 1996, which is also the year of the inception of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which unveiled the atrocities committed in the name of the “beloved land” (675). Jakkie mocks the display of nationalist pride in his caricature of the funeral goers: “Thys’s body language! The shoulders thrust back militaristically, the eyes cast up grimly, old Beatrice peering at the horizon. The labourers, men and women, sang it like a hymn, eyes rolled back in the head. Word-perfect beginning to end” (675).

Jakkie observes that “all eyes” were on him when they sang, “Thou dost know us for thy children ... We are thine, and we shall stand, Be it life or death to answer Thy call, beloved land!” (675). The inimical eyes of the community are obviously meant as an indictment against this putative heir who has not only renounced his sacred birthright and abandoned the fatherland, but is also a bachelor who reveals no inclination to secure the perpetuity of the family name and by extension the Afrikaner *volk*. In the traditional *plaasroman* the farmer is perceived as the source and guardian of Afrikaner culture. Prinsloo and Visagie (2009), reading J.M. Coetzee’s observations about the farm novel in the seminal text, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), note that in the typical *plaasroman* landownership and identity are inextricably connected. However, Van Niekerk’s novel transgresses generic expectations as Jakkie refuses this fixed model of identity formation (Prinsloo & Visagie 2009: 79). On Jakkie’s last visit home before he defects to Canada, Milla overhears him telling Agaat of his experiences in the air force and frustration with belligerent Afrikaner nationalism. He detests the authoritarianism, militancy and inflated rhetoric of Afrikaner national and cultural supremacy, and denounces his parents and the whole community for their unquestioning belief in this myth: “Who do they think they are? Blind and deaf against the whole world?” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 590).

Jakkie's ennui in the frame counters the optimism evident in the resolution of his mothers' narratives. His cynicism provides a caveat to his mothers' seductive mythologies. The final stream-of-consciousness passage where Milla is guided to the afterlife by the hand of the small Agaat, suggests, according to Stobie (2009), a final reconciliation between mother and daughter. Milla's death can thus be read as an act of propitiation for her sins and offers redemptive possibilities for Afrikaner culture. However, Jakkie's final word on his biological mother in the frame narrative is rather critical. He reminds the reader of Milla's false sense of self-righteousness and complicity with Afrikaner Christian paternalism by quoting a diary entry dated 14 September, 1960 (a month after Jakkie's birth and a month and two days after Milla expelled Agaat from the main house to an outside room and relegated her to the status of servant). In her diary Milla pledges herself, "*directed by the Almighty God,*" to take Agaat under her care and offer her "*all the privileges of a good Afrikaner home. So that in reading this one day she may ponder the unfathomable ways of Providence, who worked through me, His obedient servant and woman of His people*" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 681). Jakkie responds to this obsequious covenant with incredulity: "Could she really have written that? My sentimental, hypochondriac mother with her head full of romantic German melodies? So forced with the insanity of this country? Sounded more like Pa's language. Toastmaster bravado. But without a trace of irony" (681). This parodic repetition of Milla's words in the frame serves a distancing function, encouraging a critical reassessment of Milla's less than benign motives. Although Milla's narration allows the reader to follow her journey to reconciliation with Agaat, the return to this sanctimonious covenant causes the reader to consider that despite Milla's penitence, the evils of apartheid ideology should never be forgotten.

Jakkie also causes the reader to doubt the possibility that Agaat, as inheritor of the land, will prove to be an adequate catalyst for change. He refers to her as the "Apartheid Cyborg. Assembled from loose components plus audiotape" (677). Although, as argued by Carvalho and Van Vuuren (2009), mimesis always provides a space for difference and Agaat's mimicry of Milla may reveal a disruption of the hegemony of colonial discourse, I would contend that Jakkie's observations challenge the extent of her difference, or that she provides a productive alternative to her tyrannical mistress mother. Agaat may share some common features with Donna Haraway's "utopian dream" (1991: 181) of the cyborg: a hybrid creature "simultaneously animal and machine, who populate[s] worlds ambiguously natural and crafted" (149). However, the fact that she is accompanied by an "audiotape," and is thus

simply replaying Milla's discourse, suggests she is not as transgressive as Haraway's cyborg who possesses "a powerful infidel heteroglossia" (181). In an interview with Hans Pienaar, Van Niekerk refers to Agaat as an "enlightened dictator," "a saviour ... maybe, but not a savoury one" (2005: n.p.). Jakkie notices how she treats the farm workers in much the same way as her white predecessor. He wryly observes that she still serves the workers in "enamel dishes" and "[lets] fly with the cane among" the workers' children when they try to grab the funeral leftovers (Van Niekerk 2006a: 677). Jakkie depicts Agaat as a cultural palimpsest, and her continued devotion to her tyrannical mother as kind of religious masochism: "Calloused, salted, brayed, the lessons of the masters engraved in her like the law on the tablet of stone ... She'll look after herself and maintain her shrine inviolate. Going every day to beat her forehead in its white cap against the bedstead like a Jew by the Wailing Wall" (682).

Although Agaat has sublated herself from slave to master (from object to subject in the symbolic order) through Milla's death, master and slave still remain mutually authoring in their sado-masochistic bond. As Jakkie notes, the "promised land" is hers, but "her creator is keeping remote control. Six feet under" (682). Agaat may represent a racially hybrid matrilineal scion for Grootmoedersdrift (and by extension Afrikaner culture), but she is not a clear catalyst for change. Indeed, Agaat's governance is not democratic or egalitarian. Her inability to overturn the racial hegemony on the farm can be seen allegorically in the coloured vote for the National Party in the first democratic elections in 1994. Furthermore, as a 'barren woman' in her late forties, Agaat does not make a favourable symbol of socio-cultural regeneration.⁵⁸

Despite his criticisms of her, Agaat was Jakkie's primary caregiver, and his allegiance to her is evident in his appropriation of her two totemic symbols, the ram's-horn and bellows, which he takes back to Canada with him. In addition he permits Agaat the textual space to reinscribe her myth of origin by introducing it as the bedtime story she would tell him every night. This story within a story is told by Agaat in her voice and in the mode of a fairy-tale – the story of Cinderella – beginning with the archetypal "*Once upon a time, long, long ago*"

⁵⁸ The word "barren" is problematic because a woman's productivity or fecundity should not be measured by her ability to procreate. Agaat is certainly fecund in the artistry of her embroidery, subversive use of language, and symbolic and linguistic play in her songs (see Carvalho & Van Vuuren 2009). However, the fact that Agaat does not have an heir (and cannot bear one because of the sexual abuse she suffered as a child) is significant in terms of the importance of genealogy and landownership in securing the perpetuity of the Afrikaner culture, according to the conventions of the *plaasroman*.

(684). Fairy-tales have a spell-binding effect as they “connect vitally with our deepest values, wishes, and fears” (Abbott 2002: 42). Cinderella has its variants in a number of world cultures, and its constituent events “elaborate a thread of neglect, injustice, rebirth, and reward that responds to deeply held anxieties and desires. As such this masterplot has enormous emotional capital” (42). However, Jakkie breaks the spell by immediately following Agaat’s story with his mordant summation of her invocation of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy-tale combined with elements from Gothic fiction: “Tell me more Dolores. Grimm meets Goth in the Overberg. There’s another story here” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 692). Agaat’s narrative may be read as the climax of the novel since the reader has to wait in suspense for 684 pages to hear it, but Jakkie undermines its centrality with his promise of a counter-narrative.

On a literal level Jakkie denies us “another story”; however, his constant questioning cautions against investing in dominant narratives. It would seem that Van Niekerk may want us to read Milla’s death-scene epiphany and Agaat’s fairy-tale (where it is the young Jakkie who is her saviour) with at least a fraction of doubt. In *Splitting Images*, a study of postmodern irony in Canadian literary and artistic production, Hutcheon argues:

Certainty of nationality and personality is an illusion, since there is no permanence in anything, anything at all. And yet we cling to this shifting and uncertain self, this rag of aging bone, this handful of dust to which we’ve given a loved name. Irony has become one way of working within prevailing discourses, while still finding a way to articulate doubts, insecurities, questionings, and perhaps even alternatives. I suppose it is, in a sense, a way to have your cake and eat it too, to launch a challenge but also to admit a loss. (1991: 15)

Hutcheon notes that irony’s “very doubleness [...] disrupts any notions of meaning as single, stable, decidable, complete, closed, innocent, or transparent” (12). She likens this doubling to the effect of the optical illusion of the image of the duck or rabbit where the shift between the two semantic poles refuses resolution and the “doubleness is held in tension” (12). Her title, *Splitting Images*, cleverly evokes irony’s double vision, a double vision that is a distinctive feature of the whirligig beetle or *Gyrinus natans*, which has a divided eye that can see both above and below the water – a beetle with symbolic significance to the two focalisers, Milla and Jakkie. These writers on water can be seen as a metafictional motif for irony’s double vision and the dialogism of the novel. (Although this passage has been discussed in the first part of the chapter, it is necessary to return to it again.) After Milla first discovers Agaat in

the ashes of the hearth in one of the coloured people's cottages, she goes to a dam and seeking some divination in the water sees "the water insect and its little twin shadow [...] inscribing the surface of the water with rapidly successive perfect circles, overlapping, circling against one another, fading away, starting anew" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 658).

Although Milla cannot understand the full significance of what she sees, it is obvious that the beetle with its "twin shadow" (658) is a sign of the double she finds (and creates) in Agaat, as already mentioned. However, in the context of the frame narrative, the doubling of the circles in the water is also a self-reflexive reference to the polyvocality of the text with the narrative voices that "overlap" and "circl[e] against one another." Jakkie's is the narrative circle that obviously "start[s] anew" (658): the scion, "more freshly cut by history" (2), who grafts himself onto a heterogeneous and global world context. Milla, Agaat and Jakkie have their roots in the same discursive community and are products of that hermetically sealed world of Grootmoedersdrift (a microcosm of apartheid South Africa). However, it is Jakkie who redirects the reader to find the fissures and differences within the text. In Milla's vision, the writing on water (a metaphor for the relationship between racial self and other) is likened to a fugue – a composition characterised by two melodic themes that are played against each other, but nevertheless create harmony – whereas Jakkie refers to his homeland as "Quarrel country" and a "Cacophony" (5), a place characterised by discord and dissonance. In the Prologue, Jakkie constantly refers to fantasy: "I fantasise about an alternative reply" (4) and "the fantasy of a song" (7). But the song remains "wordless" (7). The Prologue ends with the words "Aeolian harp," alluding to the windblown harp named after the Greek god Aeolus and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous poem which explores the idea of divine *afflatus* and the transformative power of the imagination. In this poem the speaker imagines "all animated nature" as "organic Harps diversely framed, / That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, an intellectual breeze" (Coleridge 1983 [1796]: 563). However, unlike the Romantic poet, Jakkie is no sage. He does not weave a story of his own but rather presents a pastiche of intertextual allusions and ambivalent reminiscences of home – a place that is simultaneously "heaven and hell" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 676).

The frame is a *donnée* that is meant to conjure up an "intellectual breeze," as the *afflatus* motif recurs on the last page of the novel when Jakkie promises to keep Agaat's gift of the ram's-horn "on the window sill" (692). The ram's-horn has a number of religious, mythic and cultural associations, from the Jewish shofar traditionally used to signal a call to battle or

participate in religious ritual, to its associations as a grail symbol and cornucopia. However, the following line's reference to *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (*The Youth's Magic Horn*) (692) is an allusion to Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim's collection of German folksongs, allegorical poetry and idylls. Ann Schmiesing notes how the German *Volkslied* (folksong) was not meant to be seen as "a static artefact" but rather as "a part of national culture which was to be constantly renewed and revitalised" (2010: n.p.) – a protean, heuristic and inspirational instrument for cultural revitalisation. After his reference to the *Wunderhorn*, Jakkie segues to an extract from a Danish poem by Nis Petersen (1897–1943) titled "Natteregn" ("Night Rain"), which invokes the idea of summoning up an "intellectual breeze":

Blaes blaest – blaes blidt – i blinde,
 blaes friskhed til min hyttes baenk
 med myge, vege vinde
 og regn i sagte staenk.
 Blaes blaest – blaes op – fanfarer,
 til natten åbenbarer ... (Van Niekerk 2006a: 692)
 (Blow wind – blow gently – unseen
 blow freshness to my cabin's bench
 with supple, yielding reels
 and rain in gentle drops.
 Blow wind – rise up – fanfare,
 until night reveals ...) (Alexander 2010)

The poem presents the wish for the reinvigoration and regeneration promised by rain. This is not a request for sudden revolution and change, but a gentle, almost imperceptible change. It is also a change that occurs without the active involvement of the speaker. He has not picked up an instrument, but is rather like the Aeolian harp waiting for the wind to create a "fanfare." The gentle breeze culminates in a triumphant trumpet blast, apparently signalling something propitious. The ellipses create anticipation and open up multiple possibilities in the reader's imagination. However, no further clues are presented, and the reader is left in suspense, literally "up in the air," like Jakkie, at a "frozen interval" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 692). The text, like Jakkie's view of the world, remains "incorrigibly plural" (692). Despite the fact that he does not pick up his horn or write a new composition, the text is not "[s]oundlessly," but rather as Jakkie corrects himself, "full-soundingly collateral and incompatible" (692). He offers no symphony or final synthesis, but before he closes his eyes to fall asleep on the plane his final thoughts are not of an Aeolian harp, but a "[p]lectrum and

harp” (692), leaving the onus on the reader to take agency and fill the frozen interval. Jakkie’s slumber leaves the dialogue in an unnerving aporia. He provides a mode of inquiry that is not single or dogmatic (Hutcheon 1994: 44), but opens the text to a range of world cultures: Canadian, Danish, German, as well as a number of other cultures in his numerous allusions to various literary and cultural texts. The frame narrator’s international perspective resonates with Leon de Kock’s observation that the end of apartheid and the cold war has “inserted [South African literature and its readers] into a more free-flowing, and a larger, geography,” which has been encouraged by a “growing emergence of ‘world’ perspectives on culture” (2005: 80). De Kock speaks of writers like Van Niekerk being “more broadly transnational than national,” because “they read literature at large” (80). Thus the *Wunderhorn* symbolically heralds the text as a cultural cornucopia, a sign of multiple possibilities and plenitude open to Afrikaner culture in the socio-political milieu, as opposed to the univocity of Afrikaner nationalism.

However, the novel does not end on an unequivocally positive note. The “frozen interval” Jakkie finds himself in is likened to a symbolic soul-butterfly pinned on felt, suggesting pain, stasis, entrapment, contemplation and suffering. Rather than plenitude, the horn could symbolise a call for repentance and soul-searching in its association with the shofar blown on Rosh Hashanah. Jakkie’s response to Agaat’s fairy-tale, “Tell me more Dolores” is significant in this regard. The apostrophising of the noun “doulour,” with its Latin origin, *doloris*, meaning grief or pain (Webster 1981: 295), is suggestive of a call for a period of mourning, the *Via Dolorosa*. The supplication to mourn is not surprising, as Jakkie’s therapist tells him that “[m]ourning is a life-long occupation” (Van Niekerk 2006a: 683). This is what he “Must léárn to do. Mourn my mother, my mothers, the white one and the brown one. Mourn my country” (683). “What remains?” he asks: “Grieving. Grieving till I’ve mastered the hat-trick. The difficult triple sanity: Wafer, stone, and flower in turn. De Wet individuated” (638). Jakkie’s allusion to a Eucharistic incorporation of the “difficult triple sanity: Wafer, stone and flower” (representing Jak, Agaat and Milla),⁵⁹ and his devotion to

⁵⁹ Jakkie’s father is the wafer or host of the Eucharist. The word host is derived from the Latin *hostia*, meaning sacrificial victim, which alludes to Christ’s sacrifice. The wafer, as an almost invisible and fragile substance, is a fitting descriptor for Jak’s role in the family and running of the farm. His impotence points to the inherent lack and instability behind the privileged signifier of the phallus, and the Name-of-the-Father. Milla marries Jak, and takes his name, purely so that she can take ownership of the land. She assumes the role of power and in so doing emasculates her husband. Jak’s role as patriarch is a hollow façade, for it is Milla and, finally, Agaat who assumes total control of the family and running of the farm. Jak’s death also resonates with that of the Christ, as he dies in a car accident that impales him on a tree. In communion the wafer represents the body of Christ and is consumed in an act of participation in, or incorporation of, the body of Christ. Milla and Agaat are ambiguously

mourning as a lifelong occupation suggest that he aims to preserve or forestall the loss of his family, his mothers, his motherland and some abstract ideal of community.

He also preserves and claims the cultural symbols that are gifts from his two mothers: the Delft plate (representing the idealised European heritage he has inherited from Milla), the bellows (a symbol of Afrikaner language and its regeneration), and the multivalent ram's-horn. These maternal symbols ambivalently offer liberation but also highlight his connection with the past. In her article on the complex and contradictory concept of the African Renaissance and its association with a South African *Zeitgeist* of melancholia, Natasha Distiller cautions against "getting over" loss and forgetting the past in order bring about a cultural rebirth (2006: 53). She quotes Judith Butler, who states that, for the post-colonial subject, "loss becomes condition and necessity for a certain sense of community, where community does not overcome the loss, where community *cannot* overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community" (in Distiller 2006: 54).

Jakkie allows the reader, and himself, to actively re-experience the past and thereby begin the work of mourning. Through traversing the diegesis of *Agaat*, a world where there are no easily definable heroes and villains, the reader is forced to acknowledge a morally ambiguous world which defies the dualism of apocalypse and redemption. At the same time, in his brooding and suffering, he offers some hope – not unqualified or immediately foreseeable – for creative production and cultural reinvigoration through his obsession with fantasy and his continued allusion to symbols of plenitude and inspiration. Segal notes, in "A Psycho-analytical Approach to Aesthetics," that artistic production "is the outcome of a loss, it is a creative act involving the pain and the whole work of mourning" (1952: 203). "The artist," states Segal, "withdraws into a world of phantasy, but he can communicate his phantasies and share them. In this way he makes reparation, not only to his own internal objects, but the external world as well" (203). Jakkie enters the realm of fantasy as he closes his eyes to sleep, allowing a temporary suspension of reality in which unconscious wishes may be expressed. In this dream space all possible meanings of the novel are held in suspension, and

both stone and flower. *Agaat* is named after the semi-precious stone, agate. Both the stone and flower are symbols of the Virgin Mary in Christian iconography. *Agaat* associates herself with the Wise Virgin in her myth of origin (Van Niekerk 2006a: 686). Milla's full name is Kamilla, the name of a wild flower; however, she is also referred to at various points in the novel as a stone or wall.

whilst no final resolution is offered, Jakkie's allusions to divine *afflatus* suggest the latent potential for creating anew.

Chapter Three: *Memorandum*

3.1 Introduction

Memorandum: A Story with Paintings (2006, trans. Michiel Heyns, released simultaneously; henceforth referred to as *Memorandum*) is the third novel by Marlene van Niekerk. *Memorandum* presents a visual-verbal dialectic between Van Niekerk's narrative of a terminally ill cancer patient and the stark hospital still-lives of the South African artist, Adriaan van Zyl. While structurally distinct from Van Niekerk's previous two novels, *Memorandum* is similar thematically in its concern with issues of mortality and temporality. *Memorandum* is a self-consciously philosophical novel with its direct allusions, references and footnotes citing various philosophers and their views. Certain critical responses underscore the novel's main thematic concerns. In an early review of the novel, Joan Hambidge notes how the novel raises existential questions about the meaning of life and death (2007: n.p.). Hambidge also observes the "mosaic-like" form of the work (2007), a structural motif that Helize van Vuuren (2014) has elaborated on in her study of stylistic parallels between Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (1999) and Van Niekerk's "Passacaglia," exploring similarities between Benjamin's montage and mosaic technique, and Johan Sebastian Bach's experiments in musical composition. A number of critics have also explored the novel's criticism of the history of hospitalisation and care (Rossmann 2008 & 2009;⁶⁰ Roux 2009; Crous 2011). Sanders (2009) explores the novel's self-conscious exploration of *mimesis* and the processes of representation, while Buxbaum has also written on the relationship between intimacy and space and the need for a "nurturing environment" in Van Niekerk's most recent novel (2011, 2014). This chapter contributes to the conversation Van Niekerk's compact but dense novella stimulates. I begin by offering a brief synopsis of the novel and then outline the focus of my reading and analysis.

Memorandum is the tale of Johannes Frederikus Wiid, a meticulous town planner who has been diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. Highly pragmatic about the prognosis of "secondary liver cancer, 'metastasised' [...] from the colon" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 27), he tabulates the positive and negative results of the impending resectioning of his colon, from

⁶⁰ The conference paper (Rossmann 2008) presented at the Interdisciplinary.Net conference, titled "The Patient," (Salzburg, Austria) was published in 2009 in an eBook (2009).

his admission into hospital to the worst case scenario: the failure of the surgery and his death. A substitute title for this memorandum could be *Artis bene moriendi*, the medieval texts which prescribe the “art of dying well,” and to which Wiid directly refers (Van Niekerk 2006b: 61, 134). Wiid’s self-discovery and reconciliation with death are sparked by a chance eavesdropping on a conversation (or rather what seems a volley of free associations) between two fellow hospital patients, whom he names Mr X and Mr Y. These two characters, sagacious and somewhat ethereal, disappear without a trace the following morning and leave Wiid wondering if they were merely a figment of his imagination:

Could I have imagined it all? X, the fanatical poet without feet, who chattered about birds and birds’ nests, Y, the blind mocker, who delivered one speech after another on antique building methods, the foundation of cities and on hospitals when he wasn’t singing? [...] A secret language filled with nonsensical references which they banded to and fro? (23)

The letters X and Y, terms used in geometry and algebra, are appropriate terms for these two figures who appear to be, amongst their wide-ranging areas of knowledge, experts in architecture and fractal geometry. These subjects are relevant to this chapter’s focus on the novel as a spiritual quest, as geometry and architecture are metaphors used in various mystic sects to describe the metaphysical realm.⁶¹ Wiid’s feelings about being subject to X and Y’s unusual disclosure are initially ambivalent: he is either “a chance dumping site for a kind of over-production” or “a beloved person to whom precious mysteries had been entrusted” (25). However, it is the latter sentiment that prevails. An increasing “disquiet” evoked by these unexplained “mysteries” causes Wiid to begin extensive research into all the references made by X and Y.

