

JOHANNES MEINTJES - DIARIST

Most people probably know Johannes Meintjes as a painter, but it is easy to underestimate the breadth of his talent; he was also a renowned novelist, biographer, art commentator, historian, sculptor, essayist, short-story writer, broadcaster, and he even wrote two plays. Meintjes the diarist, however, has disappeared somewhat from view. As will become evident in this short introduction, keeping a diary was very important to him throughout his life, even though there were often occasions when he expressed some ambivalence about the process and even frustration because he felt a kind of compulsion to keep making regular entries in his diary. There is some evidence that he was aware of writing in a long tradition of such personal record-keeping (12 May 1960; 10 October 1970; 12 November 1978), and he sometimes comments in passing on the personal psychodynamics of being a diarist.

Meintjes was also an avid reader of what is today called 'life writing'. One of his own first attempts at writing a book, at the age of 19, was in the genre of life writing: "I started my new book yesterday - autobiographical to a large extent. I have always wanted to write about the years of puberty, because for me this is the most important stage in a person's development" (4 November 1942).^{*} Just a glance at, for example, the 1946 London Diaries shows that he was constantly reading biographies, autobiographies, collections of letters - and by no means exclusively those of other artists. Such documents - and his own diaries particularly - in fact confront one in a very direct way with the question of the relationship between the life and the work of any creative person.

As personal life writing, the Meintjes dairies are not quite confession nor autobiography. But they do consistently reflect the tension between the private life and the public life implied by these two categories - the former introspective, interrogatory and never quite resolved, the latter more designed for public consumption with elements of self-justification, self-display and even self-dramatisation (cf. Coleman 2000). But, as with diaries in general, the personal narrative in the Meintjes dairies always reveals an identity under construction - and this is what makes them worthwhile reading, rather than just questions of authenticity or veracity. Despite our contemporary scepticism about the possibility of

^{*} All translations from the diaries are my own, except those from the London Diaries (1946, 1958).

ever achieving an ultimate and integrated identity, and our awareness of the discontinuity of experience, we all nevertheless attempt to process individual memories to create at least a temporary a sense of coherence in our lives, to reconcile the contradictions of our existence, and to establish provisional points of stability and balance. In this respect, the Meintjes diaries hold a mirror up to our flawed selves.

All this short essay can attempt, tentatively and provisionally, is to take up and explore some hints, and draw some inferences - specifically on Meintjes the diarist - mainly from the excerpts selected. The focus is on his own personal perspective on his life and not on some objective version of it, scientifically validated, triangulated, stamped and filed.

Even more narrowly defined, the interest here is in his own sense of what writing a diary entails and in his own experience of this activity. It is important to stress the circumscribed nature of these introductory comments, so as not to misrepresent the range and variety of the diaries kept over some four decades. Even the excerpts register a wide range of experience: his constant preoccupation with financial worries (he complains during exhibitions that Capetonians and Durbanites are such slow buyers); his enormous admiration for Olive Schreiner, who became the subject of his first biography; the intense male friendships; his warm relationships with women (such as with the renowned Mozart pianist, Dame Myra Hess, whose vulgar practical joke played on him showed that she understood Mozart was not the composer of prissy refinement!) and the ultimate longing to get married; his love of the family farm Grootzeekoegat, despite the intense loneliness he sometimes felt there - he notes on 12 December 1953: "I have now finally decided to leave for Johannesburg just after New Year's Day and am quite excited by the idea ... Today is my seventy-eighth day alone" (12 December 1953). The latter throwaway comment suggests both a high level of self-awareness as well as a need for social engagement; it thus captures nicely some of the paradoxical features of his temperament and hints at some of the tensions he was to feel as a diarist.

It is worth bearing in mind that Meintjes edited the diaries rigorously before publication - and read them with appreciation after they were published - so the 'narrative' they contain reflects his subsequent intervention years after they were written. This means that, on the one hand, they are a record of personal experience, but on the other hand, that he has not hesitated to exercise his powers of inclusion and exclusion over the material. If one adds to this the operation of memory, it is clear that the

biographical material that the diaries (any diaries) provide - however illuminating - is of a very specific kind and carries no privileged or automatic authority. As Rachel Cottam points out (in Jolly 268), a diary “comes to stand as an embodiment of the paradoxical and elusive self, revealed yet always remaining elusive, simultaneously public and private”.

Late in his life Meintjes reflected on the act of keeping a diary:

“I have been studying the Diary as a form of expression over many years, I mean the many writings of many people, and must begin to wonder what is the significance of mentioning that you are feeling good or awful, that this or that disturbs you, that the futility of so many things stares you in the face, that financially things are going well or badly. What does it matter? And yet. I am always uncertain about whether it can be an art form The French are quite happy to write diaries with a view to possible publication.... In my case I have always been aware of a reflection of the spirit of the times, which I think is important in the historical sense, no matter how fatuous what one says may be” (12 November 1978).

