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Classical Dialogue: Allusion and intertextuality in Charl-Pierre Naudé's *Against the Light*

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The contemporary Afrikaans poet Charl-Pierre Naudé is one of the most promising voices in South African poetry today. Following two award-winning Afrikaans collections, Naudé's debut collection in English, *Against the Light* (2007), demonstrates learned intertextual references to classical literature, particularly the Roman poets Horace and Catullus. These Latin poets become competing models for Naudé's own poetics, either passionate and personal, or political and pastoral. In post-apartheid South Africa, after a period of dramatic social change, ultimately Catullus offers himself as the more compelling poetic model for this South African writer. **Keywords:** Latin poetry, South African poetry, Classical Reception Studies, intertextuality.

Charl-Pierre Naudé is one of the most promising contemporary voices in Afrikaans poetry today. His first collection of poetry, released in 1995, *Die nomadiese oomblik* ("The Nomadic Moment"), won the 1997 Ingrid Jonker Prize, and was followed by *In die geheim van die dag* ("In the Secret of the Day"), which won both the 2005 Protea Prize for poetry, as well as the 2005 M-Net Prize for Afrikaans poetry. In 2007 he also released an English version of this second collection, entitled *Against the Light*.¹ Naudé is careful to point out that the poems in this collection are in fact not mere translations, but English "reworkings" or "transcriptions" of his previous Afrikaans poems, and therefore that these are not his poems in English, but rather, his English poems (Finlay 22).

Against the Light is divided into ten sections, each with a separate title and the poems in each section forming a thematic unit. For example, the poems of the first section, "Getting home" are linked to themes of memory, past, and childhood, while the second section, "The other side" is made up of violent vignettes of South Africa's past and present. In the poem, entitled "The brush" (the final poem of the third section, "Leaves of Heaven"), the first explicit intertextual reference to classical literature in the collection is made.² It is perhaps important to note that in the Afrikaans version of the collection, "The brush" ("Die brand") is placed first, before any of the section headings, thus placing the poem in a programmatic role for the entire collection. The poem is given a subtitle, which is also a dedication: "for C, when her dog died". This sets the poem's context and establishes a triangular relationship between the

poet, C, and her dead dog. The opening stanza begins, "Such an old woe, / that goes back to Lesbia / and her pet sparrow / that died—", which immediately connects the reader to Catullus (Gaius Valerius Catullus), the Roman poet of the Republican period, and his cycle of poems concerning Lesbia, his mistress. In poems 2 and 3 of the *Liber Catullianus*, Catullus refers to his mistress's pet sparrow (*passer*).³ The traditional interpretation of poem 2 is that it is about the poet's mistress who, in order to divert her mind from her passion for the poet, plays with her pet bird (Jones 188). Catullus too longs to play with the bird, as his mistress does, and thereby console his "gloomy" heart: "oh, that I were able to play with you in this way, / And for you to ease the sad cares of my heart".⁴

The poem however has also been the subject of a rather more obscene interpretation. Since the Italian Renaissance, when first this suggestion was made by Angelo Poliziano and followed by the Dutch scholar Isaac Voss in 1684, some scholars have maintained that Catullus' *passer* is in fact his penis. The interpretation then follows that Lesbia, well acquainted with the poet's penis, delights in playing with it and satisfying her various erotic passions. In the same way, Catullus too, would like to satisfy his erotic passions through the act of masturbation. This interpretation, however, has never received widespread support from scholars, but rather is often seen as an example of what Jones called, "learned silliness".⁵ However, it is poem 3 of the Catullan corpus, a dirge on Lesbia's dead pet, which features more prominently in the mind of Naudé. In poem 3, Catullus calls on Venus and her son, Cupid, to mourn (*lugete*) the death of his mistress's sparrow.⁶ He blames Death for his mistress' sorrow, and for its negative effects on her beauty: "now, because of you, my mistress' eyes are swollen and red with weeping".⁷

Poetry on dead pets goes as far back as, at least, the Hellenistic period (Ingleheart 551–65). On this kind of poetry's tone, and quality as poetry, as well as Catullus' contribution to this tradition, Ingleheart (560–61) states,

Hellenistic epigrams on dead pets are to some extent parodic, given the incongruous mismatch between the insignificance of the dead animal and the major themes of death, mourning, and the afterlife; yet people can feel real love for their pets. Catullus reflects this ambivalence, clearly showing the sorrow of his *puella* for the dead sparrow, but also giving the poem a lighthearted feel, and evincing more interest in the *puella* than the dead pet, despite expressions of grief for it ...