Wiid’s broad education resembles Socrates’s outline for that of the philosopher king, in Plato’s *The Republic*. Although Van Niekerk omits the requirement of becoming a warrior athlete (1937: 779), the other areas of Wiid’s ‘tutelage’ match those of Socrates’s curriculum

⁶¹ Although there is no explicit discussion of Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry in *Memorandum*, the use of geometric symbols and the focus on understanding the mysteries of science and nature in the novel resonate with the interests of these societies. Rosicrucians practise alchemy and astrology and believe that the “magical harmony of the spheres [...] indirectly affect[s] the harmony of the world” (Lomas 2009: 17). The relationship between science and mysticism portrayed in the novel is also a key concern in Freemasonry. Indeed, there is evidence that the Royal Society, the oldest and most respected scientific society, was founded by Freemasons (16). Wiid makes one direct reference to Freemasonry in his glossary (Van Niekerk 2006b: Addendum 2/Memorandum 1), where he questions whether Antonio Gaudí was a freemason because of his dictum: “The straight line belongs to man, the curve to God” (136).

(although their content varies): poetry, music, mathematics, geometry, astronomy, harmony and dialectics. However, *Memorandum* is in many ways a parody of Socratic wisdom. *Memorandum* inverts the allegory of the philosopher's ascent from the cave-world of enslavement and shadows to the world of light, truth and "the good" (773–7), for Wiid's education occurs through X and Y's "nocturnal symposium" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 23), and leads eventually to his descent into an underground city where he embraces his shadows. Also, unlike Plato's philosopher who relies entirely on his rational and intellectual capacity to access eternal truths, Wiid's growth and illumination require that he also rely on his intuition and imagination to reveal the ineffable flux, dynamism and cosmic relatedness of life. This involves embracing what Friedrich Nietzsche calls "Dionysiac wisdom," his counteraction against Socratic wisdom's belief "in correcting the world through knowledge, in life led by science; [...] of confining the individual within the smallest circle of solvable tasks" (2007 [1887]: 85).⁶² Furthermore, while Socrates's dialectic serves to resolve contradictions in revealing absolute truths, the dialectic in Van Niekerk's novel is a Nietzschean "anti-dialectic"⁶³ without resolution, maintaining opposing ideas in constant, dynamic tension and exchange.

As already noted in the chapter on *Triomf*, philosophy, in the Socratic sense, is care of the soul. This concern with the soul is continued in *Memorandum*, where philosophising is the vehicle for a spiritual-aesthetic quest – a path to a new way of knowing, perceiving, and being in, the world. In this chapter I argue that Wiid's changed attitude towards his illness, towards death, life and others, resulting in his spiritual-aesthetic growth, is advanced through embracing "Mania" (his *daemon* and a unifying trope of a non-rational, creative ontology). I identify Mania/mania, in its various permutations, as a *leitmotif* and crucial connecting principle in the novel, in terms of style as well as the ontological argument presented in the novel. Thematic strands that relate to mania overlap and reveal a complex interweaving of ideas that defy linear progression or final resolution, and defiantly resist the reader's settling on a sustained, systematic argument. *Memorandum* is a rhizome (to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's botanical metaphor), a complex, interconnected network, constantly sprouting and dispersing. According to the two French post-structuralists, the rhizomatic text has multiple

⁶² In view of my over-arching favour of Socrates's philosophy (evident in previous chapters), I do not agree entirely with Nietzsche's blanket criticism of Socrates; however, the opposition between the epistemologies of instrumentalism and creative intuition is useful for the purpose of this reading.

⁶³ Lee Spinks uses the term anti-dialectic to distinguish Nietzsche's *positive* dialectic that wants to "sustain conflict and dynamism without any term being the *negation* of another" from the negative Platonic and Hegelian dialectic which seeks to move from contradictions to a higher truth that resolves antagonism (2003: 30).

points of entry, and the point of reading is not to fix meaning, but “to discover what other points our entrance connects to, what crossroads and galleries one passes through to link two points, what the map of the rhizome is and how the map is modified if one enters by another point” (1986 [1975]: 3). Another structural metaphor, kindred to the rhizome, but with mystical associations and more suggestive of the circuitousness of Van Niekerk’s narrative, is the labyrinth. Mania is the guiding thread into *Memorandum*’s labyrinth. In order to give coherence to a reading of the novel that often denies linearity, this chapter is divided into four sections.

The first section, titled “Entering the Labyrinth: Style, Structure and Focus,” provides a background to the creation of this dual-medium text. It introduces the complex structure of this dialogic novel, as well as possible stylistic influences on the written portion. It also outlines critical responses to *Memorandum*, and in doing so identifies how this reading addresses a hermeneutical lacuna. In this section I explore the labyrinth as a metaphor for the structural circuitousness and thematic complexity of the novel.

In the second section, “The Dionysian Way: Mania, Art and Spirituality,” I outline a theoretical framework that informs my reading of the novel. I argue that the motif of “mania” is an evocation of Nietzsche’s theory on the Dionysian forces in art. I outline Nietzsche’s Apollonian-Dionysian dialectic in *The Birth of Tragedy* (2007 [1872]). I also examine the parallels between Wiid’s quest and that of Nietzsche’s Dionysian prophet, Zarathustra, whose descent and “going under,” paradoxically, is the way to a “higher” experience of being. I discuss how *Memorandum* resonates with Nietzsche’s ideas on affliction, art and redemption, and the quest for knowledge. Nietzsche’s view of art as “religious” and redemptive is pertinent to *Memorandum*, where spirituality is coterminous with aesthetic experience and art becomes a conduit for an experience of the numinous. In this regard, I situate Van Niekerk’s text in terms of a renewed interest in spirituality in the humanities, both in South Africa and globally.

In the third section, “Wiid’s *Nekyia*: The Quest of the Artist-Philosopher,” I explore the motif of descent in Wiid’s journey, arguing that *Memorandum* is a *nekylia*: a Homeric term for a descent to the underworld, but also a metaphor for *poesis*, creative writing. I argue that Wiid’s quest is similar to Zarathustra’s “going under”: a twofold quest for his true self and a language of his own. I explore how *Memorandum* self-consciously plays with a number of

quest motifs from Arthurian legend, Homer's *Odyssey* and the Modernist artist Jack Kerouac's quest, *On the Road* (1957). While excavating these intertextual allusions I also explore the parallels between Zarathustra's journey and lessons on life. I discuss how, in his quest to render X and Y's "nonsensical language" orderly, Wiid eventually surrenders to the Dionysian: to his intuition and suppressed creativity. I examine how X and Y's last breaths become divine *afflatus* for Wiid's creative and poetic synthesis of their ideas into a narrative: a conclusion to their discourse and their lives. I argue that through redeeming X and Y (archetypes of the lost pair-bonds in his life) and becoming the poet and artist of his own life and world, Wiid regains confidence in the world, resulting in his decision to cancel his surgery and instead invite Joop to dinner.

In the final section, "Dionysian Daydreaming," I present a close reading of Wiid's "Passacaglia" in which I explore the wide range of intertextual allusions made in this prose poem. Wiid draws largely on X and Y's discourse, in particular Y's cherished text, Joseph Rykwert's *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World* (1976), but the passage also contains echoes of T.S. Eliot's "Preludes" (1917) and "The Waste Land" (1922), Charles Baudelaire's writings on the *flâneur* and Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1994 [1958]). I argue that this waking dream can be seen as a mystical encounter with the soul in terms of Plato's analogy of the soul as an inner city in the *Republic*. I propose that this prose passage is Wiid's apotheosis as artist and is illustrative of the Dionysian sublime. Wiid transforms his despair and isolation into an embrace of beauty in chaos and of life as a sense of cosmic community and dynamic interrelationship between all things. Finally, I explore the novel's self-conscious reflection on the relationship between science and art, and by extension literary criticism and creative writing, as well as its challenge to our conventional understanding of love and community.

3.2 Entering the Labyrinth: Style, Structure and Focus

Van Nierkerk's novelistic style is influenced by Van Zyl's artistic technique. In an interview Van Nierkerk describes how in 2005 Van Zyl proposed that they work on a book together. Van Zyl began his *Hospital Series* in 2004 and completed the collection in 2006. This selection of still-lives of the interiors and exteriors of Tygerberg Hospital was spurred by his treatment for cancer at this famous South African teaching hospital. Van Zyl passed away

before the release of the text; however, Van Niekerk attests that the book “van digby meegemaak [is]” (was collaborated on at close quarters), and Van Zyl saw the final product to its completion (Anon. 2006: 14).

Van Niekerk’s interest in Van Zyl’s work is evident in a 2004 review of the artist’s work. In this critical appreciation Van Niekerk dubs the South African artist a “melancholic miniaturist,” observing his meticulous attention to detail in his small, almost photorealist still-lives.⁶⁴ Stella Viljoen too observes Van Zyl’s “almost obsessive documentation of material reality” and how this communicates *Sehnsucht* or “sublime longing” (2009: 8). This obsessive documentation is translated into Van Niekerk’s written text (also a story of longing), with its footnotes, glossary and addenda. Van Niekerk observes how, through reducing the scale of his works, Van Zyl “dwing [die kyker se oog] om te vertoef by die besonderhede” (forces [the observer’s eye] to tarry over the details). His “*discursive impishness*” directs the viewer from detail to detail (Van Niekerk 2004: 6). Van Niekerk, inspired by Van Zyl, has adopted this “*discursive impishness*” in her own work, which although brief, keeps the active reader on an endless quest of meaning-making.

This *discursive impishness* is multiplied exponentially in *Memorandum* as it involves bringing an array of disparate temporal and cultural intertexts into dialogue with the present, as well as into dialogue with the visual medium. It is, to borrow Kristeva’s formulation, a dynamic “*intersection of textual surfaces*” (1980: 65). Van Niekerk is mischievous and modest in her technique, as, like *Agaat*, this novel displays her own encyclopaedic knowledge, yet the text self-consciously apologises for itself when the protagonist “hide[s] his head in shame over the plagiarism of dead voices that [he] was constantly committing” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 73). Furthermore, the author appears to mock the “genius” of the postmodern pastiche when Wiid asks, “How could I so shamelessly masquerade [...] as a genius full of previously unheard-of-hypotheses while I was in truth an ex-functionary with a list of misspelt names?”(73).

⁶⁴ Van Zyl prefers to refer to himself as a Romantic Realist (in Woulidge 2000: 44) and attests to using photographs merely as a “’n vertrekpunt, ’n geriefsmiddel” (a starting point, a medium of convenience) (in Van Niekerk 2004: 7). However, the artist’s denial of being a photorealist is not necessarily decisive. Gina Heyer, qualifying Van Zyl’s reservations, recalls that he started as a photorealist in the 1970s and that despite his alignment with Romantic Realism, the high degree of accuracy in his art and his preliminary use of photography “to mediate reality instead of painting from direct experience” associate him with the conventions of the style (2011: 69).

Memorandum is exemplary of a dynamic dialogism, not only in terms of the complex production of meaning that occurs in the interstices between the written text and interceding still-lives, but also because of the allusiveness of the two media that open *Memorandum* to a rich dialogue of intertextual readings. This dialogism is explored by Marius Crous, who notes how the “intertextual relationship” between the two media interpolates other paintings and cultural texts in order to evoke the full “semiotic power” of Van Zyl’s paintings (2011: 28). The relationship between the visual and verbal texts, according to Sanders, is “reciprocal” (2009: 111). Sanders quotes Lien van der Leij (2007), who notes that “[i]mage is attuned to text and vice versa. The one is not an illustration of the other; they comment on one another” (in Sanders 2009: 111). Sanders also observes similarities between photorealist painting and Van Niekerk’s self-conscious exploration of the mimetic function of art. Van Niekerk’s 2004 review of an exhibition of Van Zyl’s work (including some of his hospital still-lives, amongst other earlier works), prior to any discussion of a collaborative book, makes observations about Van Zyl’s thematic concerns and technique that anticipate her own narrative style and themes in *Memorandum*. For instance, her observation of the “ritualistiese gewig” (ritualistic weight) given to thresholds and the concern with temporality evident in the artist’s work, become a central theme in her narrative (2004: 6). The title of the review, “Adriaan van Zyl, Reisiger in die Grensgebied” (Traveller in the Borderland), anticipates Wiid’s Charon-like quest (Van Niekerk 2006b: 117), traversing X and Y’s eschatology and imagining their final crossing, as well as Wiid’s own. “[D]ie harde gefluister van vergange stemme in wagkamers” (the loud whispering of past voices in waiting rooms) she imagines hearing in Van Zyl’s Tygerberg hospital still-lives become the whispered conversation of X and Y. While the transtextual dialogue between the two media and the process of artistic exchange is worth further investigation, my chapter focuses primarily on the spiritual-aesthetic quest motif in Van Niekerk’s narrative. The near infinite task of mapping the intertextual allusions in *Memorandum* is the focus of Alwyn Roux’s (2009) Master’s dissertation, whilst Marius Crous’s article (2011) highlights significant visual intertexts in Van Zyl’s art. The analysis of Van Zyl’s *Hospital Series*, arguably only undertaken by a few (Van Niekerk 2004; Krantz 2005; Anon. 2006; Aucamp 2006; Heyer 2011), is beyond the purview of this study, which, by virtue of space, focuses on the written text.

Memorandum is an ingenious complex of registers and texts, consisting of 16 paintings by Van Zyl, a long narrative (Memorandum 3) and several addenda composed by Wiid. The first addendum (Memorandum 1) consists of two tables that systematically project the positive

and negative prognoses of two potentially life-extending operations. The tables are titled “Table A: Resectioning of the colon & post-operative trajectory” and “Table B: Colostomy & post-operative trajectory” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 128–9; 130–1). Addendum 2 (Memorandum 1) is Wiid’s self-composed glossary of all the strange words and references made in the main narrative (Memorandum 3). The final addendum is a letter of complaint written by Wiid to the Superintendent of Public Libraries regarding the “unprofessional appearance of the Parow Public Library,” focused particularly on the slovenly appearance of the chief librarian, Joop (138–40).

The combination of written and visual media shows the influence of the German writer W.G. Sebald, famous for placing photographic images alongside the textual narrative (Anon. 2006; Hambidge 2007). Like the work of Sebald, and the works of his literary antecedent, the melancholic writer and thinker, Walter Benjamin, Van Niekerk’s most recent novel shares a thematic concern with memory, libraries, history, cityscapes, institutional architecture, critiques of modernity, and with repetitions and patterns. Thematically the didacticism of X and Y’s metaphysical debate also recalls the concern of the Romantic poet William Blake with transcending and reconciling the dualities of life/death, soul/body, mysticism/science, and heaven/hell. While the novel only makes one direct reference to Blake in Joop’s comment, “the universe in a grain of sand” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 41), this aphorism links to the motif of mania. Significantly, Blake was also known for intermingling etchings and sketches with his poems, juxtaposing them in a way that often complicates interpretation.

In an article on Blake’s organic, living form in *Jerusalem*, Denise Gigante observes that Blake’s aesthetics was modelled on the biological principle of epigenesis, the theory that organisms develop through a process of differentiation, self-generation and regeneration rather than preformation. Gigante observes that “all effort to make sense of [*Jerusalem*] structurally is doomed to endless qualification” and that “[a]t the end of the day it seems impossible to draw universal [...] generalizations from the ‘Minute Particulars’ of Blake’s composite artwork” (Gigante 2009: 464–5). Gigante argues that this instability of meaning is intentional, as Blake wanted to arouse active, creative and intuitive thought processes through the vital power of “Imagination,” which renders “apparent structures [...] fluid and subject to reformation” (465). The same can be said of *Memorandum*, which remains endlessly open to interpretation. Indeed, Wiid self-reflexively comments on the impossibility of finding closure to his narrative. He likens the narrative he tries to mould out of the list of words and phrases

he has memorised from X and Y's conversation to "a roof leaking in an elusive spot": the "original lists brought forth new lists with every library visit," until it became "a list without end" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 73). The dialogism and polyphony of Wiid's interlocutors are celebrated by Wiid when he remarks that "the most wonderful discovery of that night, [is] that two people, three if you include Buytendagh, could share such strange knowledge with each other in such detail and on top of it disagree about its meaning" (94). Sanders, suggesting the organic nature of Van Niekerk's text, observes that 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" (2009: 122).

Roux notes that *Memorandum* is "a multifaceted text in which various patterns overlap" and that the novel sustains a number of "simultaneously active" themes in which the "researcher" faces the danger of getting "lost" and producing an argument "too vague" (2009: ii). After Etienne Britz's guide to the novel for *Insig* (2007), Roux's M.A. dissertation on *Memorandum* is the first sustained analysis of the text. Roux's study provides an accurate documentation, various intertexts, as well as a useful appendix of visual texts alluded to in the novel. In order to limit the danger of getting "lost" in a text Van Niekerk herself describes as a "bodemlose spel" (fathomless play) between texts (main narrative and appendices) and paintings (Anon. 2006: 14), Roux focuses on four aspects of the novel: structure, representations of space, intertextuality and liminality. A possible drawback to Roux's pragmatic approach is that it risks reducing the enigmatic quality of the text. It is these more numinous revelations I wish to explore in a close reading of certain key passages. Roux's summation of the risks faced by the "researcher" echo those faced by Wiid in his quest to find meaning in X and Y's strange utterances. However, it is only through losing himself in their chaos of "nonsensical references" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 23) that these utterances reveal profound truths that lead to his self-realisation. Roux also describes the novel as a puzzle consisting of different texts that must be pieced together, transforming chaos into order, which he states is the object of his study (2009: 43). Alas, he notes, "die orde is nie-orde, en die bou van die legkaart hou nooit op nie" (the order is non-order and the construction of the puzzle never ends) (43). Roux reads Wiid's assertion that he cannot see "to what extent such a word and allusion mania can be conducive to one's spiritual welfare" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 35) as an instruction to the literary critic that it is not "wenslik" (advisable) to analyse or unpack every utterance (Roux 2009: 20). While researching every intertext (in view of the

constantly shifting subjective context of the reader) may be impossible, Roux's too literal reading misses the irony that it is exactly this mania that leads to Wiid's spiritual wellbeing. Roux reads Wiid's promise not to "subvert anybody's common sense" with his memorandum (Van Niekerk 2006b: 35) as coterminous with the author's intention for her reader and thus also the researcher (Roux 2009: 20). On the contrary (and in line with Wiid's conversion), it seems more conceivable that undermining the reader's and researcher's presumption of a rational universe is precisely Van Niekerk's intention.

Only 10 minutes (and a few paragraphs) after his criticism of obscurity and complexity, Wiid wishes he could have interrupted X and Y with his belated discovery of a line from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2006 [1885]), "One must have chaos within oneself [...] in order to give birth to a dancing star" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 38). For Nietzsche, chaos is associated with primordial creative energy; it is destructive but also transformative. As a primary quality of the Dionysian forces in art it stands in contrast to the order and clarity of Apollonian art. Chaos, or mania as it is referred to in the novel, is a catalyst for transformation in Wiid's life, and its emissaries are X and Y and the "scatterbrained" (52) librarian, Joop. As a result of his encounter with X and Y, and his research into their "manic refrains" (116), Wiid finds himself "constantly [having] to adjust my understanding of myself" (20). This adjustment of his worldview corresponds with Wiid's embrace of the chaos in the world and within himself.

X and Y's discourse opens Wiid up to a whole universe of ideas that undoes his penchant for order. This transformation corresponds with Nietzsche's assertion that "[w]hoever looks into himself as into vast space and carries galaxies in himself, also knows how irregular all galaxies are; they lead into the chaos and labyrinth of existence" (1974 [1887]: 322). Indeed, Wiid's entrance into a physical labyrinth (the hospital) is signalled early in his narrative when he recounts the first sentence he remembers X uttering: "*It was a round trip in a straight line*" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 31). "A labyrinth it was, even though everything was brightly lit" (31), Wiid concurs, admitting his sense of disorientation in being wheeled to the operating theatre. X's words presage the labyrinthine character of X and Y's conversation, which draws Wiid into a world of new literary, philosophical and cultural texts (with the aid of his librarian), that lead to a process of self-exploration and self-discovery.

The labyrinth, in addition, serves as a metaphor for the postmodern circuitousness of the narrative. Roux's caution that the researcher could get lost in this "multifaceted" text with complex overlapping patterns is suggestive of the maze-like quality of the text. However, unlike a maze, a labyrinth has no dead ends, and while it has twists and turns, one cannot get lost in it. Following any one of Van Niekerk's narrative threads leads to a mystical shifting 'centre' and from there diverges into other circuits, endlessly.⁶⁵ The intertextuality and self-reflexivity of the novel contribute to its circuitousness. The labyrinthine structure of *Memorandum* also relates to its thematic concern with the metaphysical. Etienne Britz identifies one of the novel's central themes as spiritual awakening (2007: 4); however, this aspect of the novel has only been glossed or occluded in its critical reception. The complex metaphysics presented in the novel is the focus of my analysis.

The paradoxical quality of the labyrinth as a symbol of seeming disorder and complexity "concealing underlying order and symmetry" (Shiloh 2007: 28) relates to the structure as well as the cosmological vision presented in the text. Wiid enters a metaphorical labyrinth when he tries to follow the circuitous path of X and Y's discourse. Entering this labyrinth leads to Wiid's transformation, which he unwittingly draws attention to when he asks in frustration, "to what extent such a word and allusion mania can be conducive to one's spiritual welfare" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 35). Although this is a rhetorical question, the vexatious soul-searching X and Y trigger points to an answer from Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ*: "The most spiritual men, as the strongest, find their happiness where others would find their destruction: in the labyrinth, in hardness against themselves and others, in experiments" (2006 [1895]: 3). Nietzsche warns that reading his work is "a predestination to the labyrinth" which requires: "An experience of seven solitudes. New ears for new music. New eyes for what is most distant. A new conscience for truths that have so far remained mute" (2006 [1895]: 3). Wiid, equally, is fated to enter a labyrinth; like Zarathustra, solitude is necessary for the thinker's perpetual grappling with, and creation of, philosophic and poetic meaning in the absence of metaphysical foundations. In suffering and sorrow Wiid finds "the will to power," an affirmation of life in all its radical contingency and multiplicity; his memorandum exhibits his immersion in all things new and is evidence of a constant process of 'becoming.'

⁶⁵ Bearing in mind the impossibility of ever settling on one fixed meaning of this postmodern text, this is a de-centred centre.