This uncertainty and ambivalence about the activity of the diarist is a striking feature of his entries over many years. In London in 1946 he found at one point that he had to “force” himself to write entries in his diary, adding “Actually, for someone as active and popular as myself, it is surprising that I keep some sort of *diary* at all” (18 July 1946) - he had originally written “journal”, but scratched it out and replaced it with “diary”. This is a revealing slip of the pen, as it were, because so many of the entries record who he was with, who he wanted to avoid, what paintings he saw and loved (Memling) or hated (Matthew Smith’s work makes him want to “vomit” (27 May 1946), Van Dyck gives him a “headache” (30 October 1946), what music he listened to, what he was reading, etc. At one point he even notes: “I should try to write down some of the fantastic things happening to me in this city, mostly amorous adventures, but I find it too much effort” (14 February 1946).

This slightly paradoxical statement that no statement is to be made occurs elsewhere as well! On 29 May 1946, still in London, he mentions that writing the entries has become a “habit”, and that they would have been longer were it not for the letters and talks for the BBC that he had to write.

In 1962 he writes that he has to 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. Perhaps my own life has become exhausted, outwardly at least; what sometimes goes on in my mind is another matter” (3 July 1962).

But by 1963 his attitude had changed again (not for the first time). “Why is it that the form of my writing I never tire of is - the Diary?” (8 January 1963). “In future I shall read some of my books on Christmas day - sections here and there - as I did yesterday. What gave me the most pleasure? - the *Diary Part 1*. I never tire of it” (26 December 1963). But a year later he writes: “I think only unhappy people write diaries. I wanted to stop mine now, but as soon as the old sadness wells up again, I feel an immediate need to write a diary” (13 November 1964). In May 1966 he states that he has lost the habit entirely, and by August he starts a new section hesitantly, reluctantly, “with the feeling that I am no longer interested in myself and that I may as well stop keeping a diary. But then I start again anyway” (13 December 1966).

This is far removed from the passionate need for expression in this format that he had felt as a young man. In 1949 he writes:

“I have felt such a need to chat in my Diary that I am going to postpone it no longer. I just hope the ink in my pen will last. This book will probably become the *sine qua non* of my existence, because it feels just as if I am talking to someone from my own world” (4 May 1949).

Slightly later some of the exuberance has waned, but the need remains:

“When there is not much happening and one does not want the diary-writing habit to become rusty, there is a tendency to elaborate too much on inner troubles, dejection and financial worries. But these are things that happen to one, anyway...” (19 October 1949).

The tendency to melancholia is a persistent concern in the diaries, but at this early stage he does not feel the impulse simply to abandon the writing:

“Why is one so inclined to make notes when you are feeling dejected? I have an exceptional sense of humour and can have people falling about with laughter, but if you read the Diary one would think that I’m in a perpetual funereal mood” (24 November 1953).

‘Introspective’ is a word often used to describe Meintjes’s temperament in the light of his paintings. The diaries bear out this tendency to rigorous self-examination from his adolescent years - and the mere fact of keeping a diary so consistently suggests a willingness to engage with one’s self away from others. But even as a young man he warns himself against the need for isolation: “This utter seclusion has also affected my work, and I know now that it is fatal for creative work.... The only thing that becomes important is meditation” (15 December 1949). Yet there are also moments when it seems that writing itself is not an adequate instrument for such reflection: “Arnold [van Wyk] came to see me this evening. I don’t know what or how I feel any more” (8 May 1946); the next day he writes:

“This was a sad and embittered day. As from ten this morning I wept like a child. No need to go into it” (9 May 1946); after an apparently pleasant evening with friends, the comment the following morning is: “I think something has died in me, but I don’t know what” (11 May 1946). This was obviously a traumatic moment in the life of a man of a somewhat nervous disposition, yet clearly he felt that the diary was not the place to work through the meaning and significance of what had happened. The diaries certainly register the extreme mood swings and hints of personal crises, and he readily acknowledged that many of his physical ailments were psychosomatic. Yet he did not regard this introspection as narcissistic (another contentious term that has found its way into the discourse on his work); if the act of writing a diary is the creation of a narrative of identity construction, on the one hand, it is evident that Meintjes also had a sense of himself as somehow representing a certain *Zeitgeist*. In London he writes: “At times the sadness of a century seems to move through me” (28 April 1946); the self-aware individual, he seems to say, is also a manifestation of his times.