In an interview on the poem "The brush", Naudé says,

The poem wants the reader to recall a poem by Catullus for Lesbia. It's a well-known poem in classical studies, where Catullus describes a grieving Lesbia because her pet bird has died. The Catullus poem contains an unwitting comic element, because the poet actually desires the attention that his girlfriend gives to the dead bird. My poem ends similarly: "Come now, let it be."⁸

In the poem, Naudé, like Catullus, draws attention to the effect that sorrow has had on his mistress's appearance. Like Lesbia, Naudé's mistress has swollen, red eyes from crying. ("Shame those eyes, just look at them, / swollen and red like export apples"). Similarly, like Catullus' jealousy of the attention the sparrow receives from Lesbia, so too, Naudé seeks to recapture his girlfriend's attention ("Come now, / it's getting dark."). Despite these similarities, and Naudé's poem demonstrating an obvious textual inheritance, there is one striking difference. Naudé's poem offers an alternative fate to death for his mistress's pet:

Spark, his mistress's dog,
just got distracted, you know.
It's in his nature.
I thought I saw him
make off
in that direction ...
He slipped through the fence
ahead of us,
after that duiker
remember,
into transcendence—
through the brush,
to the top meadow.

Naudé comments on this poem,

[...] the poem is about a speaker who wants to comfort his girlfriend over the death of her dog. He tells her: "The dog is not really dead, he ran [...] after a duiker / to the top meadow." It's only "in its nature". In this way, life and death are suggested as equal and simultaneous modes of life.⁹

Another poem, found only in the Afrikaans collection and not in *Against the Light*, also refers to Catullus' relationship with Lesbia. In this poem called "'n Antieke literêre fragment, ontdek in 'n kelderverdieping" ("An ancient literary fragment found in a basement"), Naudé fabricates a fictitious literary fragment, supposedly found in a basement. The poem weaves between the relationships of Catullus and Lesbia, Petrarch and Laura, and the speaker and his lover. History repeats itself as the tumultuous love affair between Catullus and Lesbia is mimicked by Petrarch and his love, Laura, and then finally also by the speaker and his lover. Despite not formally adhering to Catullus' hendecasyllabic metre or Petrarch's Italian sonnet, the poem is influenced by both. Throughout the collection, Naudé's prosody is seldom classical. However, in this poem he refers to Catullus' metre and acknowledges his indebtedness, "Catullus' lines have eleven syllables / (more or less, or more or less)".¹⁰ Similarly, while not

following the strict structure of a Petrarchan sonnet, much of the content of the poem focuses on similar themes to those typically explored in this verse form. The contemporary poet's love affair ends with the rhetorical question, "Who needs old manuscripts / If history repeats itself so?"¹¹

Casual classical allusions in the collection are common, whether oblique references to Ulysses in the poem "Tears", or to Prometheus and his fire in "The mercenary", or Aphrodite, and the Cyclopes in "A clay image, wrapped in a name". However, one poem in particular makes sustained reference to the classical world. It is the longest poem in the collection entitled "Classical Dialogue", found in the section "Desecrated statues". It takes the form of an imagined and dramatic dialogue between the Roman poets Horace and Catullus. The poem, which Naudé refers to as a *prosaedig* ("prose poem"), requires the reader to suspend his, or her, disbelief, and to believe this imagined conceit while reading the poem. Naudé states, "one of the main themes of the book, is to impart a real, tangible feeling to the reader of how past time and present time can be made to be *felt* simultaneously present, outside of causality, in *actuality*. How the dead can be made present. The reader must key into the 'conceit' that plays out in order to have this experience" (Finlay 32). Obviously, this "conceit" requires considerable mental gymnastics concerning historical chronology. Catullus, was a Republican poet who was probably born around 84 BCE and who died around 54 BCE, while Quintus Horatius Flaccus (known in the English-speaking world as "Horace") wrote later during the reign of Augustus, he was born in 65 BCE and died in 8 BCE. The age gap is acknowledged by the poets and is played upon in the dialogue. Catullus remarks to Horace, "You were nine years old when I died!" Horace's response is to claim that poets live in "universal time", after which Catullus mocks him by stating, "Indeed, some are fifty years old at birth..." The scene of the dialogue is set at Horace's Sabine farm, given to him by his patron Maecenas. Horace claims to have found Catullus lying on the roadside in some field after having been mugged by a highwayman. Catullus is presented as suffering from amnesia, not able to remember his life as a famous poet at Rome, claiming only to remember "being with a woman", his "sweetheart". Horace reminds him of who they are, "The poets of old Rome," he says, "the archetypes. You're the poet of love and restless youth. *Et Moi?* The poet of bucolic peace". The pair's dialogue continues in a haphazard colloquial fashion, subtly betraying the contrasting ideals of the two poets as well as its South African setting. Their speech is littered with colloquial slang; South African words like "*bliksem*", "*bru*" and "*stoep*" are common.¹² In the course of their dialogue, Lesbia's sparrow and its obscene interpretation are again referred to:

Catullus: I didn't come here out of choice, you know. I'd rather be with Lesbia.

Horace: (sarcastic) Even though her little sparrow died?

Catullus: Her little sparrow dies up to five times in a night.

The dialogue quickly develops into an *agon*, or contest, between the two poets, each competing for the supremacy of their own poetic ideals. Catullus is presented as passionate and intense, striving after experience. He states to Horace, "To write poetry you have to burn [...] You have to light the pyre of perfumes, and be incinerated by sex." Later, he asks Horace, "How can one talk about love to someone who believes in the old values ...?" Horace, in contrast, is presented as striving after lyric beauty and the Golden Mean, "Aspire to balance", he says to Catullus in the course of their dialogue.¹³ However, more importantly, Horace demonstrates himself to be pro-Caesar and pro-Rome. Near the end of the dialogue, he asks Catullus to listen to him sing a song, and to Catullus' inquiry as to its theme, he states, "The Golden Age. The future of Rome". At which point Catullus exits the dialogue, and the poem ends with ash from Pompeii and Herculaneum covering Horace. His final line reads, "I am covered in ash! I have gone grey! Overnight ..."

Bernard Odendaal (192), in his interview with Naudé, questions the presence of these two Roman poets in the collection and states:

What, so to speak, are these ancient Roman poets doing in your volume? Catullus is widely regarded as the greatest passionate-lyrical poet of ancient Rome, known for his love poetry and personal voice. By contrast, Horace especially represented a poetics of moderation, of serene, light-ironic reflection. Are elements of both poetic attitudes to be found in the volume?¹⁴

Naudé responds as follows,

I first encountered these two poets in Latin class at school. They are, for me, prototypes of two poetic attitudes—as you so accurately described above—that determined the future of later Western poetry. But more importantly: Horace was pro-state and pro-order; Catullus was, by implication, anti-state and anti-order. This is what a South African writer also faces today—in a context where the choice is not as obvious as under the previous dispensation. I finally chose the example of Catullus.¹⁵

As archetypes, the characteristics that Naudé (and Odendaal) ascribe to Catullus and Horace generally reflect the common views of these poets, albeit somewhat simplistically. Despite living at a time of radical social change, Catullus' poetry, in general, is not much concerned with contemporary politics. He was a part of the literary movement known as the "Neoterics", a group that turned its back on the early ideals of Rome, and instead embraced Hellenistic Greek culture. This can be seen particularly in their poetry, with a rejection of traditional literary norms and a search for new forms and content—which, as in their lifestyles—was largely influenced by Hellenistic models.¹⁶ Horace's poetry, in contrast, is marked by its ordered and controlled form and it is relatively free from extreme emotion. Politics too, unlike

Catullus' poetry, is a prominent feature in Horace's verse, due presumably to his patron, Maecenas, and his links with the Emperor Augustus. Michael Putnam (8), contrasts the two poets thus,

If Catullus works by metonymy, Horace, by contrast, is a poet of metaphor and allegory, in its comprehensive sense. Catullus lives by the actual and concrete, Horace more in terms of the abstract and symbolic. If we view our two poets broadly by means of some traditional categories, Catullus would appear more the naive, romantic poet, Horace more classic and sentimental. The persona projected by Horace is of someone ever in the process of mastering feelings through art, as if writing were a means of gaining emotional distance rather than of presenting it and weighing its potential. The sublimation of sexuality, and again I paint with a wide brush, is an aspect of the Horatian impulse to control, in this case to ameliorate Catullus' emotional energy, to soothe over his graphic immediacy.