The labyrinthine structure of Van Niekerk's text – its twists and turns that provoke constant critical questioning, its elusiveness, the tunnelling of narrative threads that intersect unexpectedly – is the perfect Nietzschean instrument for becoming: the notion of existence as an endless process of questioning, discovery and creative reinvention. The labyrinth is not only a metaphor for style but also an ontology of subjectivity. As Deleuze phrases it in his reading of Nietzsche, the “labyrinth is what leads us to being, the only being is that of becoming, the only being is that of the labyrinth itself” (2002 [1962]: 188). Winding through a labyrinth is a key characteristic of the psychological disorientation and self-unravelling associated with the quest journey. It also corresponds to a descent into the realm of the unconscious mind. The notion of the circumambulation of the labyrinth as a catalyst for a deeper psychological (or spiritual) journey is a central function of the quest, which is explored in section three of this chapter.

3.3 The Dionysian Way: Mania, Art and Spirituality

Memorandum makes numerous allusions to Afrikaner folklore, poetry, songs and architecture as well as to a range of international myths, thinkers, artists, architects and musicians. Unlike *Triomf* (1999 [1994]) and *Agaat* (2006 [2004]), *Memorandum* deals with national identity politics more obliquely. Despite its local setting (Parow, Western Cape), and having a white Afrikaner as its protagonist, the novel crosses temporal and geographic boundaries. More so than the frame narrative of *Agaat*, *Memorandum* opens the local and particular into a broader global, and perhaps even holistic perspective. The latter is evident in *Memorandum*'s allusions to Etruscan and other forms of mysticism, sacred geometry and chaos theory. Admittedly, holism, with its assumption of a transcendent realm that reveals an absolute truth and promises ‘wholeness,’ is anathema to postmodern undecidability and multiplicity. However, while Van Niekerk's narrative highlights unexpected symmetries and synchronicities in the nature of the universe, it does not commit to the idea of completion or perfection. Joop's analogy of the nature of life as a constant mystical process of “revealing/concealing” serves as a self-reflexive comment on *Memorandum*'s postmodern undecidability:

Revealing/concealing [Joop] unwittingly clarified for me [Wiid] one day when he said with every new book that you read something is revealed, but at the same time something else is concealed. So also when one is walking along a footpath? The

mountain is in front of you and when you've passed, it's behind you? Never do you get the whole picture at the same time? Except perhaps in heaven? (Van Niekerk 2006b: 78).

But then Wiid adds, “[p]erhaps Joop is right that [heaven] will be a boring place” (78). This analogy equates the reader of this postmodern text to being an initiate of mysteries, but without the revelation of fixed, eternal truths. The act of engaging with a text becomes a stimulant for an altered state of consciousness that leads to partial, contingent revelations.

X and Y's discourse is truly transdisciplinary, bringing together and finding affinities in seemingly disparate fields: from science and mathematics to architecture, philosophy, town-planning, mythology and mysticism (Christian, Etruscan and other). Re-weaving X and Y's fragmentary discourse enables Wiid to become the re-enchanter of a seemingly mundane existence, creating meaning in life where before he felt only despair. Wiid's transformation and growth, both as an artist and spiritually, occur through a change in the way he thinks and writes. This new way of thinking and writing involves an embrace of a more spontaneous and intuitive way of living – an embrace of Mania.

Mania is personified at the end of the novel in Wiid's personal imagining of an afterlife. In this dream scene, Wiid traverses a city of his own design until he reaches a “manhole in the middle,” analogous to the *lapis manalis* of the Etruscan and Roman city (defined in his glossary as “[m]anhole cover in the underworld” (136)). Wiid lifts the manhole to discover “the goddess of this writing, Mania crowned with mottled bunch of snakes” (124). Mania was the Etruscan goddess of death, whose appearance was similar to that of Medusa, with her crown of serpents instead of hair. Dionysus and his maenads were also often depicted with their heads wreathed in snakes. The word “mania” is etymologically related to “maenad”: the raving women who awakened the spirit of the god of wine and ecstasy with their hymns and dancing, and whose holy madness revealed hidden truths (Walker 1983: 564). In *Phaedrus* Socrates notes the common etymology of mania and oracular prophecy, and suggests that mania is “inspired madness” and “a divine gift” (Plato 1937: 249). Indeed, a poet must have a “touch of the Muses' madness in his soul” (250). In addition, mania has unexpected restorative effects. In these instances, Socrates remarks, “madness has entered [...] and by inspired utterances found a way of deliverance for those who are in need” (240).

Mania's associations with death, madness, spiritual healing and creative inspiration all bear significance in Wiid's trial, which involves an active contemplation of his own death through interpreting and participating in X and Y's "manic refrains" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 116). As the silent companion to X and Y in their final hours and through their passing, Wiid becomes intimately acquainted with death and dying, and embraces a world beyond the bounds of reason and logic. Mania can be seen as a feminine evocation of Nietzsche's Dionysian and the antithesis of Wiid's Apollonian love of order, restraint and reason. Like Dionysus, Mania is an anthropomorphism of the creative-destructive, intuitive, ecstatic and unconscious forces in life and art that seek to break down ego-consciousness and connect with the cosmos. She is the conduit into an inner world of emotions and fantasy – the key to Wiid's transformation. In this way Mania also recalls the *anima*, an archetypal image of the feminine in a man's unconscious and a symbol of the soul. This Jungian concept is comparable with Nietzsche's Ariadne.⁶⁶ According to Nietzsche, "A labyrinthine man never seeks the truth but always only his Ariadne – whatever he may tell us" (in Kaufmann 1974b: 34). Nietzsche's sister, elucidating her brother's writings, explains that the Mistress of the Labyrinth is a symbol of the soul, a supposition supported by Nietzsche's translator, Walter Kaufmann (34). Deleuze's analysis of the Ariadne-Dionysus-labyrinth connection in Nietzsche's writing assists in explaining the central role Mania plays as Wiid's guide and as an initially denied aspect of his own psyche. Deleuze identifies the labyrinth as a symbol of "the unconscious, the self" and the *anima* as "a guiding *thread* for its exploration" (2002 [1962]: 188). Wiid's interpretation of X and Y is thus a journey of self-discovery – a soul journey. The labyrinth is also a symbol of the eternal return and, from a Nietzschean perspective, implies embracing the present and "*choosing* which returning moments we wish to affirm and using them to offer a new interpretation of life" (Spinks 2003: 130). It requires the strong will of the overman to create meaning out of the infinite flux of history. The overman for Nietzsche is not "a new type of person or entity" but a mode of being: the overman teaches humans to become creators of meaning (Hatab 2012: 152). Selecting personally meaningful information from X and Y's discourse, shaping it into a coherent narrative and making it his own, is exactly what Wiid does. Wiid, through a process of self-transformation, gradually takes on the characteristics of the overman, becoming the artist of his own life and world, and in so

⁶⁶ Lucy Huskinson argues that Jung's concept was influenced by Nietzsche, who has Zarathustra tell us that "we have within us 'the eternal-womanly'" and writes in *Human, All Too Human* (1984 [1879]) that "[e]veryone bears within him a picture of woman derived from his mother: it is this which determines whether, in his dealings with women, he respects them or despises them or is in general indifferent to them" (in Huskinson 2004: 103).

doing prompts the same process in the reader. Van Niekerk's narrative thus becomes a catalyst for constant re-creation and transformation.

Mania, like Ariadne, is the link between the unconscious (with its sporadic and spontaneous overflow of images and ideas) and the conscious. One may view X and Y as a manifestation of Wiid's personal unconscious or of the collective unconscious, but whether they are 'real' or a manifestation of Wiid's unconscious mind, they are the key to allowing him to affirm life. Mania's powers, like Ariadne's, can only be unleashed when she is betrothed to Dionysus, because, in Nietzsche's reading, Dionysus is Ariadne's true labyrinth. Together Ariadne and Dionysus enable the path to being and becoming, multiplicity and chance (Deleuze 2002 [1962]: 188, 190). It through chance – a chance encounter with X and Y, and consequent serendipitous discoveries in books or from often unwanted responses from his hippy librarian, Joop – that Wiid alters his relationship with his illness, with others and with death.

The Dionysian and Apollonian forces in life and art, as well as the prophecies and adventures of Nietzsche's "Dionysiac monster" (2007 [1872]: 12), Zarathustra, provide striking resonances with Wiid's journey, and the role knowledge and creativity play in changing Wiid's attitude towards life. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (2007 [1872]) Nietzsche describes the art of Greek tragedy as lying in the opposition between two forces or principles represented by two Greek deities: Apollo (God of light, order and harmony) and Dionysus (God of wine, revelry and chaos). Raymond Geuss provides a useful delineation of the two gods, their associated principles and forms of art:

"Apollo" embodies the drive toward distinction, discreteness and individuality, toward the drawing and respecting of boundaries and limits; he teaches an ethic of moderation and self-control. The Apolline artist glorifies individuality by presenting attractive images of individual persons, things, and events. In literature the purest and most intense expression of the Apolline is Greek epic poetry (especially Homer). The other contestant in the struggle for the soul of ancient Greece was Dionysos. The Dionysiac is the drive towards the transgression of limits, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality, and excess. The purest artistic expression of the Dionysiac was quasi-orgiastic forms of music, especially of choral singing and dancing. (2007: xi)

Nietzsche imagines Apollonian and Dionysiac forces working in a dynamic dialectic to produce tragic art. While in his later writings the Apollonian is mentioned less frequently, it

is not forgotten, but becomes part of the dialectic *within* the Dionysian: the constant struggle in life and art between multiplicity/simplicity, disorder/order, nature/culture, permanence/contingency, autonomous self/primordial oneness, intoxicated ecstasy/dream vision, brutal reality/soothing illusions, passion/reason, and body/mind. While in Nietzsche's later writings he came to privilege the dynamic, ecstatic and destabilising effects of the Dionysian, he acknowledges that these transformative powers require Apollonian form for their realisation. In *Memorandum*, X and Y (and Joop) represent the Dionysian forces that surface and liberate Wiid from the "shackles" of his isolated individuality (2007 [1872]: 98). While the Dionysian is ameliorated by moments of Apollonian beauty and clarity in *Memorandum*, beauty comes from the earth – from below and not above, and eventually, in the final dream vision of the novel ("Passacaglia"), emerges from the inner-city with all its chaos and urban decay, reflecting Nietzsche's affirmation of the Dionysian. Here the Dionysian is expressed through a waking dream or poetic reverie where the Dionysian dominates and presents a terrestrial experience of the numinous. Wiid's poetic illumination is not an Apollonian "trembling from above, from the spirit and its mightiness or its extreme and ethereal lightness" but rather comes from "below, from the earth and its mysteries" (Giaccardi 2006: 142). Van Niekerk presents dreaming or daydreaming as the artist's mode of perceiving and creating. According to Nietzsche the Dionysiac artist's creation "is rather like dreaming and at the same time being aware that the dream is a dream. [...] Dionysiac art manifests itself, not in the alternation of clear-mindedness and intoxication, but in their co-existence" (2007 [1870]: 121). Nietzsche's views on the Dionysiac artist – a 'this-worldly' dreamer – anticipate French philosopher Bachelard's concept of the poet as living a conscious daydream, one that "remains in the world, facing worldly things," "gather[ing] the universe together around and in an object" (1994 [1958]: 84). The tendency of Dionysian art to open the individual to a primordial oneness is echoed in Bachelard's view of words and images as "keys to the universe, to the dual universe of the Cosmos and the depths of the human spirit" (198). Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* is X's treasured text, kept in a slip of red velvet (23). It is the book he brings along with him to the hospital.

For Wiid, embracing the Dionysian involves facing the truth of his existence: realising his alienation and isolation from others, his life-negating fastidiousness, his denial of his own life through living as his twin's "still life" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 67). Following the mania of X and Y's enigmatic riddles and fragments, and thus choosing a Dionysian pathway, leads to his spiritual healing and transforms his despair into a triumphant embrace of life and death.

Wiid's affliction (cancer) and eventual quest echo Zarathustra's parable "On Redemption." In this parable Zarathustra crosses a great bridge surrounded by cripples and beggars. A hunchback explains that in order for people to have faith in Zarathustra's teachings, he must first heal the sick and crippled. Zarathustra responds by stating that removing an affliction may also remove an unforeseen gift or advantage: removing the hunch removes the hunchback's spirit; restoring sight to the blind man is to open his eyes to the evils of the world (Nietzsche 2006 [1885]: 109). Ironically, and in a clever semantic play, Wiid's cancerous liver *delivers* him from despair, leading him to X and Y who cause Wiid to discover life in all its fullness. The word "liver," in its Old English and Dutch origins, is etymologically connected to the word "live" (Webster 1981: 558, 559). In his glossary, Wiid, reading Rykwert's *The Idea of a Town* (Y's treasured text), notes that for the Etruscans the liver was an instrument of divination, the "focus of the animal's existence" and thus "the most 'significant' organ" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 135). The liver was the "seat of life," according to Rykwert (1976: 51). X and Y's reference to the Norse world tree, Yggdrasil, on which Odin's liver was impaled, also marks the wounded liver as a means for numinous revelation.⁶⁷ According to Wiid's glossary annotation, Odin "stared into the abyss for nine nights without food & water in order to catch the 'runes'" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 132). The Odin-like Wiid stares into the abyss (of X and Y's enigmas, and of death), thus likening crafting a narrative to being hung in the Tree of Knowledge. Wiid's livid liver is his Dionysian affliction and redemption, the creative-destructive organ that drives his consumption of knowledge and finally transforms his existence. Wiid imagines what others might make of this 'mad' turnaround after he is gone: "What does it all mean and what will people find of it when I'm gone? Wiid lived here, in this bare, unembellished bachelor home, a refreshment station for a pen-pusher, twenty-four years of backup copies of minutes in files, thorough and conscientious and correct in word and deed. *And then he was overtaken by his liver. The autodidact*" (my emphasis, 48).

Wiid metaphorically metabolises the life-sustaining fragments of X and Y's conversation. X and Y are embodiments of narrative fragmentation⁶⁸ (the former has lost his legs and the

⁶⁷ Buxbaum also notes the significance of this allusion, but offers a slightly different interpretation. For Buxbaum, the hospital is Wiid's World Tree. According to Buxbaum, "Wiid peers into the abyss of the hospital and decides instead to immerse himself in the outside world, to embody space as best he can in the days left to him" (2014: 95). (Buxbaum's thesis was discovered in the final stages of completing this chapter and any overlap in ideas is unintentional and coincidental.)

⁶⁸ See Buxbaum (2014) for a discussion of fragmentation and the embodiment of narrative in *Triomf, Agaat and Memorandum*.

latter his eyes), and literalise Zarathustra's description of human beings as fragments, shattered remnants on a battlefield (Nietzsche 2006 [1885]: 110). The prophet's task is to strive toward piecing together and restoring what was broken: "all my creating and striving amounts to this, that I create and piece together into one, what is now fragment and riddle and grisly accident [chance]" (110).⁶⁹ Zarathustra's task of finding meaning in the human condition adds a numinous dimension to Wiid's literary composition, his quest of meaning-making. Following in Zarathustra's footsteps Wiid can only find healing, and "endure" his suffering, through becoming a "creator and solver of riddles and redeemer of [chance]" (110). Zarathustra's parable relates to the lesson to be learnt from the eternal return: that the task of life is to will meaning and value into the contingency and meaninglessness of life.

Wiid's path to a 'redemption' begins through scholarship, gaining knowledge in a range of ideas and fields of interest from science to architecture, town planning, myth, poetry and mysticism, in order to unravel X and Y's riddles. It is fitting that Wiid's name is a near homonym for the Afrikaans *weet*, to know or be aware. Wiid's quest is to become a seeker of knowledge. X and Y enable a new understanding and awareness of the world that eventually 'saves' Wiid from "desolation" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 7) in the face of a terminal illness. Scholarship is not his only access to understanding. The meaning of Wiid's name, and his "enormous esoteric project" (84), also relates to the Greek word *gnōsis* (knowledge), implying "self-knowledge or self-understanding both on the existential and on the transcendental level" (Hinnells 1995: 189). For Aristotle it implied knowing through sensory perception, experience, memory and science. Gnosticism, on the other hand, is a "mystical theosophy" based on a dualistic view of the separation of god and the divine from humankind and the world, light from darkness (Ferguson 1982: 68). Gnosticism holds that humankind possesses "a divine spark" but has "fallen into the world of matter"; however, salvation and union with the divine can be achieved through initiation into, or revelation of, secret knowledge (68). Wiid is a Dionysian gnostic who, like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, seeks the mysteries of the earth, as opposed to metaphysical transcendence.

Knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, is insufficient on its own in saving Wiid from despair. According to Nietzsche there is no such thing as "knowledge-in-itself," just as there is no "thing-in-itself" (1968: 328). Knowledge only has value by virtue of interpretation

⁶⁹ In this translation Adrian del Caro reads *Zufall* as accident, but it also translates as chance, which I prefer as the latter contains the connotations of "opportunity" and "contingency" that accident does not.

(267). Science is merely “[s]eduction by ‘number and logic,’ seduction by ‘laws’” (328), and those who seek ‘*the truth*’ or a final logical conclusion in science are naïve, for the “horror” of science is that it points to infinity – a quantum universe. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he describes science as an *ouroboros* where “logic curls up [...] and bites its own tail” (2007 [1872]: 75). “Art is more powerful than knowledge,” he writes, for “art desires life, whereas knowledge has as its ultimate goal – destruction” (80). Nietzsche extols the artist as a productive transformer of reality, unlike the “men of knowledge, who leave everything as it is” (1968: 318). Knowledge only has value in the hands of the artist, and the one who “goes under,” for it is through “going under” (*üintergehen*), destroying all hopes of super-terrestrial hinterworld, that one transcends or crosses over (*übergehen*). In a footnote to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche’s translator, Adrian del Caro, states that the verbal play of the German verbs *üinter* and *über* make them interchangeable as a means of transitioning from “man to overman” (in Nietzsche 2006 [1885]: 3). Thus, Wiid’s *nekyia* (which will be discussed in the following section) is also his path to becoming overman. In the famous passage from this text Zarathustra describes humankind as a “rope fastened between animal and overman – a rope over an abyss” (7). The overman is a call to exceed or go beyond our mere animal state, beyond apathy, to embrace chance, to risk all in breaking with conventional values and in a journey of constant self-transcendence. Crossing over is impossible without going under. Zarathustra declares he “love[s] those who do not know how to live unless by going under, for they are the ones who cross over” (7). The one who goes under is also a seeker of knowledge; he “lives in order to know” (7). In him death and desire are intertwined: “love the one who makes of his virtue his desire and his doom: thus for the sake of his virtue he wants to live on and to live no more” (7). The man who goes under *chooses* his death. He “learn[s] to die” the “best death,” what Zarathustra refers to as the consummate death: death that is a “goad and a promise to the living”; it is personal, “victorious” and “surrounded by those who hope and promise” (53). *Memorandum* may be read as an allegory of “the man who goes under.” Creation and destruction are inseparable in the man that goes under. According to Zarathustra creating is “the great redemption from suffering, and life’s becoming light. But in order for the creator to be, suffering is needed and much transformation. Indeed, much bitter dying must be in your life” (66). In *The Will to Power*, art is the great redeemer:

Art as the *redemption of the man of knowledge* – of those who see the terrifying and questionable character of existence, who want to see it, the men of tragic knowledge.

Art as the *redemption of the man of action* – of those who not only see the terrifying and questionable character of existence but live it, want to live it, the tragic-warlike man, the hero.

Art as the *redemption of the sufferer* – as the way to states in which suffering is willed, transfigured, deified, where suffering is a form of great delight. (Nietzsche 1968: 452)

Wiid's redemption through art calls for an "experimental philosophy" that anticipates "even the possibilities of the most fundamental nihilism" but in facing negation "cross[es] over to the opposite of this – to a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is" (536). Wiid's lone existence and his insight (through X and Y) into microcosms, "the universe in a grain of sand" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 40), fractals and chaos theory (the theory that small changes in initial conditions can cause profound changes in the end result) all resonate with Nietzsche's criteria for the *artist-philosopher* as "(1) he who forms himself, the hermit; (2) the artist hitherto, as a perfecter on a small scale, working on material" (1968: 419).

Art is Nietzsche's corrective and "*countermovement*" to the asceticism of religion, morality and metaphysics (419). Nietzsche's emphasis on the redemptive aspect of art presents a lens for understanding the spiritual and numinous in *Memorandum*. Van Niekerk does not deal with spirituality in its conventional association with orthodox religion and doctrine, but rather, in a broader, secular sense of the presence of the numinous in the mundane, material world. Indeed, in a recent article, Ileana Dimitriu observes "a renewed interest in 'the spiritual' as a legitimate category of investigation" in the humanities (Dimitriu 2010: 124). Citing recent critical texts, she outlines a more inclusive spirituality: coterminous with aesthetic experience (Eagleton 2009: 7), magic (Boym 2001: 11–2) and a new sense of the sacred as embodied and demotic (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass & McCredden 2009: 2–3). Jean Petrolle argues that art and literature are 'spiritual' in that their mimetic function brings one into contact with alterity, compelling the writer and reader to become an/other (2007: 115–6). Following Walter Benjamin and Michael Taussig, she notes that any self-transcendence, "utterly secular, even profane [is] magical in the sense that it transforms ordinary reality into the extraordinary" (2007: 115). This is what Benjamin refers to as a "profane illumination," often elicited, as in surrealist art, by intoxication. While Van Niekerk's teetotaling protagonist is only newly initiated into sweet wines, he is enticed into intoxication with life through his embrace of Mania. Indeed, Nietzsche's Dionysian sensibility, which calls for "an evergreater spiritualization and multiplication of the senses" (1968: 434) provides a this-

worldly spirituality manifested in the intoxicating (ecstatic) effects of art. Nietzsche notes that the artist's ability to recreate a heightened reality with "extreme subtlety and splendor of color, definiteness of line, nuances of tone" recalls the "extreme enhancements of strength that intoxication produces"; put differently, the production and effect of art "*excite[s]*" a form of artistic intoxication (434). For Nietzsche, art is spiritual. In its capacity to create a sense of "perfection and plenitude," he argues, "art is essentially *affirmation, blessing, deification of existence*" (434) – a form of imminent, palpable sublime.

Memorandum's preoccupation with the power of poetic imagination, cosmic interconnectedness and re-enchantment resonates with Dudley Schreiber's observations about the centrality of imagination to the experience of postmodern spirituality:

Without certainty in ontology or teleology, we are beckoned to lives of active imagination and integral thinking. Our vulnerability to absence is an apophysis of our craving for presence in an expanding cosmos. Inspiration reveals presence in a postmodern mind. Perhaps imagination is most apposite in the way it articulates the *unknown*. (2012: 7)

An engagement with the unknown – intellectual, subjective and metaphysical – is the central plot element in Van Niekerk's tale. It is through scholarship and the imagination that Wiid engages with the absolute unknown, allowing the encounter with death (absence) to become the catalyst for artistic inspiration and a re-enchantment of life.

