

THE MEINTJES DIARIES: MIRROR AND REFLECTION

Johannes Meintjes was a prolific writer from a very young age. As a 17-year-old schoolboy he would write down his ideas and even entertained the dream of writing an autobiography provisionally entitled, *Vermoeide Spieël* [Exhausted Mirror]. But after years of writing, he gave up on the idea and notes in his Diary on 19 October 1960 that he would rather publish a shorter version of it called *Jeugjare* [Early Years], which could then also serve as the prologue to his Diary series.

He writes with ecstatic joy about his arrival at university and dreams of a future “in which everything now seems possible”. He dreams of his first exhibition, his own studio and his independence. “I feel as if I have stepped into a bright light, alone but undaunted, and with joy in my heart. And to capture this important moment in my life I have opened up a new black notebook, signed my name in it and written neatly at the top: Diary - 13 February 1941.”

Meintjes had thus decided at an early age to focus on documenting his life - in words and, as far as the paintings were concerned, in images. A characteristic feature of his artistic production is that he himself, both as writer and artist, is the focal point: on the page as much as on the canvas.

The definition of a diary as an “ego document”, meaning that the “I” is present both as author and as observer, is thus ideally suited to Meintjes.

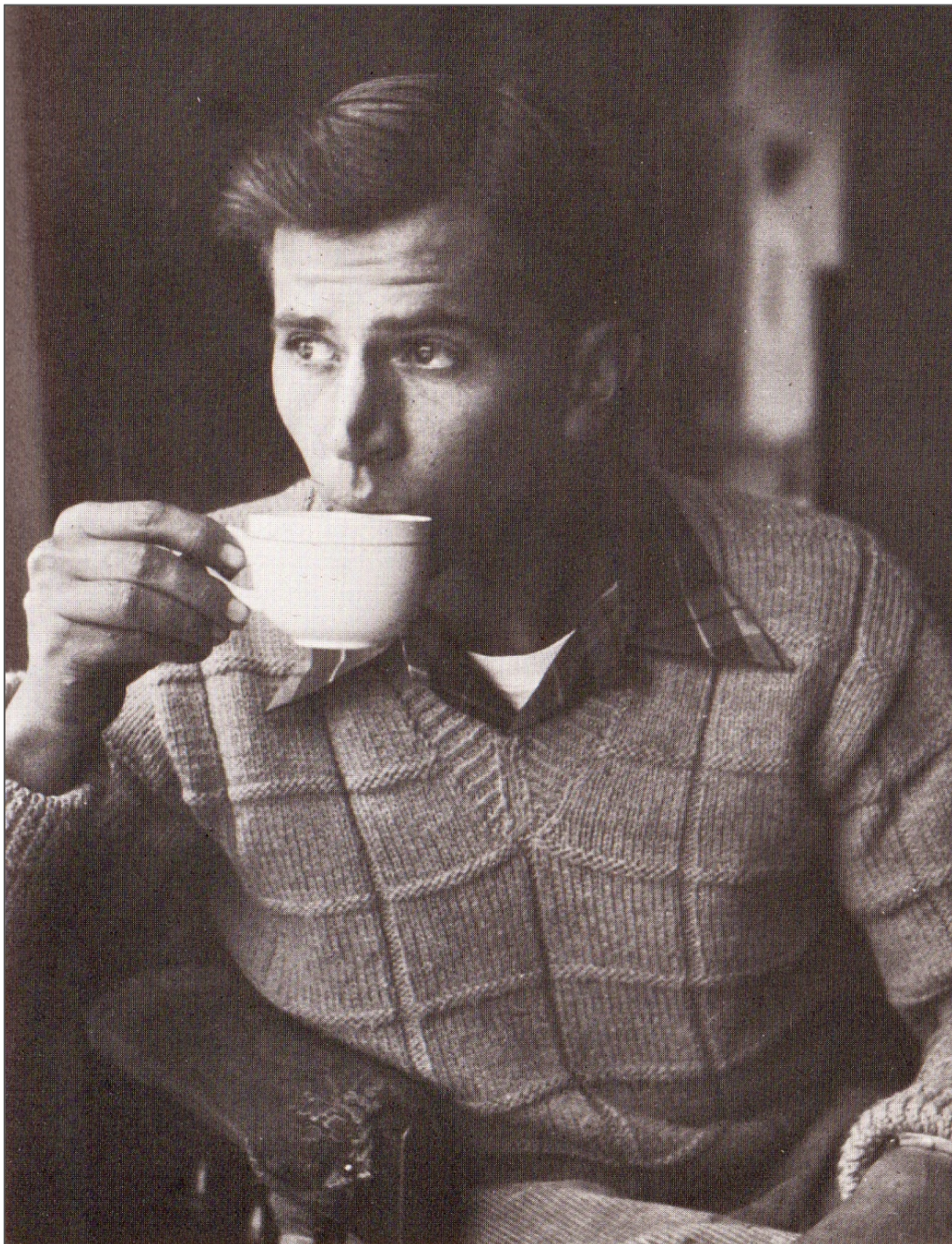
The ego document is an important primary source as the underlying assumption is that it represents a faithful account of the truth in its formal composition as well as in its presentation of the self. The value of keeping a diary is that it entails writing down ideas and observations almost in the moment. The regular or even daily entries create a “personal voice” - a characteristic tone within a particular circle with conspicuous motives. The recorded memories form an “indissoluble link” between the human being and the writer.