Naudé, as we have seen stated earlier, claims to follow Catullus in his poetics. Out of all the classical allusions and intertextual references in his poetry, Catullus' influence is most dominant. However, despite his claim, much of Naudé's poetry in this collection does concern contemporary South Africa, and its socio-political and post-apartheid concerns. As stated earlier, almost all of the poems in the section entitled "The other side" deal with contemporary South African social anxieties, as does the poem, "At the foreign correspondent's banquet", which contrasts personal local "political" realities such as HIV/AIDS and xenophobia with global concerns. Even in "Classical dialogue", the poem opens with Catullus looking as if a highwayman has mugged him. Another feature, of particular prominence to the white South African male in the post-apartheid socio-political climate, is the need to re-examine his colonial past and rewrite his place in its history. I think particularly of the poems, "The man who saw Livingstone", "The visitor" and "How I got my name", subtitled "or, A Concise History of Colonisation". Naudé acknowledges this mix—of personal and political—in his poetry, stating that it is, "How the political realities of the day are dreamt in the life of the individual."¹⁷ However, he qualifies his own writing, not as activist or political literature, but as literature where political concerns emerge only when linked to private ones (Odendaal 186). This stance is expressed in another way by Michael Chapman, "[...] there are dimensions to experience in which ethics and aesthetics are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is to the value of such experience that, in a politically demanding society, poetry—the minority genre most sequestered from the winds of history—may help delineate the potential of everyday life." (191–92). I do not wish to overstate a political slant in Naudé's poetry, but simply to acknowledge its place in the collection. In agreement with Chapman, many of the "political" concerns that the poems address are bound up with personal reflections and deliberations on a South African identity. In a recent article, providing a survey

of the state of Afrikaans poetry in post-apartheid South Africa, Marius Crous, following Bernard Odendaal, delineates the major features of contemporary Afrikaans poetry as including: “the issue of an Afrikaans and especially a South African identity”, “nomadism and migration”, “cultural pessimism”, “ageing and morality”, “gender issues”, “a new type of resistance”, and “autobiographical writing” (202–03). Admittedly, aspects of all of these features, or concerns, could be found in *Against the Light*, and when judging the collection as a whole, the love poems,—or sometimes anti-love poems—far outnumber those with political content. Naudé’s love elegies mimic the vast range of emotion present in Catullus’ Lesbia cycle. From love to hate, the full range of poetic personae are on display, whether as the passionate lover in “A solemn affair”, or as the disgruntled lover in “Against love”, or even as the jealous lover in “Beauty and the beast”. Ultimately, like the bare-breasted female figure holding a rifle depicted on the book-cover of *Against the Light*, Naudé’s collection presents a mixture of love poetry and poems dealing with contemporary social concerns.

In 2007, Theodore Ziolkowski provided an excellent survey of Catullus’ influence on Anglo-American literature of the second half of the twentieth century. In conclusion, he wrote, “As a liberated thinker in an era of dramatic social change—as an outsider from Verona looking critically at life in Rome—Catullus offers himself to many modern observers as a striking model for a writer in our own age” (Ziolkowski 429–30). It seems that, similarly, continuing into the early part of the 21st century, Catullus has offered himself once more, this time to an Anglo-Afrikaans writer, as a striking model for critically exploring post-apartheid South Africa through his passionate and personal poetry.¹⁸