In order to illuminate the transformative and redemptive potential of art, and Wiid's development as an artist, I rely primarily on Nietzsche's writings; however, the extensive allusiveness of Van Niekerk's text interpolates a number of philosophical and cultural texts, making the text a constant process of production. I thus expand on Wiid's discoveries and delve more deeply into the texts alluded to in the narrative in order to contribute to the quest of meaning-making begun by Wiid.

3.4 Wiid's *Nekyia*: The Quest of the Artist-Philosopher

Despite the fact that *Memorandum's* setting appears limited to a hospital ward, Wiid's small apartment and the town library, *Memorandum* is a consummate adventure tale and draws on a number of literary, historical and philosophical quest narratives. *Memorandum's* literary

antecedents include the quest of the artist-philosopher in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as already mentioned. As a philosophical novel, *Memorandum* can be read as a contemporary adaption of "the man that goes under." Indeed, Nietzsche draws on archetypal quest imagery in Zarathustra's odyssey. Like Homer's *Odyssey*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a *nekyia*, a descent to the underworld, except Zarathustra's 'underworld' is the mundane human world. Nietzsche's narrative also draws on archetypal quest symbols such as the "cup" or grail, representing both the trials of the hero and his/her ultimate boon. Zarathustra begins his journey by asking the sun to bless his "cup that wants to flow over" and at the same time "wants to become empty again" so that Zarathustra can "become human again" (Nietzsche 2006 [1885]: 3). Wiid also refers to his literary (and life) project as a "cup." *Memorandum* self-consciously plays with a number of quest motifs from Arthurian legend, Homer's *Odyssey* and the Modernist artist's quest, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). While excavating these intertextual allusions I also explore the parallels between Zarathustra's journey and lessons on life.

3.4.1 A Twofold Quest: Self and Language

Wiid's quest is similar to Zarathustra's: it is a twofold quest for his true self and a language of his own. While the text makes no specific mention of Zarathustra, *Memorandum* echoes Zarathustra's search to find joy in suffering, hope in despair, to persevere, to desire life and strive for the work of constant transformation and becoming. Chance is Zarathustra's redeemer, and solitude his recovery, as it is for Wiid. Thematically and stylistically Nietzsche and Van Niekerk's texts are concerned with repetition and recurrence. Wiid and Zarathustra's quests are both internal, and involve a journey of self-discovery – a quest of returning 'home' to the self, not an autonomous, unified, and fixed self, but rather selfhood as an continually emergent and contingent process of being in constant exchange with the dynamic of life forces (Hatab 2012: 144). The title of *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is* (2004 [1908]) reiterates this Nietzschean precept that life's purpose is not striving toward rewards in the hereafter, but towards becoming oneself. However, to "[become] what one is, presupposes that one does not have the remotest idea *what* one is. From this point of view even life's *blunders* have their own meaning and value, the temporary by-ways and wrong ways" (Nietzsche 2004 [1908]: 36). Nietzsche's prophet outlines this strange quest in Part 3 of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in an internal colloquy:

And whatever may come to me now as destiny and experience – it will involve wandering and mountain climbing: ultimately one experiences only oneself.

The time has passed in which accidents could still befall me, and what *could* fall to me now that is not already my own?

It merely returns, it finally comes home to me – my own self and everything in it that has long been abroad and scattered among all things and accidents. (Nietzsche 2006 [1885]: 121)

This passage helps elucidate Wiid's journey, which involves incorporating all the "scattered" ideas from X and Y into his own world and his own sense of self. What was X's and Y's fuels Wiid's research and scholarship, and eventually becomes his own – synthesised with his own experience and creative invention. In finding a new language Wiid also finds himself and a new style of living – not the self as an endpoint, but the self as a constant process of overcoming, the self as an eternal return. Indeed, X's and Y's fragments cause Wiid to re-live his own life again – they resonate with and summon up childhood memories and reflections on his life choices. In the novel certain phrases reoccur and are reinterpreted and incorporated into Wiid's story. He imaginatively pieces together bits and pieces of X's and Y's discourse to write a narrative of their journey to the afterlife, and at the end of the novel presents a dream vision of his own journey toward death, which also shows the merging of information extrapolated from X and Y into his own cosmology. The discursive repetition and circuitousness of *Memorandum* relates to the lesson to be learnt from the unusual ending of Nietzsche's narrative. In the end, while his followers sleep, Zarathustra, now an old man, awakens and realises his task has no end. His "suffering and [...] pity" do not matter (266). "Do I strive for *happiness*?" he asks, and answers: "I strive for my *work*!" (266). This is the work of becoming, of constant self-transcendence, of striving toward the overmanly (*Übermenschlich*). Zarathustra arises from the comfort and solitude of his cave, and begins his quest and descent all over again, declaring, "[t]his is *my* morning, *my* day is beginning" (266). Similarly, Wiid's narrative ends with the promise of a new day and a newfound joy in life. The 'end' to Wiid's novelistic quest, which occurs at the break of a new day, does not leave all possibilities resolved (we are left to wonder if he will indeed invite Joop over and what will occur at their dinner). This is also not the end of the novel. Wiid leaves his postscript, titled "Passacaglia (for JSB)." These are the initials of the German composer, Johann Sebastian Bach, and his librarian friend, Jeroen Sterrenberg Buytendagh.

Zarathustra's primary message of the eternal return is not only a cosmological one, it is an existential one. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche asks what one would do if one were told one had to live one's life "once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you" (Nietzsche 1974 [1887]: 273). This would be the "greatest weight" on all our actions, according to Nietzsche: a moral challenge to live each moment as if it were to return. The effect of this knowledge could either "crush you" (Nietzsche 1974 [1887]: 274) or cause you to change your style of living so that the "joy of existence would justify even the most terrible and painful events," and suffering and pain would become "the condition for self-overcoming and a new vision of 'man'" (Spinks 2003: 126). Lee Spinks illuminates the notion of eternal recurrence by referring to Harold Ramis's film, *Groundhog Day* (1993), where a cynical weatherman is forced to live the same day over and over again until he becomes a better man. Hollywood has produced a number of these time-loop narratives, with the most recent being *Edge of Tomorrow* (Liman 2014). *Memorandum* is not a time-loop narrative, but like these films Van Niekerk's novel shows the growth and transformation of a character through his realisation that his attitude, perspective and will are the determining factors in creating reality. Time-loop narratives typically involve an unlikely hero, who is 'thrown' into a situation which forces him to correct past wrongs and through puzzle-solving activities discover a truth or truths. Time-loop narratives highlight the power of human agency. While the hero may have to save other people's lives, s/he also saves his/her own life by discovering a new way of being or a new morality. Not too dissimilar to time-loop narratives, the events in *Memorandum* occur in the space of a day, from dusk until dawn to be precise, and the whole of Wiid's present and past is compacted into this moment in time. *Memorandum* also includes the re-living or repetition of phrases, but marked by subtle differences as they are interpreted by Wiid and incorporated into his changing worldview. Through re-remembering X and Y's words, Wiid 'saves' them. When they fall silent he imagines a "conclusion" to their conversation, drawing on his research into the words and phrases he recalls, and writes their journey to the afterlife (Van Niekerk 2006b: 115). X and Y change Wiid's perspective on life, and through his creative reinterpretation of their words, they form part of his cosmology and eschatology.

Nietzsche's ideas on life as interpretation and perspective are particularly relevant to the process of creative writing. In the same way, the lessons Wiid learns about writing are also a

guide to how he should live his life. *Memorandum* offers many self-reflexive comments on the writing process. This is evident early in the narrative when Wiid calls on readers to “partake in my adventure,” warning them of his use of suspense, an essential ingredient for a good adventure tale:

The reader will rightly wonder, as I did at that stage, what in God’s name the connection could be between Roman city founders, nests and skyscrapers. I could now clarify everything for you in one paragraph that I struggled with for months, but that, I feel, would defeat the whole purpose of this memorandum. Not that I normally take pleasure in deliberately withholding information, quite the contrary, but I want as it were to make you partake in my adventure, in so far of course as this may be considered an honourable practice. (33).

The “honourable practice” Wiid now includes himself in is that of the writer, thus signalling this as a particular kind of quest: a *Künstlerroman*, the quest of the artist-hero, following his creative development, while also self-consciously reflecting on literary composition. Indeed, Adèle Nel states that Wiid could be “n protipe van die skrywer” (a prototype of the writer) (2009: 124). She refers to the writer as a “mediator”; as such, Wiid is “die man in die middel” (the man in the middle), an intermediary that makes sense of X and Y’s “‘ideas touched upon and dropped’ [Van Niekerk 2006b: 76]” (Nel 2009: 124). The *nekyia*, as a metaphor for the descent into the unconscious – the wellspring of archetypes and creative inspiration – links with the narrative trajectory of the artist-hero of the *Künstlerroman*. Indeed, Evans Lansing Smith’s *The Hero Journey in Literature: Parables of Poesis* (1997) explores the *nekyia* as a metaphor for *poiesis*, the processes of poetic or creative composition. (A more detailed discussion of *Memorandum* as an artist’s novel is presented later in this chapter.)

Wiid begins his story by highlighting his status as a novice in his inexperience in literary composition and in the fullness of life. He admits that he has not “savoured much pleasure in my life or, with the exception of the events during my previous hospitalisation [when he met X and Y], experienced any interesting highlights” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 7). Wiid notices how devoid his life is of companionship when he recovers from his wallet the old scrap of paper with notes from X and Y’s conversation and likens this to “shaking the hand of an old friend” (7). The narrative gradually reveals Wiid’s growth as a character and as a writer, triggered by his encounter with X and Y, and their candid discourse on friendship, notions of care and nurturing environments, the soul, death and dying.

Wiid is an unsuspecting hero who is “drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood” (Campbell 2004 [1949]: 46). He begins his tale without knowing “where I should start and even less how I should conclude” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 6). As with most quest narratives, the plot involves the hero’s departure from the mundane and familiar world, and his entry into an unknown and phantasmagorical realm where he faces various obstacles and trials that lead to his transformation. Most importantly, in the quest narrative, the outer journey is a vehicle for an inner journey of spiritual awakening or insight into the nature of the world. While Wiid’s adventure does not involve physical travel (he only leaves his home town of Parow once to visit the beach at Blouberg), his intellectual explorations through books make him a global voyager, crossing geographical, historical and ontological boundaries.

Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004 [1949]) provides a useful tool for identifying the common tropes of the quest narrative. Many of the elements or stages outlined by Campbell are evident in Van Niekerk’s narrative: a call to adventure, the assistance of a “supernatural aid” or guide, crossing the threshold of the unknown, having to complete tasks or face trials that lead to the hero’s transformation, figuratively entering the ‘belly of the whale’ or the womb world, apotheosis, mastery of the material and spiritual worlds and, finally, freedom to live without the fear of death (34–5). Although Campbell’s monomyth, a universal hero’s story, is essentialist and reductionist, and arguably androcentric, in its broad generalisations, the stages and motifs Campbell identifies provide some useful points of comparison. This analysis touches on some of these tropes, while noting how Van Niekerk plays with and subverts many of our expectations in the typical hero’s journey.

Conflict in the narrative arises out of Wiid’s initial resistance to X and Y’s nonsensical language (associated with the realm of the unconscious, of dreams, of Dionysian chaos and passion) and his urge to render their fragments orderly and logical. Indeed, when X and Y disappear the following morning, Wiid wonders (along with the reader) whether he had “imagined it all” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 23). He likens the experience and his inability to “reconstruct precisely everything that happened” to an “enigmatic dream. The more you try to reflect on its meaning, the more the details escape you” (25). The meaning evades him when he tries too hard, but surfaces when least expected: when, “out of sheer frustration” Wiid diverts his attention to something else “time and again its atmosphere overtook me out of the blue. Just as elevated music in a suburban street can transform the pavement into a

secret footpath” (25). Although writing is typically considered an Apollonian ritual, here writing is associated with Dionysian mystery. Giorgio Giaccardi states that writing “can become a Dionysian practice, as it happens with automatic writing” (2006: 147). As Jung says of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “it just poured out of him” (Jung in Giaccardi 2006: 147). Wiid is subject to a similar Dionysian spirit in his writing: he renounces any “intentions” and “[hopes] that one thing will lead to another” – it is an “ill-considered experiment” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 6).

As is true of many quest heroes, Wiid does not choose this adventure but comes upon it by chance and reluctantly. Wiid’s feelings about being subject to X and Y’s unusual disclosure are initially ambivalent: he is either “a chance dumping site for a kind of over-production” or “a beloved person to whom precious mysteries had been entrusted” (25). At the beginning of his tale Wiid admits that he was, “at least, initially, an involuntary, even unwilling listener” (20). This chance encounter falls in line with Campbell’s observation that the hero’s journey often begins as a result of a “blunder,” which “reveals an unsuspected world” (2004 [1949]: 46). These “blunders” are the heralds of the adventure that signal an “awakening of the self” or soul (47). It is Wiid’s chance encounter with X and Y that spurs a journey of self-discovery and existential questioning. He observes that “as [their] groaning transformed itself into a bantering, I began to see my situation in a different light” and that “the real inconvenience caused by these two [was] that I constantly had to adjust my understanding of myself” (Van Niekerk 2006: 20). Campbell observes that such chance events are the result of “suppressed desires and conflicts” (2004 [1949]: 46). What Wiid denies most in his life and work are chaos and spontaneity. He describes himself as a “pen-pusher [...] thorough, conscientious and correct in word and deed” (48). In his review of the novel, Burger notes how through making sense of X and Y’s language Wiid also makes sense of his own life, discovering that his bleak bureaucratic language is inadequate (2007: 12). As the night progresses so does Wiid’s use of language change, becoming more creative and poetic.

Wiid’s understanding of the role he plays in his interaction with X and Y gradually shifts from one where he imagines himself as the benefactor, as “host,” to curious “eavesdropper,” to “sponge” and “finally a hart panting after water brooks” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 20). Wiid describes the “irresistible fascination” (Campbell 2004 [1949]: 51) of heralds, the strange yearning they awaken in him, by borrowing a metaphor from Psalm 42:1: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.” Wiid’s use of the Old English word

“hart” (*heort*) also implies an analogue between X and Y, and the role of the hart in the Arthurian quest for the Holy Grail. In this legend the pursuit of a hart and consequent appearance of the “questyng beast” marks the beginning of the hero’s journey. In Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*, King Arthur pursues a hart until, exhausted, he rests by a well and is visited by a vision of a beast (a hybrid of serpent, leopard, lion and stag) whose belly sounds like 30 hounds on the chase. It is only while drinking from the well that the sound from the beast’s belly abates (in Campbell 2004 [1949]: 49). X and Y’s association with the ‘questyng beast’ recurs near the end of the narrative when, *in extremis*, they fall silent and cause Wiid to feel “parched” and physically “thirst” for their “nourishing sentences” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 114, 115). According to Campbell the beast is “representative of the repressed instinctual fecundity within ourselves, [...] or the unknown” (2004 [1949]: 48). X and Y, appropriately, are the catalyst for unleashing Wiid’s suppressed creativity, for revealing the magical fractal patterns of nature, for his opening up to others, experiencing intimacy, and embracing absolute alterity in his imaginative encounter with death at the end of the novel.

X and Y’s discourse sparks a series of synchronistic moments as Wiid slowly pieces together the puzzle of their fragmentary discourse. Their refrains become the clues that assist Wiid in turning the desolation he feels about the ‘intractable dilemma’ of “secondary liver cancer, metastasised” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 27) into hope. Despite his earlier protestations Wiid confesses that the “reference work” they instigated “had the effect of [...] a tonic” and was “undoubtedly what [he] needed” in the face of a “freely proliferating” cancer (27). His surgeon, Dr Reinhard Snyman, whose first name is suggestive of an unwavering devotion to purity and surname literally means “cutting-man,” would remove the biological ‘chaos’ of Wiid’s body. Ironically, chaos or unrestrained creativity is exactly what is missing in Wiid’s life. Wiid, who previously guarded against irregularities in every aspect of his life, discovers that “the art lies in the impediment” (97) – a revelation that counters his previous “model for everything”: a conduit, “a conveying emptiness of which one must keep the interior as open and smooth as possible” (97). Sanders is prescient in seeing the association between art and impediment as a self-reflexive comment on *mimesis* and artistic creation. Wiid’s cancer is thus a *productive* pathology. According to Sanders it is through “impediment that thought, or matters for thought, emerge” (2009: 108). Signifiers can shift to new and multiple signifieds, especially in poetic language – this deviancy and variability is characteristic of art. Wiid’s two models, one of language as direct and uncomplicated, and the other of language as

constantly shifting, resonates with Roland Barthes's distinction between 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts (2002 [1974]: 4–6). The former is simple and direct in its message and befits Wiid's conduit model. The writerly text, on the other hand, requires the reader to become an active producer of meaning, in effect turning the reader into a writer (4–6). This active production is literalised in Wiid's extensive research into X's and Y's fragmentary utterances woven into his own personal and socio-political context.

3.4.2 “Free Proliferation”: The Art of Error

Following Sanders's argument, I would add that when Wiid realises that “the art lies in the impediment” he is pointing to the lack of “artistry” in his life. If art equates impediment it implies chaos and complication. The maxim, “art lies in the impediment,” is conspicuously Nietzschean. Error and delusion are the condition of art, and the meaning of life, in Nietzsche's thinking (1974 [1887]: 283). Art becomes “the highest power of falsehood, it magnifies the ‘world as error’; it sanctifies the lie” (Deleuze 2002 [1962]: 102). Impediment provides a new model, a worldview, and style for living and writing.

Wiid's initial faith in Dr Snyman reflects his misguided devotion to Apollonian order and restraint. However, his attempt to rationalise and order the trauma to his body, and to predict and anticipate death, through his tables (Memorandum 1), proves futile. His “actions” are broken down into ludicrous minutiae, from bowel movements to the potential miscarriage of his arrival in theatre due to “lift stuck, power failure” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 128). In “Table B: Colostomy & post-operative trajectory” one of his negative outcomes – “Nausea, vomiting, fear and trembling” (130) – parodies Sartre's *Nausea* (1964 [1938]) and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (2006 [1843]). Science and instrumentality cannot conquer death, and instead leave him feeling dehumanised and in despair.

Through abandoning the world of logic and opening himself up to “error,” impediment and chance, Wiid finds hope and begins a process of becoming and of self-transformation. He realises that what the tables and lists lack are “conjunctions, that which my mother called ‘style’ and my father simply ‘discourse’” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 7). If the lessons he learns about writing and story-telling are a metaphor for life, “conjunctions” and “discourse” indicate a lack of meaningful connection in life (both human and cosmic). Wiid's need for

“style,” echoes Nietzsche’s declaration in an aphorism titled “*One thing is needful*”: “To ‘give style’ to one’s character: a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan” (1974 [1887]: 233). Giving style to one’s existence means viewing oneself as a work of art. Art is the redeemer that does not need to excise ugliness or error but rather “reinterprets” it (230). In this way one becomes one’s own saviour.

The notions of “free proliferation,” “style” and “discourse,” are evocative of the Dionysian individual, whose Apollonian urges serve the Dionysian in order to create a “well-fashioned aesthetic totality,” where one’s drives and passions are integrated into a “spontaneous and powerful self” (Spinks 2003: 22). The liver, as an organ with regenerative powers, is an appropriate symbol for the Dionysian forces that awaken in Wiid. His “livid liver” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 123) is his Dionysian affliction and redemption, the creative-destructive organ that drives his consumption of knowledge and finally transforms his existence. In the final passage of the novel it will become his “shining wound” (124), a grail symbol, with allusions to the legend of the Fisher King.

Van Niekerk draws on, and alludes to, a number of quest narratives, including the Arthurian legends of the Holy Grail, and Homer’s *Odyssey*.⁷⁰ The dark, nocturnal and dream-like quality of *Memorandum*’s diegesis recalls the land of Cimmerian shades visited by Odysseus. X and Y’s “nocturnal symposium” (23) is comparable with Odysseus’s conversations with the dead in the land of eternal night. Indeed, as has been mentioned, *Memorandum* belongs to a particular subgenre of quest: the *nekylia*, a Homeric term that refers to a descent to the underworld. Typical of this motif, Wiid’s journey begins at twilight, with “hesitation, as darkness deepens” (6) and his “overture” to his tale is “Therefore, so help me God, I take a leap in the dark” (10). As in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), images of darkness, visual obscurity and the dream-like exegesis serve as an objective correlative for the hero’s entry into the realm of the unconscious, or the soul – “the crooked lanes of his own spiritual labyrinth” (Campbell 2004 [1949]: 92). The didactic effect of X and Y’s exchange, and Wiid’s reference to their discourse as “precious mysteries” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 25) resonate with the mystical illumination that Campbell describes as the hero’s “ultimate boon” (2004 [1949]: 50).

⁷⁰ X quotes Odysseus’s landing in Ithaca, which Wiid references in a fictitious Afrikaans translation of this text (Van Niekerk 2006b: 55).

Memorandum makes specific allusion to Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus is shipwrecked in the land of the dead. In intensive care Wiid imagines himself “embarking on the night in the humming cabin of a ship, with my fellow-passengers asleep on either side of me” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 18–9). Wiid’s feeling of being all alone and needing “a glass to sip at while peering through a porthole at the boundless ocean” (19) is evocative of Homer’s quest tale. Like Odysseus, who remains awake to tell the melancholy tales of the Cimmerian shades, Wiid exercises his own night-long vigil to tell the tale of X and Y. In addition, Wiid, like Odysseus, reanimates the dead through his storytelling (but without the libations of sheep’s blood). He also recalls Joop directing him, “Now, Voyager, sail thou forth to seek and find” (120).