He later explored this notion specifically with reference to himself as a diarist:

“James Boswell [in his *Journals*] makes me think about diaries in general, and especially those that appear during the writer’s lifetime - all so completely different They are all naturally human documents of value, *a reflection of a particular spirit of the times*, bearing the stamp of a particular personality. In my case, even though I do not regard my Diary as the full picture of myself, it is the *vade mecum* as far as my paintings are concerned. I also seek, in this intimate communication with others, an escape from the oppressive solitariness and loneliness that I have known from my earliest childhood years” (28 June 1955, my italics).

Soon after the publication of the first diary in 1961, he notes: “Strange how few of the critics see [the *Diary*] as a document of our time, but no, it must be discussed as a work of art” (29 January 1962). This is clearly Meintjes the historian talking, and perhaps he is reluctant to acknowledge the distinctive nature of a diary, which “lies on the border between life and representation ... the diarist becomes bound to his or her own emerging story” and as such the narrative - the personal ‘performance’, as it were - is characterized by “nonlinearity, interruption and lack of closure” (Cottam in Jolly 268).

At times there seems to be something oddly unreflective, or at least unduly guarded, about the entries – not just as a result of the rigorous editing, but because an entry seems to be no more than a note to himself, a mnemonic, as it were, which one would have thought is slightly at odds with a desire to publish them. Two entries from June 1953 are revealing not only about his occasional ambivalence about his writing the diaries, but also about the extent to which he regards them as ‘windows to the soul’, to say nothing of the *Zeitgeist*:

“I don’t know why I make an entry if I don’t have anything to say...” (10 June 1953).

“In a letter to Brian Proudfoot I said: ‘Sometimes the burden of my giftedness is more than I can bear’ - why don’t I ever elaborate on such matters here? Probably because a diary is predominantly a matter of reporting, and not unpicking, things. The revelations occur between the lines. But they are always only partial revelations” (11 June 1953).

Years later he was making the same point: “The greatest meaning of this Diary does not lie in what is said, but in what is concealed” (30 June 1961).

This circumspection is evident not only in the many cryptic references to homosexual 'adventures' in London - chased by a Dutch Baron, pursued by the yacht man, evading a predatory male prostitute at the cinema - though this obliqueness could be explained by the fact that such activity was still illegal in Britain. (Not that Meintjes expresses any anxiety in this regard: hardly a month after arriving in London he writes "I'm becoming rather weary of the chaps who fill me up with liquor in order to drag me off to bed" (8 February 1946)). But it is also evident in some of his responses to the art works he encountered there:

"I had a look at the Royal Academy yesterday morning and got the fright of my life. I experienced such nausea that I went straight home..." [the original Afrikaans translated more literally reads "such a dead, sick, exhausted feeling..."] (7 May 1946).

As will be seen below, the London Diaries in particular reflect his sense of alienation from the contemporary art of the times, but that hardly explains the sense of extreme physical revulsion and even psychic distress hinted at here. To borrow a pertinent thought from Tambling's introduction to his study on confession, another form of self-representation: if identity construction is a kind of performance, one sometimes wonders in the case of the Meintjes diaries whether the performing takes place in an amphitheatre or an operating theatre.

His sense of his own identity as expressed in the diaries is naturally bound up with his work as an artist: "My utter, unshakeable belief in myself as an artist is the guiding principle of my life, stabilises me and ensures that I will always retain my integrity" (8 January 1944). After several successful exhibitions by 1953, his confidence had grown even further:

"Although an artist does not actually sacrifice his life for the sake of his art, he does use the life and people around him for its sake. This is the case with all great artists, and I am a great artist. I have an inborn tendency to attach myself to people and places like a creeper, and every now and again I have to be chopped loose from those people and places with a violence that sends me temporarily reeling from shock. But it has to be harsh, otherwise nothing will happen.... It is all part of the process of refinement through which I am forged" (6 June 1953)

The second part of this entry, however honest about himself, is interesting in suggesting (retrospectively, of course) that his attachment to his own form of painting was both a strength and a limitation. Meintjes's role in what Stefan Hundt refers to as "the Expressionist impulse in South African art" is widely acknowledged and appreciated, but his very success did also seem to leave him feeling alienated from much of the post-war art that he encountered during his second visit to London in 1958:

"At the moment I am sick to death of all these scores of people who fiddle about with wire, balls and stuff, sprayed and dripped over with pigments, depending for effects on extraneous factors. On the other hand it is good to know that the plastic arts have at least entered a phase where every convention has been swept aside and a completely fresh approach can be found" (18 September 1958).

"I took some of my pictures to a gallery, but was told that they don't show figurative work. I stood and watched paintings being carried out, probably from a previous show, and I thought, dear Lord protect me. I'm not going to arrange a show here, not at present, even if a gallery should be interested in anything that isn't dribbled, action painted, or trompe l'oeil all over the place" (30 September 1958)).