Meintjes, as a well-read man, was familiar with the power and interest of autobiographical information in diaries and memoirs.

It is interesting that Meintjes quotes from Arthur Koestler’s autobiography, *The Invisible Writing* (1952), and compares it to writing his Diary. One reason for such life writing, according to Koestler, is the urge to write things down, while another is the “Ecce Homo motive”, which signifies that the spotlight falls on the self (or the “I”). Both impulses draw on the same source: the need to share your

experiences with others and for others to *know* about you. It becomes an intimate form of communication to circumvent the isolation of the self.

Meintjes responds enthusiastically to Koestler's point: "This also applies 100% to the diary." Hennie Aucamp concurs. In the foreword to his published diary, *Gekaapte tyd* [Hijacked time] (1996), he writes: "The reality of [my] own existence has become more important to me than fiction..."



Meintjes in his study at Grootzeekoegat in 1952

(Photograph: M. Reyersbach)

The experiences become reality only once they have been articulated. The link between the writer and his text is private. If the text is intended for publication, then there are certain expectations in the presumed reader that the text must satisfy. As such, the diary in the public domain thus becomes a form of literature.

The expectation is that the published diary will be authentic. Undesirable editing and omissions undermine this authenticity and impoverishes the content. Hybridity is a distinctive feature of a diary. Some writers simply provide information. Other diaries will have achieved a level of polished finalisation that is in itself unmistakably literary. What excites one reader will bore another.

If the "I" is at the centre of the writing, then the diarist is constantly present as the writing, observing and observed subject. Ideas, impressions and personal actions become fixed in words. According to Aucamp, time and events are "hijacked" for the reader.

It is in the nature of diaries to be self-centred - egoism is the typical trait of the diarist. The recording of events constantly entails shifts of emphasis - a play of fictional and non-fictional moments. In Meintjes' case, the diary captures these fleeting moments of his immediate experience. As the writing subject he is the constant point of focus.

He had decided at an early stage that his diaries would be published - he even planned them as a series. In the act of writing he thus had an implied reader, and in publication an assumed reading public, in mind. What matters is whether faithfulness to the truth was the primary consideration in the contents. Meintjes responds to this (30 Junie 1961) that "the greatest significance of this Diary lies not in what is said but in what is concealed." With publication aimed at a broader reading public as the goal, he therefore resorted to literary strategies to disguise certain facts.

In several entries Meintjes explains how he feels about his comments in his Diaries. "The sorrows of life" are one reason for his writing. "Has there ever been a diarist who did not experience life's sorrows? Pain is the reason for the confession, pain and guilt mainly; happiness is seldom recorded" (10 September 1959). Five years later he notes: "I think only unhappy people write diaries. I wanted to stop writing mine, but as soon as the old sorrow wells up again, I feel an immediate need to write in the Diary" (13 November 1964).

In revising Diary 2 he writes on 9 April 1964: "In doing this final (?) revision I can't help wondering ... what for? Why? Will it ever see the light of day, and if it does, who will buy it? But seeing that I seldom start on task that I do not carry through, I shall complete it".