Wiid’s description of X and Y as “ghosts” (66) and their language of “special mysteries” (25) give them a supernatural quality that makes them comparable to the Shades of Cimmeria, where Odysseus is shipwrecked. These shades represent the archetypal forms of the mythical imagination or collective unconscious, a point James Hillman emphasises by relating the etymology of the word Hades to “*eidōs*, ideational forms and shapes, ideas that form and shape life” (1979: 51). X and Y can be seen as archetypes of the original pair bond missing in Wiid’s life: they reconstitute Wiid’s deceased parents, and the fraternal bond with his twin brother who died when they were eight months old. Sanders notes that “[e]verything that [Wiid] writes is filtered through this unspoken family drama, which [...] like the ‘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 2006b: 96)]” (2009: 119). X and Y can thus be seen as a structuring myth in Wiid’s life. More than re-enacting a myth of the couple, of the filial and romantic love missing in Wiid’s own life, through their frequently antithetical perspectives and divergent fields of interest they represent the duality of art/science, intuition/analysis, dreamer/thinker and chaos/order. X and Y operate like the complementary and interdependent forces of yin and yang, together making an indivisible whole. Mr X lies on Wiid’s right, perhaps representing the right side of the brain with its associations with creativity, imagination and intuition, while Y, who lies on Wiid’s left, is the analytical thinker who threatens to “*sharpen up [X’s] poetic intuition with pure mathematics*” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 38). X is an ornithologist and a lover of Romantic poetry. His treasured text is Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1994 [1958]). Y nicknames him Dozy Guineafowl and Danny Dreamer. Conversely, Y is an architectural fundi,

geometrician and lover of Bach. He bears a copy of Rykwert's *The Idea of a Town* (1976), which reveals the interrelationship between science and mysticism in Etruscan town planning. This kinship in a concern for the spiritual is noted by Buxbaum, who observes that despite the "different focuses, both Bachelard and Rykwert (and by implication X and Y) insist on the importance of a poetic and spiritual interaction with one's surroundings" (2014: 54).

3.4.3 "Midnight Electrical": From *Allesverloren* to *Welgevonden*

Although Wiid experiences a self-awakening or illumination, Van Niekerk self-consciously draws attention to her postmodern revision of the quest's promise of a glimpse of divine perfection when she has her protagonist warn the reader: "I can of course not, sir, madam, promise you paradise" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 64). Wiid follows Joop's caution that heaven is a "boring place" and hell might be "more pleasant" (78), when he writes his dream-scene "Passacaglia" to Joop. In this final paragraph Wiid traverses a "profane" city and descends to the underworld (124), rather than a celestial paradise. The parody of divine transcendence is implicit in Wiid's summation of the midpoint milestone of his narrative as "Midnight electrical. / This cup without name. / Twelve legions of angels I need to fulfil the scripture (64). "Midnight electrical" is a clear reference to the time and the fact that he is using an electrical typewriter, but the reference to the Eucharistic cup and angels suggests a parody of the midnight mass of Maundy Thursday, the Christian ordinance that commemorates Christ's washing of his disciples' feet and the last supper.⁷¹ Maundy Thursday initiates the celebration of Christ's passion, death and resurrection, and signals the shift from the dark liturgical colours used during Lent to brighter, festive hues. Maundy Thursday is also referred to as Thursday of Mysteries, in that it celebrates the fifth Luminous Mystery of the Catholic Rosary: the institution of the Eucharist.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* midnight is associated with the deepest revelations of the soul, of secrets that cannot be heard in the clamour of day. Midnight speaks "secretly," "terribly" and "cordially" (*herzlich*), literally of or with the heart (Nietzsche 2006 [1885]: 260). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* "Deep Midnight" "speaks," "listens," "creeps into nocturnal, over-wake

⁷¹This also echoes Dante's *Inferno*, which begins on Maundy Thursday with the opening lines, "Midway through our life's journey" (Alighieri 2009: 1). Wiid, like Dante, has to abandon "the straight way" (30), and, like Dante, who relies on his guide, Virgil, Wiid relies on his guide, Joop.

souls” (260). It is a Dionysian “drunken midnight” that only reveals its secrets to those intoxicated with sweet wines, like Zarathustra’s “higher men,” and like Wiid who has to open a window because of the smell of port (Van Niekerk 2006b: 64). In Part 3 (“The Other Dance Song”) the midnight bell signals Zarathustra’s overcoming of disgust with, and desire to flee from, life. Midnight speaks a message of the indivisible nature of joy and pain, but that joy is more primordial (“deeper”). Midnight is the voice of Life. This message anticipates Zarathustra’s affirmation of life in his “Yes Song” and his triumphant acceptance of the eternal return of all things: every joy and every pain. Like Zarathustra, whose despair turns to triumph at midnight, Wiid’s Midnight Electrical occurs at an emotional nadir, when he is ready to quit his quest and renounce X and Y for “contaminat[ing] the air [...] with their outrageous points of view” and filling him with “impossible questions and unnecessary doubts” (62–3). Midnight signals the shift from scepticism and despair to the beginning of his “yes song”: an affirmation of life and of the spiritual-creative journey initiated by X and Y’s conversation. Before midnight X and Y’s discourse is viewed as an unwanted burden: “A cuckoo’s egg! Cunningly laid in my nest! For which I now have to take responsibility” (63). However, by the end of the novel Wiid realises that borrowing from “what belongs to someone else” is what saves him “from dire need” and allows him to “start anew” (123). The novel exhibits self-conscious humour in marking this shift by his change in sweet wines from *Allesverloren* (Dutch for “all is lost”) at the onset of writing (26), to *Welgevonden* (“well found”) at 01.45 (77).

The “cup,” in the Christian story, is associated with both suffering and redemption, self-sacrifice and the promise of paradise, as well as apotheosis – human becoming divine. However, Van Niekerk defies the conventional Christian dualism of divine transcendence that separates human and divine, matter and spirit, making Wiid’s “cup without name” a closer approximation to Zarathustra’s “cup that wants to become empty again” so that he can become “human again” (Nietzsche 2006 [1885]: 3). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ asks his Father, “take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). When Christ accepts this cup he is accepting his fate to suffer and die on the cross. His mortal life will come to an end, but he will eventually join his Father in heaven. Unlike the Christian story, Zarathustra’s quest is cyclical and earth-bound, as at the end of the narrative he descends once more to the mortal, material realm, defying a final revelatory or redemptive moment. Thus, for Nietzsche, to be human exceeds being a Messiah, and the process of becoming a “higher” being is open and endless. Furthermore, unlike Christ, whose fate had

been predestined, Wiid's fate is unknown. His nameless "cup" (akin to Zarathustra's empty cup) may portend nihilism and despair (as the soothsayer predicts in Zarathustra's tale) or it may present an opportunity for a strong wind to break open the coffin of life, simultaneously releasing laughter and terror, but promising change (Nietzsche 2006 [1885]: 107–8). The latter is true for Wiid whose "cup" involves laughing in the face of death, embracing the bitter-sweet nature of life, and a "[t]hirst for the creator, arrow and longing for the overman" (53). The *Zondernaam* sherry he receives from Joop is a witty analogue for the contingency and openness of this quest. To name it would be to fix it, but Wiid's Dionysian path requires embracing the instinctual creative imagination, developing a new writing, living and dying "style," and surrendering to the unknown.

Writing at a few minutes past midnight, Wiid is at a threshold hour that marks a turning point in his narrative. Likening the task of writing to a "cup" shows his commitment to his task "to the bitter end" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 63). Self-mockingly Wiid declares the need for "[t]welve legions of angels [...] to fulfil the scriptures" (64), parodying Christ's refusal to call on his Father's angels. Before his three-line summation of his work, Wiid asks if he is "halfway yet," self-reflexively signalling the midpoint in the novel (64). Wiid's question is posed a little after midnight – the "witching hour" in a number of world myths. Midnight's association with the supernatural aptly marks a liminal moment in his transformation as an artist. This reference to "halfway" occurs on page 64, which is roughly halfway in a novel 140 pages long (including appendices and paintings). In his guide to the essential elements of storytelling, Larry Brooks defines the "midpoint" as "a morsel of narrative information [that] may not change the story per se, but it does change the hero's and the reader's understanding of what's been going on" (2011: 193). The midpoint also "empowers the hero into the transition from [...] wanderer to [...] warrior" (193). It is here that Wiid asserts his own voice and places himself at the centre of the narrative. His annoyance at X and Y for "saddling" him with "impossible questions and unnecessary doubts" has reached its zenith and he suddenly realises that he has been "writing about another man's sorrows" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 63), instead of his own. "It's théir work I'm doing here!," he exclaims (63). While documenting the details of X and Y's discourse, Wiid admits that "every so often [he felt] driven to fantasy" (66). Notably, the influence of imagination and fantasy comes to the fore at this threshold hour. Looking out the window of his apartment, Wiid suddenly observes:

The view, so familiar to me, turned stranger and stranger to me the longer I stood facing it. 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. Certainly not the kind of sentence I would ever have written down had it not been for that first strange night. And now I write Janus-faced, half yesterday, half tomorrow. (64)

Wiid is caught between two opposing forces in his character: on the one hand, the Apollonian drive for order, rationality and semblance, and on the other, the drive to surrender himself to his imagination and intuition. By identifying his Janus-like nature he also becomes aware that he faces a turning point and choice in how he lives and writes. He asks: “How should I recommence? What has been written, has been written, on a typewriter one can’t erase” (64). However, his consequent naming of his existential and literary dilemma “Midnight electrical” and “cup without name” suggests the potential for dynamic change, a change in style and for re-signifying his narrative and himself.

Wiid’s fondness for storytelling, which emerged out of the boredom induced by being bedridden by illness during his childhood, was something his parents suppressed. Finally Wiid realises the error in stifling his imagination: “My parents, perhaps like you, and certainly like me, thought they could keep these things in quarantine, temper it with a scanty diet and exertions of self-denial, but in that way they only starved their fears” (66). This realisation anticipates Wiid’s adoption and imaginative development of X and Y’s thoughts, using them to craft his own story.

The “morsel” of information (to borrow Brooks’s terminology) that changes our perception of Wiid and our understanding of his quest is revealed in the next section, titled 01:10. The mirror reflection of the binary numbers, zero and one on other side of the colon, provides an apt title and visual analogue for Wiid’s revelation that his identical twin brother died when they were eight months old (67). After this disclosure Wiid asks, “[h]ave I always been nothing but my brother’s still-life?” (67). Still-life or *nature mort*, in the more apposite French term, highlights the constant presence of death in the midst of life. It also suggests that despite the fact that Wiid survived his brother, he imagines himself and his life as a static, mimetic replica, not as a vital and dynamic individual. As his “brother’s still-life,” Wiid defines himself as loss. The duality in the nameless X and Y can be seen as a manifestation of Wiid’s lost “whole” (Sanders 2009: 119). However, in forming new

connections, initially through the intertextual overflow of X and Y, and later in his forging of a bond with the librarian, Wiid comes to experience love and life, fully. Through creating a narrative out of X's and Y's fragments and translating their significance into his own life, he gives meaning and "wholeness" to his life, while the openness of Van Niekerk's text keeps Wiid and X and Y alive.

3.4.4 Dionysian Angel: Joop

Like most quest heroes, Wiid cannot rely on his ingenuity alone. In order to attempt to decipher X and Y's discourse he visits the town library, where he finds an unlikely ally in the chief librarian, Joop Buytendagh, whose administrative style and appearance cause Wiid much alarm. In a letter of complaint he describes him as "barefoot and 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" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 139). Beyond his appearance, Joop's countercultural values are evident in his mockery of conservative Afrikaner politics (101), architecture, literature (52) and art (88), as well as his use of cannabis (121). Despite Wiid's initial strong disapproval of Joop, a friendship develops between them and he becomes Wiid's guide and *amicus mortis* (literally, friend of death), a term X bestows on Y (102). In his gloss of this Latin phrase Wiid quotes from Ivan Illich's essay, "Death Undefeated: From Medicine to Medicalisation to Systemisation" (1995), where the Austrian iconoclast asks if there are "still people who are 'capable of the act of dying'? For that a wise man must make and cherish 'a friend unto death, someone who will tell you the straightest truth & stay with you to the bitter end'" (in Van Niekerk 2006b: 135).

Like Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*, Joop is a mercurial figure. As Campbell observes, the guide is not only a guardian but also "the lurer of the innocent soul into realms of trial" (2004 [1949]: 67). He can be both "[p]rotective and dangerous, motherly and fatherly at the same" and is representative of the "inscrutable" unconscious that the hero has descended into, "to the peril of all [his] rational ends" (2004 [1949]: 67). In many ways Joop's character is a twenty-first-century South African parallel to the Mephistopheles of the Beat Generation: Dean Moriarty, Sal Paradise's icon of itinerant, free-living in Jack Kerouac's cult novel, *On the Road* (1957). In addition to Joop being characterised as a "tramp" (Van Niekerk 2006b:

122), like Dean, there are other resonances between the characters and the two novels. For instance, *Memorandum*'s thematic concerns with the artist's life, the craft of writing, and the mystic quest echo those of the seminal Beat novel. Dean is Sal's guide: "Angel Dean," a "new kind of American saint" and "the devil himself" (1957): 122, 25, 110). Similarly, Joop is a confidante and friend but also a provocateur. Dean reminds Sal of a "long-lost brother" (7), and Joop replaces the fraternal bond Wiid lost in infancy.⁷² Wiid "surrender[s] himself to the whims of a bibliophile" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 98) just as Sal follows Dean, a man who "spent a third of his time in the poolhall, a third in jail, and a third in the public library" (Kerouac 1957: 6). Joop is that third part of Dean – savant and autodidact. Like Dean, Joop makes profound mystical and philosophical insights that aid Wiid on his journey of self-discovery.

Joop and Dean both share a voracious appetite for food and life. While Kerouac's character is recognised primarily as a sexual libertine, Joop is an epicurean who is constantly presenting Wiid with tempting victuals. Joop's constant counsel to Wiid, "Voyager, sail thou forth to seek and find" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 120), resonates with Dean's lust for life and adventure. Joop tells Wiid that he turns "librarianship in to a rare adventure" (52), suggesting a reciprocal process of discovery similar to that between Sal and Dean (Kerouac 1957: 5). Joop enjoys leading Wiid into subject matter that diverges from his specific intent and is often provocative. One such example is when he "set[s] a trap" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 98) for Wiid, by placing an open book in his lap and telling him to keep his eyes closed until he hears an "outcry" in Keith Jarret's Cologne Concert.⁷³ Wiid opens his eyes, expecting to see a nineteenth-century floor mosaic in the Cologne Cathedral, but instead Joop has presented him with an ancient Roman mosaic of the god of wine, Dionysus. This mosaic was discovered by accident beneath the Cathedral in 1941 during the building of a bomb shelter. Joop's "trap" is a test of Wiid's prudery (and perhaps his sexual leanings) as Wiid describes the mosaic as "[q]uite saucy, the young god stark naked, supported by an equally naked lad, drunk against a slope, the two tippers, with an urn rolling away in front of their feet" (101). This depiction of homoerotic, drunken revelry is clearly meant to provoke a response as Wiid tries not to show his shock in order to avoid another "tirade" from Joop about the inability of "Afrikaners to surrender to the intoxication of life" (101). Sanders presciently sees the significance of the

⁷² See Sanders (2009).

⁷³ Keith Jarret is both a classical and jazz pianist who interestingly attests to the "Dionysian nature of jazz by stating that a jazz player needs to disappear into the music" (Giaccardi 2006: 149).

revelation of this image of homosexual love as subtly indicative of Wiid's own unspoken and unconfessed affection for Joop. Sanders writes: "Wiid's placement of the pages on the *amicus moriendi* [...] after he recalls Buytendagh showing him a picture of a mosaic of Dionysus [...] suggests that when he is thinking about X and Y he is also thinking about the younger librarian and himself" (2009: 118).

According to Sanders, Joop "feeds and stimulates Wiid's *Wißtrieb*, the drive to knowledge that impels him to reconstruct X and Y's conversation" (118). In this, he also offers creative advice that matches his guide for living: "Intoxication plus tradition plus precision plus the urge to completion is according to Joop the essence of art. But he's not serious. He says need plus seat plus push plus pinch is therefore also art. Uncontrolled, the man" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 100). This approach to writing recalls the lessons learnt by Kerouac's protagonist, who tells Dean all he knows is that "you've got to stick to it with the energy of a benny [Benedrine] addict" (1957: 5). Sal also learns, when Dean urges him to "make it fast" because "the girls won't wait," to "get it all down and without modified restraints and all hung-up on like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears" (5). Joop, like Dean, embodies Dionysiac chaotic and ecstatic energy that "threatens the integrity of every formal structure" and stands in opposition to Apollonian "order, clarity, proportion and formal harmony" (Spinks 2003: 20). The Dionysian celebrates sexuality, unconscious desire, intoxication and a complete forgetting of the self. It is, according to Nietzsche, an essential transformative power. Joop is Wiid's Dionysian 'guardian angel,' a distant relative, according to Van Niekerk, of the Machiavellian Treppie in *Triomf* (Anon. 2006: 15), whom Burger refers to as a Dionysian devil (2000). Like Zarathustra, Joop preaches "faithfulness to the earth" and distrust of "extra-terrestrial hopes" (Nietzsche 2006 [1885]: 8). Joop castigates Afrikaners for their "profound blindness to the earth": they "would rather adore [...] a heaven full of Pierneef trees and face-brick churches than assume responsibility for the appearance of our direct environment" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 40). As Wiid's guide, Joop not only stimulates 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. Wiid, who has not "savoured much pleasure in [his] life" (7), through Joop discovers and savours sweet wines, sultanas, music, poetry and eventually, love. Joop's gift of raisins, "[s]o sweet and crackling," leave Wiid "quite emotionally undone" (59). Following his Dionysian guide, the teetotaling Wiid forsakes the medical prescription of "nil per mouth" and takes Joop's advice of "*in vino veritas*" (8). Wiid defies the dietary restrictions imposed by Western medicine and instead

reveals his gradual conversion to Joop's Dionysian sensibility. Contrary to the hospital's almost ascetic code of sensory and gastronomical restraint, Nietzsche sees intoxication and "multiplication of the senses" as the greatest moral good, and "desensualization" of life as "illness [...], hypocrisy or self-deception" (1968: 434).

In addition, and most importantly, it is through Joop that Wiid discovers friendship and love. When Wiid accidentally lets slip his terminal status, Joop shows compassion by placing a hand on Wiid's shoulder (Van Niekerk 2006b: 90). Sanders presciently reads this gesture of intimacy as "telling us what, presumably, [Wiid] does not tell Joop: that he loves him" (2009: 118). I would add that at this stage in the novel Wiid is surprised by his own reaction and not yet ready to acknowledge his feelings. Joop's touch is a sign of his care for Wiid. It is an act of love, a caress. Zygmunt Bauman observes that the caress "visualizes what in love escapes vision, it lends itself to description the way love does not. In description, the caress stands for love" (1994: 92). Joop's touch leaves Wiid unable to "concentrate all that well any more" and forces him to leave the library and go home (Van Niekerk 2006b: 90). It is also clear that Wiid envisions a future with Joop (Sanders 2009: 118). In his table predicting the outcome of his surgery he assumes Joop will be waiting at home for him learning how to imitate the Janfredrick (Van Niekerk 2006b: 131). Wiid also unwittingly intimates a desire for a mate, someone to share his home and his heart, when he shares a dream of X's, claiming it as his own. In this dream X (and now Wiid) sees himself reflected in the eye of a kingfisher and then sees himself "multiplied a thousandfold" and "float[ing] up like winged seeds over water" (103). Joop, moved to tears by this, tells Wiid it is a "dream of yearning" (103). When Wiid questions "for what," Joop "look[ing] embarrassed" quotes a fragment from a Dutch poem, which in full and translated by Wiid is: "All birds have started building nests except you and me, why are we waiting?" (104). Wiid's deception and ignorance thus unwittingly lead to Joop's timorous proposition. His invitation must remain a gesture, an open invitation, for in Bauman's articulation ideal love, like the "caressing hand [...] remains open, never tightening into a grip, never 'getting hold of'; it touches without pressing, it moves obeying the shape of the caressed body ..." (1994: 92). Wiid finally reciprocates this invitation with equal openness at the end of the novel with his decision to invite Joop to dinner. Although Wiid imagines the details of the dinner and their conversation, the actual outcome of events remains endlessly open for the reader, as the novel ends instead with a prose poem dedicated to JSB (presumably Joop). Like Bauman's formula for the caress, the possibilities (or

impossibilities) of Wiid's friendship with Joop are dependent on how the reader responds to the "caress" of the text.

3.4.5 "I too have a story": Restoring Self and Others

Notwithstanding the inconclusiveness of this love affair, Joop is Wiid's ever-present provocateur, forcing Wiid to face the iniquity of a passionless life. It is this realisation that anticipates his personal and artistic transformation. Wiid can no longer remain a "neutral observer" and silent recorder of someone else's story (Van Niekerk 2006b: 20). Midway through his narrative Wiid admits to himself his vexation at his interlocutors for dominating the discourse, and his unspoken desire to interject, "Excuse me, I too have a story? I have a liver! Listen to me!" (76). Over the centuries the liver has become marginalised as a sacred and symbolic organ, in favour of the heart; however, in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, and later in Etruria, the liver was considered the seat of the soul (Reuben 2004: 1179). X and Y allude to the significance of the bowels as an instrument of divination (Van Niekerk 2006b: 24), but the oracular power of the liver is Wiid's belated personal contribution to the conversation. He imagines meeting X and Y on the way to the library and starting a conversation about an Etruscan bronze model of a liver found in Piacenza, Italy. In his glossary, Wiid notes that this was "probably a teaching model of Etruscan haruspices" (136). Although he does not mention Rykwert's *The Idea of a Town* (Y's favourite text) in this gloss, it is clearly Wiid's source. According to Rykwert the liver was the "seat of life" and a "mirror of the world" (1976: 51). It was also, as Wiid observes, a map of the "astrologer's sky [...] divided up into sixteen houses" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 91). The liver was thus a reflection of both the physical and metaphysical realms. Wiid's desire to cry out, "I have a liver! Listen to me!" can be read as his need to lay bare his soul, and tell his own story.

X and Y open Wiid to a "secret language" of compassion, care, a phenomenology of home, and the interconnectedness of all things that are food for his soul. When X and Y's belaboured breathing is eventually followed by silence, Wiid becomes filled with "deep unrest" in a ward that is now "barren" (114). He wants to call out, "wake up and feed me, speak your nourishing sentences to each other so that I can rejoice in you" (115).⁷⁴ Prior to

⁷⁴ These words bear a close resemblance to Zarathustra's in Part 4 ("The Ugliest Man") of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "Now I want to chew on their words for a long time, as on good kernels; my teeth will grind and grate them down until they flow like milk into my soul!" (2006 [1885]: 213). Zarathustra refers to the company

their falling silent, Wiid describes their words as a quasi-divine annunciation, a metaphorical womb for his poetic and spiritual nourishment, gestation and rebirth. Wiid declares, “I lay between them that night and let myself be filled. Not that I would call it an immaculate conception, but still. Did I deserve to inherit so much rich material without exertion?” (94). The womb is a symbol of the cosmic void where all life began and to which all life will return. It is a space for regeneration but also a tomb (Campbell 2004 [1949]: 12). In the interminable silence left by X and Y, Wiid feels as if he had “descended into a shaft” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 114); this shows parallels with Zarathustra’s descent into the “well of eternity” (Nietzsche 2006 [1885]: 224) and is not too dissimilar to the biblical story of Joseph who was thrown down a well by his brothers.⁷⁵ According to Campbell, the well, like Jesus in the tomb and Jonah in the whale, are all symbols of the worldwide womb (2004 [1949]: 83). In these myths, crossing the threshold is “a form of self-annihilation” through which the hero is born again (84).