Notes

1. A Dutch translation has also been completed, *Tegen het licht*. A limited bilingual (Afrikaans and Dutch) edition of his poetry, along with drawings by the poet, entitled, *sien jy die hemelliggame* (“Do you see the Heavenly Bodies?”) appeared in 2008, published by the Centrum voor Beeldende Kunsten Zeeland.
2. I use the term “intertextuality” and its cognates in the title and throughout this article loosely. It would perhaps be more correct to use Gérard Genette’s term “transtextuality”. He defines the term as follows, “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (Genette 1–10). Genette’s term “transtextuality”, not only covers “intertextuality” (under which he also places “allusion”), but also, “paratextuality”, “metatextuality”, “hypertextuality” and “hypotextuality”.
3. On the ordering of poems in the Catullan corpus, see Green (13–18).
4. *tecum ludere, sicut ipse, possem / et tristis animi levare curas* (2.9–10). For the text of Catullus, I have used R. A. B. Mynors’ 1958 Oxford Classical Text throughout.
5. See Jones (188–94) for a full explanation of this interpretation, its major proponents, as well as his rebuttal. Also see Jocelyn (426–28) for a refutation of the term *passer* connoting anything sexual.
6. Following on from poem 2, an obscene interpretation of this poem (following Voss) then declares Catullus impotent, claiming him as presenting himself as “worn out” from physical erotic exertion, compare Jones (188).
7. *tua nunc opera meae puellae / flendo turgiduli rubent ocelli* (3.17–18).

8. "Die gedig wil hê die leser moet 'n gedig van Catullus aan Lesbia oproep. Dis 'n beroemde gedig in klassieke studies, waar Catullus 'n bedroefde Lesbia beskryf nadat haar troetelvoëltye verklum het. Die Catullus-gedig bevat 'n onbewuste komiese element, want die digter wil eintlik die aandag hê wat sy meisie aan die dooie voëltye gee. My gedig eindig soortgelyk: "Kom nou, dit word laat." (Odendaal 187)
9. "[...] die gedig handel oor die spreker wat sy meisie paai ná die dood van haar hond. Hy vertel haar: 'Die hond is nie regtig dood nie, hy hardloop net agter 'n duiker aan / op die boonste weiland.' Dis maar 'in sy aard'. So, die lewe en die dood word as gelyk én gelyktydige leefmodusse voorgestel." (Odendaal 187)
10. "Catullus se versreëls het elf sillabes / (min of meer, of meer of minder)."
11. "Wie het ou manuskripte nodig / as die geskiedenis hom so herhaal?"
12. *Bliksem* is an Afrikaans word, which in this context means "scoundrel".
13. Horace is famous for coining the phrase *aurea mediocritas* ("Golden Mean"; *Carm.* 2.10.5). An example of this would be the lines from *Satire* 1.1.106–07: *est modus in rebus, sunt certi denique fines, / quos ultra citraque nequit consistere rectum* ("Things have a proper measure, in other words, there are definite limits, beyond or short of which the right course cannot lie").
14. "Wat, by wyse van spreke, maak hierdie antieke Romeinse digters in jou bundel? Catullus word redelik algemeen beskou as die grootste hartstogtelik-liriese digter van antieke Rome, veral bekend vir sy liefdespoësie en selfopenbaring. Daarenteen verteenwoordig Horatius veral die poëtika van gematigheid, van serene, lig-ironiese besinning. Is elemente van beide poëtikale houdings in die bundel terug te vind?"
15. "Ek het hierdie twee digters die eerste maal op skool in die Latynklas teëgekomp. Hulle is vir my prototipes van twee poëtiese ingesteldhede—soos jy so akkuraat hierbo beskryf—wat die voorkoms van die latere Westerse digkuns bepaal het. Maar meer belangrik: Horatius was pro-staat en pro-orde; Catullus was by implikasie anti-staat en anti die orde. Dis waarvoor 'n Suid-Afrikaanse skrywer ook vandag te staan kom—in 'n konteks waar die keuse nie so voor-die-handliggend is as tydens die vorige bedeling nie. Ek kies uiteindelik vir die voorbeeld van Catullus.
16. The Neoterics, also called *poetae novi* ("New Poets"), were designated as such by Cicero (*Att.* 7.2.1). The movement was marked by a return to the elegance and style of Hellenistic poetry, in particular to the poet Callimachus.
17. "Hoe die politieke realiteite van die dag *gedroom* word in die lewe van die individu." (Odendaal 186)
18. All translations are my own. Earlier versions of this paper were read at the 29th Classical Association of South Africa Conference held at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, June 2011, as well as at the UKZN Classics Colloquium, February 2011, at both of which I received helpful comments from members of the audience.

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