Some weeks before the completion of Diary 3 he writes with a kind of melancholy: "I must adopt a new attitude towards the Diary, unless I intend it in future to be simply a kind of daily notebook for my own edification - as in R's case. Appointments, self-analysis, jeremiads and speculation about this and that are becoming boring at this stage. But I am always scared to break the habit, because that will be the end of it. Perhaps my own life has become exhausted, outwardly at least; what sometimes goes on in my mind is another matter" (3 July 1962)

More than two years later Meintjes writes that after the completion of Part 42 of his Diary, he embarks on the new part with "hesitation ... with the feeling that I am not really interested in myself any longer and so might as well stop writing the *Diary*. And yet I start again" (13 August 1966).

Gradually writing the Diary entries becomes more of fulfilling a duty towards himself to complete a project he has undertaken. "I am now jotting down these entries over weekends, but more out of a sense of duty than desire and am surprised at how indifferent I am about so many things that I would have recorded with enthusiasm before" (2 September 1968).

Some six years later the entry: "This is almost becoming a journal again instead of a Diary, and I am ashamed of the emphasis on myself, but how could it be different?" (15 June 1974).

The main reason that readers are interested in the Meintjes Diaries is to learn more about this enigmatic artist and in this way seek to find more information on the paintings and on what in particular influenced him. He was aware of how this affected his work from early on. In an entry he dates 30 (sic) February 1944, he writes: "It is remarkable how many of my heads look like me, but this is inevitable if you work from memory; it is as if one creates a particular type, and you see it in the work of almost all portrait painters".

More than five years later Meintjes writes: "What have all these studies of myself and my alter egos, mirror images, heads with birds and flowers, isolated figures in veld and sea, desolate beaches, nocturnal street scenes, beggars, mother and children, and so on, to do with narcissism?" (20 June 1949). The symbols that Meintjes uses to represent his own state of mind are personal and usually private, and sometimes their significance is known only to him. Taking into account the intensely personal nature of his work, it is an irrefutable fact that most of the male characters whom he paints look very much like him.

Meintjes commented on this in a conversation with Muller Ballot. Ballot reports this as follows: "He says that most of his works are based on memory. The consequence is that he tends, completely

unconsciously, to paint the lineaments of his own face - which is naturally the one he knows best. According to him, this is not a matter - as the critics claim - of self-glorifying self-portraiture.”

Ballot also notes that many of Meintjes’ paintings are completed from memory. He only sketches a direct portrait of a model and makes additional notes about the model. But the end product “is pure memory work”.

As Meintjes keeps his diaries, he makes notes about the models and scenes that he paints. Anything to capture and hold the transient moment. The irreversibility of the rush of time is captured in a fixed present moment.

This makes the individual as writer and subject, as painter and painting, an abstraction. What Meintjes ultimately captures in his artistic production and as a prolific writer is a certain sphere of life and a particular time - of a unique individual. Meintjes, as a unique recognizable personality, calls upon us through his ego to acknowledge it and so understand ourselves. His Diaries become an appeal to share his life - and art - in the light of the way that W.H. Auden had defined art: “Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead.”

Meintjes writes on 23 Augustus 1962: “Now that I am typing up *Diary 3* (and finding it fascinating), I cannot help wondering what the ultimate fate of this monumental document will be. I always feel that genuine interest in me and my work will come only in some 20 years, or even later.” Some two years later he notes: “When I started on the *Diary*, I never realised that it would become my monument. If it were ever to appear as a single volume, who knows, it can be cut fairly drastically. It is impossible to gauge the proper value of the whole while I am still alive” (30 January 1964).

The writer manifested in Meintjes’ Diaries offers us a mirror image of the “I” who has a voice in them, but it remains only a reflection. The real Meintjes - the actual versatile man that he was - eludes full description. Like all of us, he can be known only partially.

Amanda Botha 2024. “Conclusion. The Meintjes Diaries: Mirror and Reflection”. In De Waal, L.M. and Opperman, M.R.J. 2024. *Johannes Meintjes Diaries*, pp. 363-367. African Sun Media, Stellenbosch.