Before Wiid can truly be reborn as an artist he must, metaphorically, enter the grave. He does this by becoming “*their silent boatman*” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 117), a Charon-like figure who imaginatively transports X and Y to their personalised afterlife. Wiid fills X and Y’s silence by continuing their conversation for them, allowing them to “[sing] *in unison each other’s swan song*” (117). He also transforms his sense of loss at their sudden disappearance into possibility – an opportunity to re-imagine a hereafter where the pair-bond remains intact, where together they weave an organic, “*perfect shelter [...] of nomads*” (117). Wiid’s mythology reveals his poetic interpretation of X and Y’s discourse on Etruscan religion and urban design, poetry, birds, nests and notions of space. Four words serve as the inspiration or starting point for Wiid’s mythology. In the dark he hears a “soft fluttering,” resonant of Psyche, the Greek goddess of the soul represented as a butterfly. “*Feather*, said one. *Stone*, said the other. *Breast*, the one, *Hand*, the other” (115). Wiid cannot determine whether these were “really their words” or his own, “[b]ecause in the end there was that evening only breath, and on the breath sometimes a vowel, perhaps an a, or a consonant” (115). Nevertheless, he states, “I must imagine a conclusion that is worthy of them” (115). (These four words become the “hinges” of his narrative.) Initially an irritation to him, X and Y become his esteemed “companions” (115). Although he has remained silent throughout the

of the wise interlocutors (representative of various qualities of the overman) he meets on his path: the two kings, the man in the swamp with leeches, the magician and the pope.

⁷⁵ In Genesis 49: 22 (NKJ) Joseph is called “a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall.”

night, Wiid, the loner, has discovered a deep intimacy with the ward-fellows who have paved the way for his own encounter with death and a new embrace of life and of companionship. As his heralds and guides, on a metaphysical journey, this conclusion is a tribute and paean to the life-sustaining and life-affirming images they revitalise in his imagination. Their seemingly garbled discourse is a gift that confers new meaning on Wiid's life, opening him up to new intimate relationships and a new sense of wellbeing. Concomitantly, his conclusion confers meaning and significance upon their lives, synthesising their worldviews – their “word and allusion mania” (35) – into a shared vision. The act of writing makes Wiid a necromancer who lifts the *lapis manalis* (stone to the underworld in Etruscan myth) and allows X and Y to “[waft] up out of the depths with [their] manic refrains” (116). Their last breaths become the divine *afflatus* that allows Wiid to compose a narrative – a dream of their final passage, bound in a nest. He imagines X beginning the conversation:

An inspired tower, round and round the flycatcher turns, moulds the gathered dust, her breast pressed against the wall, one could say her nest contains the palpitations of her heart, the true inscription of her grief. Here then our example of habitation, an equilibrium anchored in nothing but the wheeling of the shadows, in unison with the smack of rain on leaves, hollows repeating the rounding of the earth. (115–6)

Here the nest is presented as a personalised sanctuary, a living expression of the inseparability of love and loss. The above description echoes Jules Michelet's observations in *The Poetics of Space*, about how a sparrow's nest is moulded from the inside by the pressure of the bird's breast against the walls of mud and grass. Michelet describes a nest as the “bird's very person [...], I shall even say, its suffering” (in Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 100). Wiid's description of the nest as the mother bird's “*true inscription of grief*” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 115) calls to mind a childhood memory that returns to Wiid when X and Y are *in extremis*. He remembers how as a child he crept out of his sick bed to spy on his parents peering into a tree, talking in an “unfamiliar tone” and their bodies leaning forward strangely (109). That evening they tell him of their discovery of a nest containing two Burchell's Coucal chicks, but only years later do they reveal that the chicks were dead. Wiid's parents wanted to spare him a reminder of his lost sibling (their dead son); however, the image of his parents' grief (their bent bodies over the chicks' nest) remains embedded in Wiid's psyche. In imagining X and Y's passing, he is able to repair the broken bond with his twin, acknowledge his parents' concealed grief, and return to a myth of wholeness.

The nest, according to Bachelard, is the prototypical image of refuge and well-being – a “hospitable threshold” (1994 [1958]: 100). It is an “entire universe,” a “cosmic situation” (94). Paraphrasing Bachelard, Y notes that for Quasimodo, “*Notre Dame was egg, nest, home and heaven*” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 94). It is also a sign of “return” (Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 100). Bachelard observes that “[i]f we return to the old home as to a nest, it is because memories are dreams, because the home of other days has become a great image of lost intimacy” (100). If Wiid imagines X and Y’s final home as a nest, it implies death is a homecoming, a return to a happiness that was lost. Death is spiritually restorative and “nourishing” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 117).⁷⁶ Through dreaming of X and Y’s nest in the beyond, Wiid enables his own healing and regains confidence in the world. For Bachelard, in contemplating nests, dreaming of nests, “we place ourselves at the origin of confidence in the world, we receive a beginning of confidence, an urge toward cosmic confidence” (1994 [1958]: 103).

“[D]reaming of [X and Y’s] home beyond the Styx” is Wiid’s ‘trial run’ for writing his own homecoming in the hereafter. It is a sketch of a contingent, “earthly” and mundane eschatology, that “savors of soil” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 120), where X and Y can rest with “pony and pooch and nice cup of coffee” (117). This is not a “solar city or metropolis of radiant happiness” (117). Rather, Wiid has X state: “*The perfect shelter is that of nomads, must be like a wave, must arise from the water, the whole sea displayed in that arc; stars, dolphins, coral and glass, and after it’s broken, the sea, just like the language after the reading of a poem, must regain its former mystery*” (117). This last phrase self-consciously points to the elusiveness of Van Niekerk’s own poetic narrative. The comparison of the perfect shelter to a wave and to a poem, suggests that a narrative too may be a shelter, an itinerant home, like the arc of a wave revealing splendours that surface for a moment and then crash back into a sea of multiple possible meanings.

Finally, in Wiid’s conclusion, X suggests they “cross over” to a makeshift tent: a “*wicker hut, a capsized basket, tied underneath with switches of hood-thorn fastened to pegs securely hammered into the ground*” (120). Y can “lend [X] a hand” in securing the pegs (120). From their itinerant shelter X and Y see “[v]isible at night the Dioscuri, our oars suspended from their temple columns.” In keeping with the recurring significance of pair-bonds in the

⁷⁶ The idea of death as nourishing also appears in *Agaat* when Milla sardonically notes of her cannibalistic cows that “death itself [has] nutritional value” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 113).

narrative, Wiid ends X and Y's eschatological journey with an allusion to the twins of Greek and Roman myth, Castor and Pollux: Dioscuri in Greek, Gemini in Latin. Castor was mortal and Pollux immortal, but because Pollux could not bear to be separated from his twin he petitioned Zeus to allow him to share his immortality by alternating their stay between Olympus and the underworld. X and Y are Wiid's Dioscuri: his guardians, and a symbol of the interdependency of self and other, life and death.

3.4.6 Death: Creating Horizons

Earlier Wiid notes an online article Joop directed him to ("History of Space Perceptions 111" by Jean Robert) which highlights the centrality of death as the ultimate delineator of meaning (Van Niekerk 2006b: 78). The significance of this profound, but somewhat bizarre, existential message, is rendered less prominent by appearing in a footnote:

[T]he purpose of the piles of stones on graves around the ancient cities was to direct attention to the death that awaits everybody in the long run. Without that, apparently, one does indeed not know one's place. And that is what X and Y were going on about all the time, about establishing a place – sitting place, lying place, eating place, living place, city – in space with integrity. It must embrace the living and honour the dead. The word "discriminate" one hears mostly in relation to black people, or nowadays white men, women, disabled people, or homosexuals. For myself I've never thought that it's possible to discriminate against the dead, but perhaps X and Y had a point. If you disadvantage people on account of colour and suchlike you are harming yourself. So too when you exclude the dead from your thoughts and no longer commemorate them in material form. It is then actually your own mortality that you discriminate against. Makes me think of what Joop said about people who go to live on golfing estates: They can't tolerate the horizon and they play out the Via Dolorosa in eighteen holes. (78)

Robert observes that the very earliest topographic markers and delimitations of space were derived from grave stones and were used for marking the limits of a town or country. Tombs were also positioned on the horizon. The word horizon comes from Greek *horizeo*, meaning "I divide," and signifies the diving line between the "visible and the (still) invisible part of the landscape," by extension the known and unknown, "our world," and the world beyond, self and other (Robert 1999: 10). Therefore, the grave stones on the horizon, "the most conspicuous mark of the temporal limitation of life was also the origin of spatial boundaries" (12). Having read Robert's article, Wiid concludes that we can only occupy and live in space with "integrity" if it includes an acknowledgement of death. He takes this argument further

by suggesting that denying or “excluding” death equates to any other form of prejudice against otherness. The idea that discrimination against others is essentially “harmful” to the self corresponds with Derrida’s theory of *différance*: the idea that in a system of meaning based on oppositions or difference, a signifier always carries the ‘trace’ of its opposite – it only exists by virtue of its relation to its other, in a process of *différance*, of both differing and deferring. Consequently, to deny death is, ultimately, to deny life. This is implicit in Joop’s indictment of people who live their lives out in the false utopia of a golfing estate. Here utopia literally denotes a “no-place” in terms of the absence of horizon and a refusal to engage with alterity, where an insular existence is reduced to a meaningless repetition and circularity of the same 18 holes, on the path to death – an absurd time-loop narrative without any progression or hope of change.

Van Niekerk’s novel transcends issues of race, gender, sexual orientation or other physical markers of difference, by focusing on the universal other: death. Everyone, and indeed everything, comes to an end. Suddenly issues of identity politics seem insignificant in the face of the ultimate other. Wiid learns, through Joop’s guidance, that the denial or ‘exclusion’ of death is a denial of self. This footnote is attached to a comment by Y who (following Robert’s argument that grave stones were the original markers of place) determines that a failure to commemorate the dead results in “*no focus of community*” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 78). X and Y’s conversation offers a critique of the loss of a sense of place in modern Western society in comparison to pre-modern societies. Robert’s article (available on the internet)⁷⁷ ends by posing the question implicit in X and Y’s discourse: how may one recover a sense of place today when we no longer use death as a marker? In conclusion Robert points to, but does not elaborate on, “Jerry Brown’s idea that friendship can make us recover a sense of placeness” (1999: 12).⁷⁸ What Robert refers to as “Brown’s idea” about the relationship between friendship and place emerges from an interview with Ivan Illich and Carl Mitchem on Brown’s radio programme, in which the Austrian philosopher posits that “if community life exists at all today it is in some way the consequence of friendship cultivated by each one who initiates it” (Illich et al. 1997: 26). Illich notes that in the Greek and Roman tradition friendship was the supreme point of virtue, of a habitual flair for “doing the good thing.” This virtue was “fostered by what the Greeks called *politaea*, political life, community life” (24).

⁷⁷ This appears to be a conference paper; however, the details of the conference are not provided.

⁷⁸ Jerry Brown is the current governor of California (USA). From 1995 he hosted a radio talk-show titled *We the People* that featured famous thinkers and public figures and explored a wide range of social, political and spiritual issues.

Illich bemoans the fact that technology has “devastated the road from one to the other, to friendship” (18), by turning humans into “artefacts,” or instruments in a machine (8). In effect the metaphors of technology have changed the way we understand ourselves. Illich notes that modern science reduces eyesight to a kind of “camera obscura,” “part of a machinery,” while the ancient Greeks saw the gaze as “a way of sending out my psychopodia, my soul’s limbs, to touch your face and establish a relationship between the two of us. This relationship was called vision” (10). True friendship does not only involve this kind of mystical vision, but also an act of hospitality, like the kind extended by the Good Samaritan (actually a Palestinian, Illich tells us) who chooses to take the other, the destitute and beaten Jew, someone whom he ordinarily would not choose as a friend, across his threshold and make him his guest. It is a choice, states Illich: “I have to make my mind up whom I will take into my arms, to whom I will lose myself, whom I will treat as that vis-à-vis, that face into which I look, which I lovingly touch with my fingering gaze, from whom I accept being who I am as a gift” (26).

Wiid chooses Joop as his friend, his “vis-à-vis.” He rejects the anonymous medicalised care offered by the hospital to embrace the personal care he receives from his *amicus mortis* (Van Niekerk 2006b: 135). From X and Y, Wiid learns that the origin of the term “hospital” lies in the word “hospitality.” In “ancient times,” notes Wiid, “ordinary people were hosts and every householder invited in and supported for free a stranger, or a lost traveller or a sick person,” but this was eventually replaced by institutionalised care, initially a function of the Church and later taken over by the state (58). Wiid returns the hospitality offered him by Joop, with his gifts of sweet wines, sultanas, and the constant support offered in his quest, by finally forsaking a potentially life-extending operation and deciding to invite Joop for dinner. What would otherwise seem a moment of loss is in *Memorandum* presented as a moment of triumph and hope, reflecting Illich’s proclamation that if there is one word one can tie to hospitality, it is hope.

This reading counters Buxbaum’s argument that Wiid’s “connection to Joop is *too tenuous* for him to be Wiid’s “amicus mortice [*sic*] (2014: 135), or his guest” and that his “lack of discernment when it comes to whom he is willing to invite into his [final] ‘nest’ [in death] erases the possibility of discovering a ‘friend unto death’” (225). Instead, according to Buxbaum, his stronger affiliation is with text: he finds “hospitality in the library, in the books

which welcome him, and the memorandum he intends to craft” (225). Buxbaum, reading Derrida, argues that “the dilemma” of (impossible) unconditional hospitality “remains intact because while it is possible that the fact of Wiid’s impending death means that he has nothing to lose, and so is no longer bound to ‘law, duty, politics,’ his hospitality remains, because it must, in the realm of the imaginary” (225). For Buxbaum unconditional hospitality is only possible in Wiid’s imagined embrace of death where he becomes a host welcoming all strangers. While death or the realm of the imaginary may be the only space for (impossible) unconditional hospitality, I will read Wiid’s final invitation slightly differently and see Wiid’s yearning for human intimacy as equal to, and not less than, his *topophilia* and *librophilia*. Human connection and intimacy (even if only projected into an unseen future) are a model and prerequisite for his anthropomorphism of death’s embrace. The bond between Wiid and Joop is highlighted by his “entrusting” Joop with his “Passacaglia,” a prose poem that brings together into one the meaning of his life (and death). This is the most intimate confession of his soul, of his ultimate terror and joy, the idea for which was implanted by X’s question: “*To whom do you entrust the most beautiful dream of your life?*” (Van Niekerk 2006: 132).

3.4.7 (Dis)integration of Self in Dionysian Communion and Community

Wiid’s yearning for intimacy is also implicit in the symbolic significance of his imagined dinner: a sanguine communion of “spaghetti with a sauce of ripe tomatoes and a nice strong Cheddar grated over it. A French loaf perhaps. He’ll bring wine along if I know him” (122). This is exactly the setting Illich imagines for fostering friendship. According to Illich, friendship cannot be achieved through modern technological means of communication which destroy the “walls between inside and outside” (in Illich et al. 1997: 29). The hospitality of friendship requires a “door,” the crossing of a threshold, and “a table” and is achieved by “cultivating, when we get together around spaghetti and a glass of wine” (16). Wiid already assumes a level of familiarity with Joop in inviting him into his home, rather than the more impersonal space of a restaurant. Wiid’s *table d’hôte* is also suggestive of a Dionysian Eucharist. It shows a passionate engagement with flavours and, despite the vegetarian fare, is evocative of Dionysian blood sacrifice, with its succulent “ripe tomatoes,” evocative of human flesh and blood, recalling Dionysian rituals of *sparagmos* and *omophagia* (the “tearing apart” and “consumption of raw flesh”). The tomato, a member of the nightshade

family (*Solanaceae*) and closely related to the poisonous “Deadly Nightshade” (belladonna), is an appropriate sacrament to Wiid’s nocturnal literary and spiritual odyssey, a figurative dance with death. Nightshades are feared for their toxicity and hallucinatory effects, but in homeopathy their poison is also a cure, having therapeutic and soothing effects. The tomato is not only a “risky” plant because of its association with death, night and danger, but also because of its purported aphrodisiacal properties (Palmatier 2000: 370). In France it was referred to as the “love apple” (*pomme d’amour*) (221). The tomato ambivalently connotes Eros (creative life or sexual energy) and Thanatos (the death drive, or the urge to exceed the bounds of the ego). Wiid’s ripe tomato sauce is evocative of the interdependency of life, love, creativity and death in his own life. It is an appropriate sacrament to the forces of love and life that Wiid’s Dionysian Angel, Joop, has initiated him into. Consequently, it is fitting that this communion be shared with this epicurean and pleasure-loving friend and be a festival of erotic love, in Zygmunt Bauman’s sense, as a “relationship with alterity, with mystery, with the future” (1994: 93). This nightshade repast is thus proper sustenance for his dream voyage to the afterlife.

The blend of tomatoes and pasta also visually remembers the death of the newly born Dionysus, dismembered and boiled in a cauldron (Graves 1960: 103). Dionysus is described by Walter Otto as “god of the most blessed ecstasy and most enraptured love” (1965: 49) and his *orgia* (from *organ*, meaning “to be aroused” or “run riot” and *orge*, “intense passion”) of dancing, music, revelry and masquerades were typified by sexual liberation, nudity, the display of phallic symbols, homoeroticism and gender code-switching (a reflection of the god’s own gender ambiguity) (Evans 1988: 70–1). While Wiid’s dinner is hardly an *orgia*, he “throws caution to the wind” and creates a tantalising and erotic gastronomy that intimates a transgression of the boundaries of platonic love. This is evident in his phallic *French* loaf, and the gift of wine, brought by Wiid’s Dionysian Angel, Joop. The “green-fig preserve” for dessert (Van Niekerk 2006b: 122) is also associated with Dionysus, particularly in terms of its tumescence and as a symbol of fecundity and plenitude (Otto 1965: 158). The imagined conversation that ensues from this Dionysian gastronomy is illustrative of a fluid conception of male-male friendship as including passion, hysterical laughter and catharsis. Wiid’s vision of Joop’s spontaneous laughter, wild abandon, and his tender and familiar reference to him as “old jackal,” reveal a deeper affection than intimated earlier in the novel: “I can see it now. He’ll shake the papers [of my memorandum] in the air, mock my clumsy effort. Probably before long roll around on the carpet laughing, the old jackal, wipe tears from his eyes with

that filthy rag of a handkerchief” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 123). Joop is the ‘bullish’ Dionysus who Wiid imagines will “barge [into a discussion of his memorandum] on all fours” (122). Arthur Evans notes how the purpose of the Dionysian mysteries was to “step outside the limits of one’s ego” and give yourself “into the world” (Evans 1988: 184). Wiid’s eager anticipation of this Dionysian communion is the first step toward a sense of community. By embracing Joop, filthy handkerchief and all, he also embraces and accepts himself. The unsanitary handkerchief becomes a marker of social cohesion and positive contagion, recalling the scene in *Triomf* where Mol happily holds the greasy snot-laden hand of the “Chicken-Licken woman” (Van Niekerk 1999: 301). This is Wiid’s ultimate boon and the blessing at the end of his quest: to “lose” himself only to find himself, to reach out to an-other with a “fingering gaze” and in so doing recognise his being, in the other, as a gift.

Paradoxically, in anticipating inviting Joop into his home, and sharing a meal with him, Wiid experiences his own homecoming: a return to the city of his soul. Like Zarathustra, discovering oneself – finding meaning in one’s existence – is likened to an unexpected visit, a reconciliation with a long-lost friend: “It merely returns, it finally comes home to me – my own self and everything in it that has long been abroad and scattered among all things and accidents” (Nietzsche 2006 [1885]: 121). Wiid’s imagined supper carries the same associations of the Christian sacrament of Eucharist: spiritual restoration, reconciliation and renewal. The Eucharist is a symbolic re-enactment of Jesus’s last supper with his disciples – his friends – and anticipates his death on the cross, descent to the netherworld (according to the Catholic catechism), resurrection from the grave and ascension to heaven. Wiid’s imagined supper with his friend also anticipates his descent and encounter with Death, but unlike Jesus Wiid finds his home below, which is also the place of his apotheosis. As Wiid’s supper shares a closer kinship with Dionysian rites, it is appropriate that it end in an ecstatic vision, in this case, Wiid’s “Passacaglia.” In this final passage everything of his life, his home town, and of X and Y’s fragments returns anew, but crystallised into a prose poem dedicated to Joop, where Wiid’s hospitality crosses another threshold: the one between life and death. Wiid, following the image of his vagabond guide and companion, Joop, becomes a postmodern vagabond-*flâneur* in this daydream, tramping (or dancing) beyond the bounds of his insular existence.

Reading *Memorandum* in light of Illich’s views on hospitality opens up broader socio-political implications for re-imagining community. For Illich friendship – the intimacy

between two – is the foundation for community: A “practice of hospitality recovering threshold, table, patience, listening” generates “seedbeds for virtue and friendship,” but also “radiat[es] out for possible community, for rebirth of community.” However, Wiid does not forget the centrality of death. It is only through recognising and restoring death’s place that Wiid opens up to others, to the possibility of friendship.

We do not know how this communion between “friends unto death” turns out as Wiid’s last entry is at 7.15 when he declares, “Heaven’s morning breaks!” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 123). Dawn signals Wiid’s poetic illumination, titled “Passacaglia (for JSB)” (123). These are Joop’s initials as well as those of the famous composer, Johann Sebastian Bach. Wiid is indebted to Joop for his gift of a compact disc of Bach’s organ fugues, which he plays sixteen times before beginning to write his narrative. As both Bach and Joop served as an inspiration to Wiid, he dedicates his final prose passage to them.