During his first trip to London in 1946 he went to an exhibition of Italian painters which he found "more interesting than exciting". But what is so telling about this particular entry is the suggestion that he feels his own talent is intuitive - he doubted that the artists represented at the exhibition could be representative as "too many of them are professors" (22 June 1946)!

It may be this very intuitiveness - a conscious and deliberate avoidance of academic 'distance' - that accounts for a distinctive feature of his work, which he and others noted on several occasions: the similarity of the figures in his paintings to Meintjes himself. It is worth dwelling briefly on this (admittedly rather speculative) point, because these comments are the most explicit pointers we have that the persona constructed in the diaries - Meintjes admits that the diaries do not tell the full story of who he is - bears similarities to the somewhat idealised figures on the canvases.

"It is noteworthy how many of my heads look like me, but this is inevitable if you are working from memory; it is as if one has created a particular type, and you see this in the work of almost all portrait painters (30 February 1944[sic]).

“My large new work, *Sebastiaan*, is now finished. Someone posed for it, but it looks like a self-portrait” (dated 17 April 1944, but should probably be 17 March 1944).

“Whenever you ... approach the work of an artist who works exclusively from memory, you find that his own appearance constantly crops up in his work. This is to some extent unconscious, but sometimes totally unconscious, because this is the face that he knows best and not because he is necessarily interested in the face itself, but what is rendered by means of it. It is the same in my case. I have gradually created a type (which people are already calling a Meintjes types) that looks like me” (20 June 1949).

The obverse of this self-reflection is self-scrutiny: what Meintjes has to say about his own body in the diaries, in particular in defending himself against allegations of narcissism in the paintings (an allegation to which the diarist is also vulnerable). This scrutiny is quite literal:

“My own experiences are still crystallised to make this kind of interpretation possible. But you also need to have the knowledge of how to convey this, and this is why I began my studies in front of the mirror from a very early age - something my family teased me about, because they could not understand the intensity of the gaze (*betragting*). Every possible change of expression was important to me, and this is why I flung pepper into my eyes as a boy in order to study a person crying. Also when I was given a hiding, I immediately ran to the mirror to see what I looked like.... What does all this studying of myself and all my alter egos, mirror images, heads with birds and flowers, solitary figures in fields and sea, deserted beaches, nocturnal street scenes, beggars, mothers and children, and so on, have to do with narcissism?” (20 June 1949).

Ten years later he was still pondering the issue:

“It’s strange that people still find me so beautiful. Is it foolish to mention this? I do it with a kind of childish amazement, especially after Saturday evening, when three people totally embarrassed me with their comments on my ‘beautiful face’. Is this really the case? R[aymund] often teases me about my conceitedness, and yet I think I am not more conceited than the average man” (27 July 1959).

For someone so intensely aware of his body - indeed of his physical beauty - aging must have been a somewhat disconcerting process - and it says a great deal about his commitment to keeping up the entries in the dairies that he can be so meticulously honest about his responses. In 1953 he expresses some alarm at the thought of being 30 - and begins to think again about getting married (31 October 1953). The 1958 London Diaries give wonderfully contradictory - and all too human - glimpses of his sense of his body (he was 35 years old):

“Old friends glare at my thick head of hair, not a gray one in sight, and don’t realise that I couldn’t care less, that I despise my physical being. There is beauty in a lined face, and who on earth wants to look nineteen forever” (25 September 1958).

Just a few days later he is thinking of his return journey by boat to South Africa:

“On the voyage back I’m bound to gain weight like mad again, and it will be a pity as I have the physique of a boy of nineteen at the moment (5 October 1958).

The later (unpublished) diary entries suggest that, as a man of around 50, he seems to have thought of himself as old and on the verge of death. In 1969 he notes that his “intense interest in myself has long since waned” (12 February 1969), and a few years later: “Physically I am changing so much.... Gone the ‘legendary beauty’ of J.M. Is this surprising at the age of 52? I think a lot about my death, and how much there is to be thankful for” (24 June 1975). At this stage he also regularly records his affection for, appreciation of, his wife Ronell, whom he had married in 1960 soon after his return from his second visit to London, adding that his perspectives and preoccupations have changed and need not be noted in the dairies any longer. So whether the later dairies are still a *vade mecum* for the paintings, as he had claimed they were in 1955, is a matter that art historians will have to decide.

For Meintjes the man, keeping a diary was an integral - and sometimes to his dismay, an inescapable - part of his being. Whatever one might think of Meintjes as a painter, novelist, historian, etc., as a diarist he strove to live the most worthwhile life envisaged by Socrates, a life examined.

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