

Johan de Wit: *Gero Nimo*

Reality Street
(Hastings UK, 2010)



Keith Jebb

Can you write a conventional review of a text by Johan de Wit? Obviously one would start with the book's theme, which is the themeness of themativity it(or her)self. One would name the major characters of this prose work: Gero Nimo to Dola Rosa via Coca Cola, Dama Dola, Tora Bora and dozens more, each with his or her own named section. They never talk to each other, which does leave something of a hole in the plot. The plot would of course be the plotliteness of the plottingly. You may suspect this trick isn't working.

The book is prose, with similarities to what is sometimes called "poets' prose" as opposed to the prose poem. Each piece is about two and a quarter pages long. What they contain is possibly the most in-your-face semantic evasiveness in current English language innovative writing. You could chime with Robert Sheppard and call this a "pure poetry" and you wouldn't be wrong, if you believe in purity. But this purity continuously muddies clearly semantic waters:

So, better follow the words when they roll over each other, you never know where the flow of the argument will stop the force of the discussion. Let's not mention dialogue. To think that a single plane could compete with a single page

is stretching friendship beyond the limits of presents and anniversaries.

(“Bala Clava” pp120–21)

You can’t argue with the first sentence, just as you can’t argue the last. De Wit has spent the last decade and more writing his Statements (some of which were published as *No Hand Signals* by Veer Books in 2009), prose texts of poetics which form an endless manifesto not for any particular school of poetry, but for the art of poetry itself—poetry as a single-minded trek across and through contradiction, an uncompromising craft of making a cabinet out of jelly.

For de Wit, nothing is more serious than language, and poetry is the most serious use of it, because the least bound by the political, economic and even cultural demands that limit the scope of language. Imagine a poetry at once profound and aseptic and you have at least two of the poles of tension he grapples between. The first descends into truism and empty rhetoric, the latter is attained at the moment language ceases to be itself.

What de Wit does in *Gero Nimo* (at least one way of looking at it) is to choreograph a dance amongst the various contemporary registers of the English language. I say contemporary, because there is nothing of nostalgia here, no golden age, no Literature (capital L for authority), although their industries are all present and correct and making money and kudos. And of course dance is both a serious and a joyous activity: take it seriously, enjoy it all the more—and so will those who watch you:

On his way to the bank he put down a pawn. It—excluding this interruption—takes the rule of point-blank-point to a correspondence course without a twenty-eight day delivery pact. In fact, consumption is up, guts willing, now it’s time to place an isotopic inheritance tax in the fridge to avoid taking the grade and paying the price by phone.

(“Pacha Mama” p105)

One of the things that distinguishes de Wit from the popular image of the avant garde poet is the absolute replacement of posturing with performativity. Even his posturing is performative. This is a mature writer at the height of his ability and experience, with nothing to

prove—not to himself, not to us: because the burden of proof is not what he bears. Performativity does that—removes the extraneous burdens on the text. In that sense there is purity. We do not have to see de Wit as a humane voice, a politically radical voice, or even an honest voice. What he does subsumes those notions under a wider and wilder idea. That he is that (*sic*) writing and poetry. Not a transcendence; close to a transubstantiation, but not really that either. Closer to a kind of ontological recycling. If meeting the actual, physical Mr de Wit is a bit like meeting his poetry (and it is) one suspects the poetry had a big hand in this.

The strategies de Wit uses are of course important, and more so since he goes against the grain of much innovative writing in the post-war era. There is a tendency (exhibited at least as early as Gertrude Stein's essays and fiction) towards what could be called a paratactic style. An almost random example from Stein:

They think they are interested about the atomic bomb but they really are not not any more than I am. Really not. They may be a little scared, I am not so scared, there is so much to be scared of so what is the use of bothering to be scared, and if you are not scared the atomic bomb is not interesting.

("Reflections on the Atomic Bomb" 1946)

Here phrase follows parallel phrase; but also there is a sense of following a sequence of thought or event. It is an anti-rhetorical strategy. On the surface it might follow the way things happen (like a young child's story of their holiday: "We went to the beach and we made a sandcastle and then we buried grandad in the sand and then the tide came in."), but as you can see from the quotation, it can in itself produce a sense of losing the structures one expects of language—of having the rug of articulacy pulled from underneath you. Stein is quite extreme, but in some form the tactic is a staple of the Language poets, of Tom Raworth (who was one of their lodestones), and of most of the poets you will find in the anthologies of more left field writers and poets. However, I do say this is a tendency—it is not a rule. Unstitching rhetoric is another tactic of the likes of Raworth (listen to his "Logbook" on Pennsound), where one plays with the expectations of the reader from the first phrase of the sentence. Johan de Wit lives in the waters of this kind of subversion:

Whoever lives behind bars may be seduced in the open fields,
 it was of course known that Pacha Mama had only if invested
 in what not. Little wonder there was no course to grind or
 remorse to find. For that very same reason doubt when bathed
 in money laundering offers to shoot the buggers.

(“Pacha Mama” p.105)

Note here how “if” has to be read as a noun to make sense of the second sentence. This kind of thing happens all the time in *Gero Nimo*: articulate hypotactic sentence structures are presented, perfectly preserved, but lead us calmly into the waters of anti-sense.

Without overt political affiliation, de Wit’s writings could be held up to the outputs of the speechwriters of our politicians both sides of the Atlantic as a kind of litmus test. So much that sounds like it should make sense but actually doesn’t can be exposed if you just turn up the volume on the same trick. Both Cameron in the UK and Obama in the US have performed some interesting rhetorical tricks with the word “change” over recent years. One could say the same for the language of advertising and frankly, as an academic, the language I have to write my creative writing courses in. Damn it: Johan de Wit is the language police—and he’s coming to get us.