3.5 Dionysian Daydreaming⁷⁹

Bach’s complex contrapuntal “Passacaglia” – Italian for “walking (passer) in a street (calle)” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 8) – is a perfect title for Wiid’s personal integration of X and Y’s polyphonic discourse into this final culminating moment of the novel: a dream vision in which Wiid traverses through his ideal city as a quasi-deity and descends through a portal to his own unconventional and urban Elysian Fields. Wiid does not mention the full title of Bach’s composition, “Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor,” although a footnote credits the title of the compact disc, “*Toccata & Fugue*” (8). A fugue (from Latin *fugere*, “to flee”) in psychological terms refers to a temporary dissociative state in which a person wanders off, often taking on a new identity (Barlow & Durand 2002: 176). Wiid’s psychic flight is comparable to what Jung describes in his reading of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* as a “Dionysian frenzy,” a “creative *dynamis*” in which the individual “dissolves into collective instincts and contents, a disruption of the secluded ego from the world” (Jung in Giaccardi 2006: 145). This flight from the ego into primordial oneness is the apotheosis of his Dionysian quest, where an ecstatic state leads to creative inspiration, exaltation of suffering, self-transformation and a Dionysian sublime.

⁷⁹ This section is an adaptation of an article submitted to *English in Africa* (see Rossmann 2014, in process).

The association with music evident in the title and the mellifluous poetic style of this last passage resonate with Giaccardi's observation that music "provides ways into pools of psychic energy [...], hence its special place in rituals for accessing the numinous – or rather its being a ritual in its own right" (149). Interestingly, Nietzsche saw Bach's music as heralding the "*gradual awakening of the Dionysiac spirit*" in modern times, which would then lead to Beethoven and Wagner" (2007 [1872]: 94). This prose poem is the equivalent of the Dionysian dithyramb (an ecstatic choral song and dance in honour of Dionysus). The musical title and urban setting of this poetic reverie recall Wiid's comment earlier in the novel that music can "transform the pavement into a secret footpath" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 25). Nietzsche saw the dithyramb as the origin of tragic art, and tragic art as a catalyst for cultural transformation. It compels change by "teaching us that humanity's potential to develop a vital and expansive existence is fundamentally linked to its capacity to endure suffering and terror" (Spinks 2003: 14). Nietzsche writes that in the Bacchic chorus all political and social hierarchies are overturned as "the gospel of 'universal harmony' rolls on from place to place" (2007 [1870]: 120). In this moment of "intoxicated clarity," "human beings express their membership of a higher, more ideal community" (120). More than this, they are "transformed by magic," and "that which had previously lived only in [their] imagination[s]" they experience viscerally (121). In this state "[m]an is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art" and "moves with the same ecstasy and sublimity with which, in dream, he once saw the gods walk" (121). This is Nietzsche's concept of the sublime, according to Paul Guyer: when Apollonian order serves and is driven by Dionysian revelation of the world in all its contradictions and complexity (Guyer 2012: 116).

Wiid's "Passacaglia" is the ingenious melding of X and Y's mania into his own vision and eschatology. Robert Schumann's praise of Bach's composition as "intertwined so ingeniously that one can never cease to be amazed" (David et al. 1998: 503) applies equally to this complex intertextual pastiche. In this dream scene the Dionysian artist "become[s] entirely one with the primordial unity, with its pain and contradiction, and he produces a copy of this primordial unity as music, which has been described elsewhere, quite rightly, as repetition of the world [...]; now under the influence of Apollonian dreaming this music becomes visible to him" (Nietzsche 2007 [1872]: 30).

Wiid's dream vision can be seen as a mystical encounter with the soul in terms of Plato's analogy of the soul as an inner city in the *Republic*. The "man of understanding," according

to Socrates, “will look at the city which is within him, and take heed that no disorder may occur in it” (Plato 1937: 591). For Socrates this perfect city “exists in idea only,” “in heaven,” and cannot be realised in this world, although one should “live after the manner of that [ideal] city” (592). Wiid’s city of the soul, however, is the inverse of Plato’s perfect, orderly *polis* that is only attainable in a hereafter. It is typically Dionysian – a place of chaos, danger, decay and flux. It is not a beautiful, otherworldly utopia, but a familiar geography: his hometown, Parow, an industrial town with “barbed wire” and “grey cement” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 124). Before he fell ill Wiid saw the inner city with its “[r]ampant informal trading,” as a “nest of iniquity” to be “root[ed] out” and “rationalised” to allow for the “free flow of labour, capital and information” (74, 76). In a place where he could not move on foot “with purposeful tread” (74) he now becomes a *flâneur*, who makes an art of strolling, a walking “kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness,” who reproduces the “multiplicity” and “flickering grace” of the city (Baudelaire 1995 [1863]: 9):

And every day that remains to me, I’ll slowly walk my city’s streets, and as I walk note all that lives, and guess at all things that nest in hedge, or perch in tree, with plan to start anew or move from dire need into what belongs to someone else. And I shall know to augur all that meets my path, the yellow rust on autumn leaves, the mellow light of soft April, discarded scraps of foil I’ll read, glistening shards of glass on tar, shadows shrouding brick defiles, stone fronts of suburban shopping malls. (Van Niekerk 2006b: 123–4)

In this passage Wiid has become the “augur” of a modern cityscape. The scene of “mellow light” and streets littered with “scraps of foil” and “glistening shards of glass on tar” (123) is reminiscent of the twilight setting of T.S. Eliot’s “Preludes”: “The burnt-out ends of smoky days. / And now a gusty shower wraps / The grimy scraps/ Of withered leaves about your feet / And newspapers from vacant lots” (1983 [1917]: 4–8). But where Eliot’s city suggests cultural decline and malaise, Wiid’s city is alive and full of mysteries waiting to be unveiled, even in its signs of decay, decline and danger: dying leaves, broken glass and litter. Even the *noir*-like “shadows shrouding brick defiles” he hopes to divine as much as the “mellow light of soft April” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 123). He has found a new fascination for the parts of his city he previously sought to “rationalise” (76), like the postmodern *flâneur* who “engage[s] in a kind of counter-tourism that involves a poetic confrontation with the ‘dark corners’ occupied by the dispossessed and marginal of a town or city” (Crawshaw & Urry 2000 [1997]: 179).

April, autumn in the southern hemisphere, usually signifies a state of demise.⁸⁰ But where demise is accompanied by disenchantment and dread in Eliot's vision, here it is forgiving and comforting and still allows time for Wiid to "re-enchant, contemplate, consider" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 124). For Baudelaire the *flâneur* is the embodiment of the artist-philosopher of modern life. He is a solitary figure "gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying," searching to capture the ambivalent and paradoxical experience of 'modernity,' to bring together past and present, to find "poetry within history" and "to distil the eternal from the transitory" (1995 [1863]: 12). Like Baudelaire's artist-hero, the "mainspring" of Wiid's "genius is *curiosity*" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 7). Wiid, whose cancer places him in proximity to death, and who has travelled with X and Y into the unknown (in terms of knowledge of the physical world and beyond), journeys further to the limits of the self, to an imaginative encounter with absolute alterity. "He is an 'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I'" (9). In Wiid's city-soul, death, or Mania, is found in the very midst of the hustle and bustle of life. She lies beneath the "manhole in the middle" and joins Wiid, along with X and Y, to "walk along across the squares and walkways, by termini of bus and taxi, the messy markets and the small cafes, the pawnshops and the dealers in second-hand wardrobes till the fall at last of twilight" (124). Pawnshops and second-hand dealers, with their typically shabby exteriors and interiors filled with other people's unwanted things, are given new prominence in Wiid's city – an analogue for his own celebration of literary 'upcycling': giving new meaning and value to a 'second-hand' discourse appropriated from X and Y. Wiid also 'upcycles' his "freely proliferating cancer," abject to the clinical Dr Snyman, but now transformed into sacred organ. Pathology and chaos are transformed into something productive and positive. (Cancer is a physiological mania in its uncontrolled division of abnormal cells in the body.) Wiid's cancer becomes a "treasure, a shining wound, that no moth or rust can destroy" (124). His cancerous liver is re-signified as radiance, plenitude and incorruptibility. The "shining wound," with its allusion to the Fisher King, becomes a grail symbol, a source of regeneration and illumination. His cancer is no longer a reminder of mortality, but a reminder of the eternal soul that recalls Jesus's instruction to store up "treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys" (Matthew 6: 20). Unlike Christ, the Dionysian man finds treasures in the human, temporal, earthly, profane and fallible. He

⁸⁰ Wiid's April cannot help but recall Eliot's opening lines from the "The Waste Land" : "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead lands, mixing / Memory and desire" (1983 [1922]: 1–3). As Eliot reverses the conceit for spring in the northern hemisphere, so Van Niekerk reverses the associations with autumn.

no longer sees his illness as terminal but as the gift that enables him to see the world open up interminably.

According to Baudelaire the perfect artist and *flâneur* is “always, spiritually” a convalescent, because “convalescence is like a return to childhood” (1995 [1863]: 7). For the child everything is new and he is “*drunk*” with life (8). Notably, Wiid’s research takes him back to memories of his childhood, the majority of which was spent in convalescence, during which time he honed his skills of observation and imitation. This aspect of his character makes him an uncanny incarnation of Baudelaire’s *flâneur* whose genius is “*childhood recovered*,” but equipped with adulthood’s “power of analysis which enables it to order the mass of raw material which it has involuntarily accumulated” (8). By utilising the seemingly arbitrary knowledge gathered from X and Y, Wiid’s maturity as an artist emerges in his creative summoning of the energy of the city, bringing together the conventional beauty of nature with the messy mayhem of urban detritus.

Wiid crystallises X and Y’s broad discourse into his personal cosmogony and eschatology. X’s and Y’s references to architecture and the mystical inauguration of Etruscan and Roman towns inform his transformation of the city in his own heart. It is not only a Dionysian dithyramb, but also an *apologia*, in the sense of being a public philosophical and literary explanation and defence of a certain perspective on life and way of being. His address to “Brethren mine” denotes an all-inclusive *spiritual* community (despite being seemingly androcentric), and suggests Wiid’s embrace of a more universal human kinship:

And I shall say, Brethren mine, were it given me to do it all again, I’d find you someone else as architect, o pardon me. I shall stand on the islands of my boulevards, I shall consecrate them, invoke the four directions of the wind, measure the mighty quarters of the sky, the lines of heaven where they intersect, *cardo*, *decumanus*, *decussis*. The sacred round I shall ambulate, erstwhile beautifier of park and playground, and in my heart unmake what seems inhospitable and out of place. I’ll re-enchanted, contemplate, consider, and at the entrance routes unyoke the white heifer of my left foot and the white bull of my right, lift the plough and transport it to the proper place for Parow to remain profane. The streams of traffic I shall conduct for two measures, three; the gases, wheels, the glow of heated steel, the lights and signs, the chimneys I shall sanctify, the barbed wire, the grey cement. (Van Niekerk 2006b: 124)

Wiid renounces his role as “architect” (of the city), a typically Apollonian art associated with precision, perfection, logic and order. Instead of “mak[ing] the crooked straight,” he becomes a Dionysian magician, who reconciles, not “nature, alienated, inimical, or subjugated” (as Nietzsche originally states), but the *city* and her “lost son, humankind” (Nietzsche 2007 [1872]: 18). This transformation of ordinary reality into the extraordinary resonates with Petrolle’s view that any self-transcendence, “utterly secular, even profane [is] magical” (2007: 115). In Wiid’s “Passacaglia” the city is depicted as alive and organic with its “streams of traffic,” “glow of heated steel” and “chimneys” evocative of breath. Wiid re-enchants, sanctifies and purifies, not to correct or transcend the industrialised, mundane, and chaotic world, but to keep Parow “profane.” Like the Dionysian overman he “becomes the artist of his own life (and world), even in the most ordinary things” (Nietzsche 1974 [1887]: 299). He is an “augur” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 123), in the Etruscan sense: a magician who invokes the powers of the numinous in the material world. Standing on the “islands of [his] boulevards” and “invok[ing] the four directions of the wind,” he re-enacts the sacred Etruscan rite of inaugurating a town. According to Rykwert, the augur transforms the ground he stands on into “the centre of the universe” (1976: 90). The cardinal points form a template for the squaring of the town according to the *cardo* and *decamanus*, defined in Wiid’s glossary as the “north-south & east-west lines first drawn to orient new dwelling place” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 136). The *decussis*, “a tablet with a cross drawn on it,” was meant to coincide with *cardo* or *decamanus* (Rykwert 1976: 50). As Wiid notes, reading Rykwert:

The words ‘contemplate’ and ‘consider’ take their origins from the Etruscan/Roman city foundation rituals during which the augurs determined the orientation of the new city by literally drawing on the ground the templum, the right-angled intersecting lines, *cardo* and *decamanus*, inside a circle symbolically representing the quarters of heaven. Lat. *Contemplari* thus means thinking the heavens together with the earth. (Van Niekerk 2006b: 32)

Through the augur’s words and touch he makes things come into being. Despite his abrogation of the title, “architect,” Wiid’s “contemplation” of the city shows how the Apollonian serves to give semblance to the Dionysian multiplicity and contingency of the city space. Wiid’s urban design, consisting of a circle within a square, is mandala-like: a symbol of the union of heaven and earth. Influenced by Eastern yoga, Jung saw the *mandala* as a symbol of spiritual realisation and the drawing, dancing or enacting of a *mandala* as a process of healing or integration; a “psychological circumambulation” or “movement in a

circle around oneself” (Jung in Coward 1985: 50). Notably, the mandala is also the prototype for the labyrinth. Finally, in his “Passacaglia” Wiid truly becomes the “labyrinthine man” who “looks into himself as into vast space” and affirms the “irregular” galaxies in himself and in the world (Nietzsche 194 [1882]: 322). The trepidation and dis-ease he felt at the beginning of the narrative in the labyrinth of the hospital (Van Niekerk 2006b: 31) are replaced with a sense of awe and wonder at the chaotic and labyrinthine nature of his home town. In making his city-soul a mandala, Wiid re-awakens and restores the sublime in the human and earthly, bringing the divine down to the ground. In Tibetan Buddhism the making or contemplation of a mandala is “a ritual of restoring the ideal principle of things to the earth,” of bringing “cosmic energies down into the mandala and reawaken[ing] immaculate principles within [the adept]” (Leeming 2010: 540). Unlike the Buddhist adept, Wiid does not seek to awaken “immaculate” or “ideal” principles, but rather finds beauty in imperfection. As Wiid “ambulates” the “sacred round” (124) he makes his city a topocosm and hospice – his soul communes with the *anima mundi* or world-soul. He does not alter or ‘sanitise’ this space but in a personal revaluation of values “unmakes” in his heart what is “inhospitable,” simultaneously reconciling his self/soul to itself and his soul with his community and world.

Circumambulating the labyrinth of his soul-city leads Wiid to “the manhole cover in the middle,” the portal to the deepest recesses of his soul where he is reconciled with his *daemons*: “the goddess of this writing, Mania” and X and Y (124). Death and Dionysian ‘inspired madness’ are brought together in the personification of Mania (Etruscan goddess of the underworld), and her emissaries X and Y with their “manic refrains” (116). Van Niekerk inverts Judeo-Christian dualism and makes Wiid’s “going under” his apotheosis. This is not an endpoint, but a return to his own self as “creator,” “form-giver” and “spectator-divinity” imbuing fragment and chaos with meaning (Nietzsche 1966: 225). This is the Dionysian sublime: the self opened up to “primordial unity,” the sense of “belonging to a higher community”; man “feels himself to be a god, he himself now moves in such ecstasy and sublimity as once he saw the gods move in his dreams. Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art” (Nietzsche 2007 [1870]: 121). Like Nietzsche’s Dionysian man, the man of “tragic knowledge” who faces the “terrifying and questionable character of existence” (1968: 452), Wiid’s voice “echoes out of the abyss of being” (Nietzsche 2007 [1872]: 30), but turns terror into joy. His “final home” is in the “darkness of the shaft,” a symbol of the *omphalos* or world navel, where he will “[whisper] this sad city” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 124).

But this melancholy contemplation and pathos for the city is immediately followed by a jubilant exclamation:

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. (124)

This is Wiid's gift to Joop (and the reader, with whom Wiid has constantly engaged): the restoration of death as the affirmation of life. Death creates a horizon, a limit to be overreached. Paradoxically, in heralding the "temporal limitation of life" and "origin of spatial boundaries" (Robert 1999: 12), he opens himself up to the world boundlessly. He does not seek an 'invisible' hereafter, but rather finds wonder in the world as it is. His descent into the earth at twilight echoes Zarathustra's desire to die with his "spirit and virtue [glowing], like a sunset around the earth," to die so that one may "love the earth more"; "to become earth again, so that I may have peace in the one who bore me" (Nietzsche 2006 [1885]: 55). Death is a return to the origin of life. As for X and Y, death is a nest, an archetypal image of refuge and cosmic homecoming and hospitality (Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 94, 100). It is also an image of intimacy lost, but restored and regained (100). This is the consummate death Zarathustra extols that is "a goad and a promise to the living" (Nietzsche 2006 [1885]: 53): an invitation. Wiid stands as Death's host, welcoming the stranger. Death offers unconditional hospitality, in the Derridean sense, as it knows no boundaries and no master; it is all and it is nothing.

The ordinary material of Wiid's everyday life becomes the inspiration for his imagined afterlife. Mimosa, the title of his apartment block, becomes his "final home," but with renewed significance. The Mimosa tree, also known as Silver Wattle, is an exotic acacia (*acacia dealbata*, native to Australia), common in South Africa. In Egyptian myth the acacia was the tree of Osiris, the paradoxical god of darkness and light, death and rebirth (Budge 1999 [1960]: 177, 293). In a number of world myths it is believed that the souls of the dead animate trees (Frazer 1993: 115). In this way Mimosa becomes a symbol of the eternal soul. Wiid's Mimosa, as a metaphor for his soul, also invokes associations with *Mimosa pudica*, the mimosa flower – modest mimosa, the sensitive plant, or sleepy plant. Mimosa derives its name from the Greek *mimos*, to mimic, because of its imitation of sentient life by folding in gently when touched. Its sensitivity and imitative capacity make it a fitting analogue for the

mimetic function of the artist as reflector of reality. Mimosa is also associated with concealed love, prophetic dreams and immortality. Wiid's Mimosa recalls Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, "The Sensitive Plant" (1820), an anthropomorphism of the "companionless Sensitive Plant" who dies too young, "panting with bliss" and "with love's sweet want" (2002 [1820]: 9, 11). While there is no promise of immortality for the plant, Shelley concludes that "For love, and beauty, and delight, / There is no death nor change: their might / Exceeds our organs – which endure / No light, being themselves obscure" (134–7). Shelley offers no promise of heavenly transcendence to counter the forces of death and decline, but his "modest creed" is that love and beauty may be preserved through the artist's imagination. This is the antidote to death Wiid (and Van Niekerk) offer: a lie. We "*need lies*," according to Nietzsche, to "conquer" nihilism and "inspire confidence" in life while facing the reality of absolute negation (1968: 451). This is the artist's "tremendous" task, to become a supreme liar – an artificer and redeemer, "will[ing], transfigur[ing], deify[ing]" suffering, turning it into a "form of delight" (451, 453).

Wiid's Mimosa (his nest), like X and Y's cosmic nest, is an evocation of his "very person," even his "suffering" (Michelet in Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 100). In welcoming the "stranger," and more specifically, "a lonely tramp," to his nest "already prepared for him," Wiid opens his heart to the other (Van Niekerk 2006b: 124). This is, as Buxbaum attests, a sign of unconditional hospitality, but it is not entirely undiscerning (2014: 225). The "chance" encounter with a "lonely tramp" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 124) is a clear reference to the barefooted and slovenly Joop. When Wiid contemplates inviting Joop to his apartment, he realises he needs to warn his hippie librarian to wear shoes in case his neighbours mistake him for a "tramp" (122). Wiid concludes his invitation with an assurance of eternal friendship, that he will "abide" with him "to the end" (124). In this promise Wiid offers himself (Buxbaum 2014: 225), but not because his attachment is a weakness, a sign, as Buxbaum suggests, of his "despairingly wishing for someone to console him in his death" (225). The exalted magnanimity of the last three sentences suggest that Death is not an occasion for despair or consolation but for celebration. This hospitality challenges the limits of love/intimacy, suggesting new possibilities beyond the limits of the known. This is the "*most beautiful dream of [Wiid's] life*" (Van Niekerk 2006b: 132), a dream of an (impossible) intimacy. He reaches out with his psychopodia, his soul's limbs, returning the hospitality of his friend unto death, and opening up his soul entirely to his vis-à-vis, the one in whose eyes he sees himself as being a gift (Illich in Brown et al. 1996: 26). At the same

time, Wiid imaginatively restores the symbolic structural lack in X and Y by replacing X's lost eyes (symbolically a gateway to the soul) with his soul's eye and Y's amputated legs with his psychopodia. In addition, X's blindness and Y's immobility are metaphors for Wiid's castration in the symbolic order. However, through writing his *own* story – engaging in his own symbolisation – Wiid replaces X's blindness with poetic vision and Y's immobility with narrative progression.

Wiid's anticipated invitation of Joop into his home, his imagined Dionysian communion with Joop, and his invitation to an eternal companionship suggest that, above all else, this is a story of love. Admittedly, this is not a typical romance, rather it is a story of falling in love with the world, with life, with the universe within oneself, and with alterity.⁸¹ It is through *mimesis* and metaphor that the writer (and reader) experience alterity, the “sensation of being an/other self, or being in an/other place, or in an/other time” (Petrolle 2007: 115–6). This encounter with alterity is taken to the extreme in *Memorandum*, where Wiid's journey ends in an embrace of the absolute Other: death. If love is the opening up of oneself to an/other, then writing and reading is also an act of love: the journey of a solitary soul in a constant wayfaring that leads to endless encounters with otherness. Bachelard marvels at the capacity of the poetic image to “react on other minds and in other hearts, despite all the barriers of common sense, all the disciplined schools of thought, content in their immobility” (1994 [1958]: xviii–xix). X and Y's discourse, and by extension Van Niekerk's novel, are proof of the dynamic and contagious effect of the poetic image. Bachelard attests to the “transsubjectivity” (xix) of the image, its ability to “communicate poetically from soul to soul” (17). The more Wiid writes, the more he comes to realise that “space is a [...] holy medium, and how it is filled is [...] a *barometer*, yes believe it or not, *of love*” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 94). It is poetic language that imbues space with meaning. Poetry is, after all, according to Bachelard a “phenomenology of the soul” (1994 [1958]: xx).

Through writing Wiid re-creates and restores himself, his world, and his connection with others (with X and Y, Joop, and the reader). In Bachelard's more recent text, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos*, he observes that “*written love* [...] is going out of fashion, but the benefits remain. There are still souls for whom love is the contact of

⁸¹ Van Niekerk admits that a friend of hers “wat altyd weet waaroor ek skryf voor ek dit self weet, het gesê [*Memorandum*] is 'n liefdesverhaal” (who always knows what I am writing about before I know it myself, said [*Memorandum*] is a love story) (Anon. 2006: 14).

two poeties, the fusion of two reveries” (1971 [1960]: 7). This definition of love as a contact or fusion of reveries – perhaps, rather, a momentary collision or organic interweaving – corresponds to the musical metaphor of “Passacaglia,” which consists of the interweaving of X and Y’s wide-ranging intertextual reveries with Wiid’s own, and Joop’s. Finally, the reader interweaves her own reverie with Van Niekerk’s, and engages with the polyamorous reverie of other readers, where, like counterpoint, themes may collide, diverge, dissolve and restore. Love, like Van Niekerk’s open and undecidable text, “is never finished expressing itself, and it expresses itself better the more poetically it is dreamed” (8). Like a “Passacaglia,” a constant variation on a theme, or like the organic nature of poetic reverie, Van Niekerk’s novel calls the reader to participate in the reverie. Perhaps Bachelard is correct in positing that sometimes “when we believe we are studying something, we are only being receptive to a kind of day-dreaming” (Bachelard 1994 [1958]: xxxviii). For Bachelard, writing is active reverie: the writer lives “a daydream that is awake, but above all, his daydream remains in the world, facing worldly things” (84). Wiid is the student-scholar become artist. His quest undoes the seeming divisions between art and science, and by extension creative writing and literary criticism. Bearing in mind the economic pressures on the humanities, Petrolle – an academic, creative writer and literary scholar – notes that “scholarship” tries to “maintain its legitimacy by being as ‘professional’ as possible, as distanced from the nonrational as possible, [...a]s little like dream, or art” (2007: 126). However, Wiid’s journey dissolves these boundaries and resonates with Petrolle’s supposition that, “[i]f we could credit art with knowledge-making value, we could probably also restore to scholarship its elements of spiritual quest and meaningful play” (126).

Wiid’s poetic reverie not only makes self-reflexive comments on the act of reading and writing, but also raises broader socio-political issues about the relationship between self and other, the idea of ‘community.’ Wiid’s gesture of hospitality, like Mol’s in *Triomf*, suggests that genuine hospitality requires an affinity with alterity: in Wiid’s case Death (in the form of Mania). Wiid’s journey implies that community begins with friendship, a personal (face-to-face) gesture of kindness. In this sense, friendship is transgressive, as it involves reaching out to the other across the threshold. It does not seek to subsume difference into sameness – to make the other common, neither is it something to be feared, but rather it becomes a gift, something enchanting, and with which one can enchant the world. Wiid reminds us too that community is an inner universe – an encounter with the expansiveness of one’s own soul –

which in its growing abundance seeks to reach out far beyond local or national boundaries to the cosmos.

At a certain point Wiid describes X and Y 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. (Van Niekerk 2006b: 94–6)

This is a universe of infinite wonder, where the microcosm – a soul, a home, a town – can be a reflection of cosmic beauty. Wiid’s dream vision of his home town, Parow, reveals the transformative power of the poetic image to create worlds. Van Niekerk presents “the world of a soul” who, through combining knowledge with poetic imagination, discovers and creates the world “where it would like to live and where it deserves to live” (Bachelard 1971 [1960]: 15). Bachelard, echoing the spirit of Nietzsche’s Dionysian, reminds us that “[p]oets lead us into cosmoses which are being endlessly renewed” (23). Art and fiction can create imagined communities, or at least plant the germ of cultural renewal by re-enchanting reality with the “non-I,” creating horizons beyond the gated communities of our minds. Wiid’s invitation to the stranger extends not only to Joop, but to each reader who participates in the writer’s reverie.

Conclusion

Wat ek will doen [... is om die leser] te frustreer en in 'n baan te sit vol terugvouings en vlakverskuiwings en veral 'n slot [te skryf] wat vasgedraai is in die bek van die begin sodat hy nooit uit die labirint kan loskom nie. Hy moet dink hy lees 'n storie terwyl hy eintlik besig is met iets anders, met 'n soort ontdekking van ongekaarte moontlikhede van die self in taal. Dit is wat ek probeer doen as ek skryf, ten minste.

What I want to do [...is to] frustrate [the reader] and to put him on a course full of flashbacks and surface-shiftings and especially [to write] a conclusion that is entangled in the mouth of the beginning so that he can never be released from the labyrinth. He must think he is reading a story while he is actually busy with something else, with a kind of discovery of the unmapped possibilities of the self in language. That is what I try to do when I write, at least.

(Marlene van Niekerk in Burger 2009b: 155)

It seems an imposition to the spirit of Van Niekerk's writing to present a conclusion to this thesis. Van Niekerk's description of her own writing as an *ouroboros*, with the end entangled in the "mouth" of the beginning, and as a labyrinth, clearly expresses her urge to lock the reader in an eternal return – an endless quest of meaning-making. In the interview with Burger from which this epigraph is taken, Van Niekerk explains that although she is well-known for creating a strong plot or story-line, the story is merely an "allure" to seduce the reader into "something else": a journey of self-discovery, of "unmapped possibilities," through language (2009b: 155).

Van Niekerk's narrative quests are a process of endless questioning. She achieves this by bringing antagonisms into dynamic exchange: self/other, matter/spirit, art/science, life/death. *Poiesis* occurs through this negative dialectic. The term "negative dialectic" is properly claimed by the cultural critic Theodor Adorno, who critically engages with and extends Nietzsche's thought. There are undeniable affinities between Adorno's and Nietzsche's views on dialectic. In *The Will to Power*, under the heading "An Epistemological Starting Point," Nietzsche argues for a "[p]rofound aversion to reposing once and for all in any one total view of the world. Fascination of the opposing point of view: refusal to be deprived of the stimulus of the enigmatic" (1968: 262). Dialectical thinking bears a moral imperative. It implies what Nietzsche refers to as an "intellectual conscience" (1974 [1887]: 76). In Nietzsche's view what is truly "*contemptible*" is "to stand in the midst of this *rerum concordia discors*

[discordant concord of things] and of this whole marvellous uncertainty and rich ambiguity of existence *without questioning*” (76–7).

In their comprehensive and penetrating critique of Van Niekerk’s play, *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W* (2010b), Leon de Kock and Annel Pieterse, borrowing a phrase from Adorno, state that Van Niekerk “seeks to [...] *embody* contradictions” in her work (2012: 72). According to Adorno, the successful work of art “is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure” (Adorno in De Kock & Pieterse: 72). This quotation, with its musical metaphor, can be applied equally to *Memorandum* with its allusions to the atonal music of jazz musician Keith Jarrett and the contrapuntal compositions of Bach; however, it is also relevant to Van Niekerk’s first two novels. For Adorno, “contradictoriness is a category of reflection” (1977 [1966]: 144). By drawing attention to antinomies, dialectical thinking has “a fragile, transformative horizon, namely, a society that would no longer be riven with fundamental antagonisms” (Zuidervaart 2011: n.p.). Despite this utopian ideal, Adorno speaks of negative dialectics as a “logic of disintegration” (1977 [1966]: 145) and extols experimental writing that disrupts mimesis – that does not simply reflect reality, but fragments it. Such art highlights fundamental antagonisms, thereby offering a critique of the dehumanising effects of modern, capitalist society, and the totalitarian tendencies of Enlightenment thinking.

All three of the novels under scrutiny co-opt the reader in the quest/ioning and critique of social and metaphysical reality. Van Niekerk achieves this quest/ioning through her play with antinomies in the text, maintaining opposing ideas in an open dialectic, without resolution. Even *Triomf*, which is undoubtedly the most linear in structure, avoids narrative closure. The two main characters are left staring at the constellation of Orion, but the significance of this gaze is ambivalent. It signals either the ‘trashing’ of Mol’s redemptive cosmology, “Man of Stars,” down the overflow pipe, or, in Treppie’s eyes, it is simultaneously a grounding of the metaphysical and an attempt to move beyond the insularity of a white cultural and racial homogeneity – the intimation of a desire to look beyond the horizon of their prefab wall.

Quest and horizon are inextricably linked. One could describe the quest as a search for the ever elusive horizon. As already noted and explicated in Chapter 3, the word horizon in its Greek origin (*horizeo*, “I divide”) signifies division between the known and the unknown,

self and other, sameness and alterity. Unlike the medieval Arthurian legends, where the quest was associated with a definite and concrete outcome or endpoint – a grail, a radiant illumination – the outcome of Van Niekerk’s quest/ion is always an encounter with the threshold. Commenting on what she perceives as the ideal ending, Van Niekerk insists on “n Weiering van sluiting, of dan wel sluiting maar altyd teen die horizon van die vitale ekses van Andersheid” (a refusal of closure, or indeed closure but always against the horizon of the vital excess of Otherness) (Burger 2009b: 156).

Agaat presents the most aporetic ending of Van Niekerk’s three novels, with multiple threshold images. The fragment from Nis Pietersen’s poem simultaneously inspires and frustrates revelation and the promise of creative activity: “Blaes blaest – blaes op – fanfarer / til natten åbenbarer...” (Blow wind – rise up – fanfare / until night reveals...) (Van Niekerk 2006a: 692). The Ram’s-horn-*Wunderhorn* (the promise of creative and cultural renewal) rests dormant on a windowsill. Meanwhile the “frozen interval” leaves the reader with Jakkie suspended on the threshold between consciousness and dream-world as Jakkie closes his eyes to sleep, in an imaginative limbo. Frame narrator and reader are “frozen” in an interstitial space, mid-flight between South Africa and Canada, the ideological poles of South and North. The reader is left waiting in suspense with only Jakkie’s suggestions of divine *afflatus*. In the end Jakkie offers no song or symphony. However, before he closes his eyes his final thoughts are “[p]lectrum and harp” (692), suggesting the possibility of creative activity, albeit “frozen” and forestalled. In this way, *Agaat*’s ending is a prelude to *Memorandum*. Jakkie’s fantasies of nocturnal revelation, musical composition and exercising the creative arts are realised in *Memorandum*, and crystallised in the final prose poem of the novel, “Passacaglia.”

In *Triomf* the horizon or the “excess of Otherness” at the end of the novel remains an elusive beyond; it is only hinted at in Treppie and Mol’s star-gazing. In *Agaat* the horizon – the boundary that invites creative and cultural re-invigoration – glimmers within reach. But it may also be a mirage, a mere phantasm, signalled by Jakkie’s constant reference to “fantasy” and the fact that the novel closes with him falling asleep. However, this aporia, Jakkie’s failure to provide “an alternative reply,” places the onus on the reader. The unsettling effect of the negative dialectic stirs the “intellectual conscience” of the reader, who continues to grapple with the unresolved antagonisms in the novel, and the constant doubt introduced by the frame narrative.

Finally, in *Memorandum*, the Other is immanent and anthropomorphised as the goddess, Mania. Alterity and the boundary are figured as stimulants for creativity and the *poiesis* of the self. The novel ends with the protagonist on the threshold of absolute alterity. He is the stranger who becomes death's host. His gesture of hospitality suggests that unconditional hospitality requires the (im)possibility of constantly occupying the threshold: the simultaneity of (dis)integration, of self-dissolution and re-creation. Wiid is paradoxically both host and stranger/vagabond/*flâneur*, which serves as a potential model for the artist, and for art, as a constant process of re-creation. This is arguably Van Niekerk's most utopian novel, in the sense that Wiid's embrace of life in all its chaos – all is primordial Dionysian energy – leads him to the horizon of absence. Paradoxically, death's threshold is also a space of becoming, of partial revelation, but also of concealing, of remaining at the threshold of contingency and possibility.

Wiid (and Van Niekerk) do what only Dionysian artists can do in the face of the absolute threshold: they do a contrapuntal *danse macabre* over it. It is significant that Wiid's "Passacaglia" remains in the realm of dream. Unlike Jakkie's glimmering promise of a fantasy, Wiid actually composes a dream vision. However, it is not a final resolution, but merely part of a postscript, an endless polyphonic play at the threshold of consciousness, self, and other – a space of infinite (im)possibilities. Wiid's Dionysian communion and "Passacaglia" are expressions of the urge toward greater relationality, of a loosening of the boundaries between self and other, of losing the insular self to discover the relational self.

The extreme openness to alterity and to the unknown in *Memorandum* stands in contrast to the relatively minimal exposure to alterity in the ontologically closed world of *Triomf*. *Agaat* is situated between the two extremes of ontological openness found in *Memorandum* and *Triomf*. In Van Niekerk's second novel, the racial other looms largely in the figure of *Agaat*, and the meaningful encounter between self and other is strained and painful. *Agaat*, as racial other, serves as a guide to self-awakening, but it is a difficult, slow and assisted awakening. *Agaat* has to literally lift Milla's eyelids, while Milla, in almost total paralysis, battles to focus on *Agaat*. The physical difficulty parallels the psychological and ethical difficulty of truly *seeing* the other. Furthermore, relationships in *Triomf* and *Agaat* are primarily determined by kinship. Despite their 'familiarity,' these relationships are largely characterised by disconnection. In contradistinction, the tale of the loner, Wiid, becomes a tale of radical openness to alterity (X, Y, Joop, Mania, and a world of alternative

epistemologies and ontologies). There is a clear progression in Van Niekerk's novels from limited self-awareness and self-awakening in *Triomf*, to partial self-awareness and assisted-awakening in *Agaat*, and finally searching introspection and momentous self-awakening in *Memorandum*.

Awakening and awareness are achieved through Van Niekerk's art of constant questioning. Van Niekerk's dialectic is a creative process, a poetic thinking. Adorno's and Nietzsche's views on the revolutionary power of dialectical thinking resonate with Heidegger's concept of *poiesis* as a process of becoming, an emergence of being from one state to another, resulting in a reciprocal transformation of the artist in the production of art.

Van Niekerk's work keeps the reader shifting between poles of mordant self-criticism and passionate hope for self-transformation; of irrevocable antagonism between self and other, on the one hand, and reconciliation between the races, on the other; of austerity in the face of death and suffering, and of death as the ultimate possibility. This study of Van Niekerk's novels may, at times, tend toward the latter of the two poles: toward hope, reconciliation, and possibility. This seeming utopianism must exist alongside its antinomies, which I have foregrounded in the contending readings of the novels in discussion here. Van Niekerk's concern with "unmapped possibilities" (Burger 2009b: 155) comes to the fore in the oneiric and phantasmagorical elements of her writing. Dreams are the realm of latent possibilities.

Peter Thompson, explicating Adornian negative dialectics for the readers of *The Guardian*, makes an interesting observation about the link between negative dialectics' forward-moving and transformative potential and the materiality of dreams. He explains that the openness of the dialectic is the product of the ontological incompleteness of existence: there is "a hole in it where the whole should be" (Peter Thompson 2013: n.p.). This articulation resonates with the description of the Lacanian Real as a void, and shows an uncanny correspondence between Marxism and psychoanalysis. Thompson clarifies:

Where Marx talks about the objective material factors at work in history that condition our consciousness (being determines consciousness) even though we are not necessarily conscious of them, Freud argues that it is our objective unconscious being, of which we are equally unaware, that determines our conscious thoughts. The latent content of our dreams is therefore equated with the latent but as yet unrealised possibilities in human history. (2013: n.p.)

Negative dialectics “open up these as yet unrealised possibilities” for the individual and for society; it is the “contradiction between what is and what might be that allows us to overstep the boundaries with which we are constantly presented in order to create our endpoint, rather than simply sleepwalk towards it” (n.p.) Dialectical thinking undoes certainty and inevitability, and replaces it with contingency, even in the face of the absolute other. It opens up an abyss of abjection, suffering, death and disconnection but transforms it into an affirmative void – what Nietzsche calls the “stimulus of the enigmatic” (1968: 262).

In the face of human suffering, Van Niekerk’s texts are a reminder of the moral imperative to create a contingent endpoint, one that does not relativise or rationalise suffering, but also does not give up the quest/ion of constant play, endless circling through words and language to release strange, new possibilities.

One of these possibilities is an experience that only occurs at the point of liminality: *communitas*. In Victor Turner’s view, *communitas* is community in flux, on the threshold – a “moment in and out of time,” at the “edges of structure” (2002 [1969]: 372). Turner’s phrasing of *communitas* as “the ‘quick’ of interrelatedness” and a shared mystical experience that often occurs in rites of passage reverberates with the threshold moment, and final rite of passage (from life to death) at the end of *Memorandum*, and in *Agaat* with Milla’s dream of crossing to the afterlife, hand-in-hand with Agaat. At the end of *Triomf* there is the vaguest glimmer of an anticipated *communitas* in Treppie and Mol’s shared cosmic gaze, even though that gaze has ambivalent significance. However, unlike the endings of *Triomf* and *Agaat*, Wiid’s “Passacaglia,” despite being a dream vision, is grounded in material reality, in the local and particular – his home town, Parow. Furthermore, *Memorandum* breaks the bounds of the homogenous and private worlds of *Triomf* and *Grootmoedersdrift*, opening up the individual to a heterogeneous, public space: a modern, sprawling, urban marketplace (as opposed to Milla’s bucolic afterlife, and Mol’s distant, androcentric hereafter).

Through interweaving elements of the past (particularly, the mysticism of Etruscan town planning) Wiid’s Parow becomes a hub of “free proliferation” (his metaphor for his metastasised cancer). His “Passacaglia” is the apotheosis of his Dionysian quest where Wiid, at the brink of death and corporeal dissolution, experiences the abundant sensuousness of life. It is through a poetic re-collection of myth, metaphor and history that Wiid achieves a quasi-

mystical experience. In and through the work of art – the restoration and recreation of death – he restores and recreates himself, revealing interstices of art and life and the capacity of a Dionysian aethetisation to enable self and communal re-creation. This is community as *communitas* (flux, threshold, passage and interrelatedness) and as collective aesthetic (sense perception) experience.

A Dionysian spiritualisation of the senses, necessary for the transformation of the individual into creator and transfigurer of existence, is evident in Van Niekerk's rituals of human connection. Mundane acts of embodied existence take on greater spiritual significance: Pop and Mol's pedilavium, Mol and the Chicken Licken woman's positive contagion through touch, Milla and Agaat's Eucharistic last supper, the merciful touch of Agaat's moleskin, Joop's touch, and Wiid and Joop's Dionysian Eucharist. Simple acts, such as a touch, holding hands, and sharing a meal become sacramental. Even illuminations are grounded in bodily and sensory reality. Treppie's confession of the Benades' complicity with Afrikaner ideology and his consequent revelation of (short-lived) social harmony occurs while he is on the toilet. In *Agaat* Milla comes to realise her othering of Agaat through their Eucharist, in which she humbles herself as an offering of "baked bat" (Van Niekerk 2006a: 584). In *Memorandum* Wiid's experience of the afterlife is not abstract, but visceral – through *walking* and *seeing* and *touching* (with his soul) he brings things into being in an active, embodied contemplation. The illumination in Wiid's "Passacaglia" is not only an insight into his own soul and simultaneously the world-soul, but also the revelation of *poiesis*, the work of art in process. Art and artist come into being in the process of perceiving the world poetically and dialectically, echoing Benjamin's dialectical optic that sees the mundane as mystical and the mystical as mundane (1979: 237).

In comparison, Jakkie's aporetic illumination lacks 'embodiment.' However, it is the reference to "plectrum and harp" that summons the presencing of a body, a hand. The harp is a metaphor for the poet/artist's soul and its desire to be touched by inspiration. The reference to the Aeolian harp in the Prologue is a hint to the reader to attune one's ear to the music in the wind, the surprising combination of harmonic and dissonant chords produced by the wind harp. The windblown harp is a subtle, sensitive and dynamic instrument whose resonance depends on the climate – a fitting analogy for Van Niekerk's open texts, whose dissonant/harmonic 'music' responds to the meaning 'blown' through by the subjectivity of each reader. It is significant that the Ram's-horn-*Wunderhorn* is left where an Aeolian harp

would normally be situated – an open window – strangely equating the horn with divine *afflatus*, the sounding of which requires a body to breath life into it, with effort and technique (equitable with the effort and technique necessary for critical reading and creative process). When the Aeolian harp becomes “plectrum and harp” in the Epilogue, the significance alters, suggesting a call for active participation in the endless process of creating. With the untouched plectrum (and Ram’s-horn) Van Niekerk tempts the reader-writer to take up the act of creative composition, whether it be through narrative or critique.

The three novels under scrutiny reveal together a process of endless re-creation, of simultaneous (dis)integration of self, of (de)mythologising, of profane (partial, foreclosed and ambivalent) revealing and concealing, of (dis)enchantment with the world. Van Niekerk dismantles and gathers local and global histories, myths, philosophies, and literatures in an endless quest of re-creation. The open dialectic of Van Niekerk’s writing calls the reader-writer to participate in this quest, which carries a moral burden to think and live in contradictions, to avoid the “spurious harmony” of a Platonic dialectic that seeks resolution, to remain in *communitas*, on the threshold of an emergent being, oriented toward “vital excess.”

Underlying this explication of a dialectical method is the crux of Nietzsche’s philosophy: the “condition of life is error” (1974 [1887]: 177), and by extension incompleteness. As Van Niekerk’s prototypical artist, Wiid, realises: “art lies in the impediment” (Van Niekerk 2006b: 97). It is error – the gap in knowing and perceiving, the space between antinomies – that keeps the artist creating, the quester questioning. It is also this ‘error,’ the eternal return of the absent present, that is the space of Van Niekerk’s “unmapped possibilities” (Burger 2009b: 155). We must learn to love and cultivate error, Nietzsche says, for it is “the womb of knowing” (in Pearson 2006: 240). Van Niekerk’s writing is a challenge to every reader/writer and artist/critic to live and think poetically, which implies thinking on the threshold, and entering into an aesthetic *communitas*. In the context of Turner’s conception of *communitas*, reading becomes a rite of passage, a transformative experience. One is drawn into fluid community with the text. This is the strange love that Gaston Bachelard writes of – a contact of poetics (1971 [1960]: 7) between writer and reader, in which the active reader is co-opted into a process of creation. However, it is a bittersweet and vexed love, a celebration of the boundary, for in all three novels discussed here the writer-reader is the bearer of death and self-dissolution, but also, simultaneously, of life, re-integration and transformation.

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