



Behind the wall in Kobus Moolman's *A Book of Rooms*

Karen Jennings

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Kobus Moolman prefaces *A Book of Rooms* with a quote by Georges Perec. The quote details the irrevocability of the past through memory. However, both Perec and Moolman not only recover memory, but are able to do so in great detail, specifically through thorough catalogic descriptions of spaces and objects that surround them in the domestic realm. Analysis of these catalogic descriptions forms the key component of this article. The structure of Moolman's work, with different rooms used to demarcate different sections, and the significance of objects, further contribute towards his project of recovering the irrevocable. Comparison of Moolman's project with that of Perec, with reference to Bachelard's thoughts on the home, serves in the analysis of how the self is related to the concept of a house, with its many rooms in which are stored those things which contribute to an individual's sense of identity. The generation of narrative via description and cataloguing of these various domestic objects and events is considered, with specific focus given to the 'bed' as it plays a significant role in the formation of the self and the recollection of memories. **Keywords:** Bachelard, catalogic description, domestic sphere, Kobus Moolman, Georges Perec.

1

Kobus Moolman prefaces his autobiographical poetry collection, *A Book of Rooms* (2014), with a quote from the partly-factual novel *W, or the Memory of Childhood* (1975) by avant-garde French author Georges Perec:

Even if I have the help only of yellowing snapshots, a handful of eyewitness accounts and a few paltry documents to prop up my implausible memories, I have no alternative but to conjure up what for many years I called the *irrevocable*: the things that were, the things that stopped, the things that were *closed off*—things that surely were and today are no longer, but *things that also were so that I may still be*. (emphasis added)

Perec's use of the term "irrevocable" stands out here, for upon reading both *W, or the Memory of Childhood* and *A Book of Rooms*, it is apparent that these "things"—memories—are very much recoverable. In fact, both authors not only recover memory successfully, but are able to do so in great detail.

The past two decades have seen growing scholarly interest in the subject of memory, particularly with regard to its recovery after trauma. Within South Africa, regaining and voicing these memories has been a crucial step towards coming to terms with the gross injustices perpetrated under the aegis of the apartheid government for the better part of half a century. After 1994 the new democratic government encouraged the recovery of such memories through the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Recollections that emerged during these hearings inspired works such as Antjie Krog's *Country of my Skull* (1998), and poetry by the likes of Ingrid de Kok and Gcina Mhophe. These texts, and others, have been engaged with in various scholarly articles and books. Shane Graham's *South African Literature After the Truth Commission* (2009) and Mengel and Borzaga's edited collection *Trauma, Memory and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel* (2012) are notable examples. However, other than touching on the TRC poems of de Kok, such works concentrate on fiction or non-fiction. Little attention is given to poetry. This might be a consequence of a lack of poetry either being produced or published within the country, as well as difficulties of access to English translations of poems written in South Africa's indigenous languages. Nevertheless, what is noticeable with regard to academic studies about the recovery of memory in South African literature is that the focus tends to be on the country as a whole, with a largely political and cultural emphasis. Certainly, individual characters are examined, but this is done synecdochally, with the individual representative of the country or of a group of people within the country. In general, the aim has been to determine how the recovery of memory through narrative can help a nation to heal.

Karen Jennings is a South African author. She recently completed postdoctoral research at the Federal University of Goiania, Brazil on the historical relationship between science and literature through the lens of eusocial insects.

Email: catullusfan@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8139-6056>

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Kobus Moolman's project of memory recovery, however, deals with the personal and apolitical. For him, the reclamation of memory is less to do with trauma and more to do with the everyday, the domestic. Influenced by Perce, Moolman makes use of spaces and objects in order to achieve this end. The structure of his work, with the sections of the anthology corresponding to different rooms, his employment of descriptive writing, and the significance of objects, in this case the bed, all contribute towards Moolman's aim of recovering the irrevocable. Despite being a multi award-winning poet, Moolman has received little scholarly interest, and none with regard to *A Book of Rooms*. This is a sore neglect of one of the country's important and potent voices, whose subject matter includes living with disability, the South African landscape, rural villages, the Border War, and a recurrent questioning of the self and who that self is in relation to others, the past, present, and future. Moolman experiments with forms and ideas, and the way this experimentation in *A Book of Rooms* has been influenced by Georges Perce is the subject of this article. No other contemporary South African author has engaged in a similar project of using catalogic description as a means of recovering memory. For this reason, Moolman's *A Book of Rooms* is unique and deserving of interest. The focus of this article is a comparative analysis of Moolman's project of recovering memory with that of Perce through examination of their employment of catalogic description in the generation of narrative, and with reference to Bachelard's thoughts on the home, which serve in understanding how the self is related to the concept of a house, with its many rooms in which are stored those things which contribute to an individual's sense of identity.

2

In the quote given above, Perce talks about memories that "were closed off", suggesting that some obstacle has been put in front of them, some form of separation; a partition, a wall. The idea of a wall or hindrance to a view is a recurrent theme in Perce's work. In *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1974), he cites French playwright Tardieu: "Granted, there's a wall, what's going on behind it?" (39). In other words, what might be accessed if that partition were removed? What is the truth behind the wall? Perce's life's work was the subtraction of such walls, and this is perhaps best evidenced by his novel *Life a User's Manual* (1978) which he describes in *Species* as being about "a Parisian apartment building whose façade has been removed [...] so that all the rooms in the front, from the ground floor up to the attics, are instantly and simultaneously visible" (*Species* 40). He further notes that some of the inspiration behind this project "is a drawing by Saul Steinberg that appeared in *The Art of Living* (1952) and shows a rooming-house [...] part of the façade of which has been removed, allowing you to see the interior of some twenty-three rooms" (40-1). While well executed and rich in detail, the cartoon style of the drawing lends it a sense of naïveté in which life is depicted very simply. But it is herein that the power and appeal of the artwork lies. Consider a drawing of a house by a small child: though simple, it is effective in conveying some complicated dynamics through "synthesiz[ing] in one structure his or her self, body, parents, and relation to space and others" (Burgelin and Mai 14). This is what Perce achieves in *Life a User's Manual*. He models it on "rudimentary architecture" where he reduces the building to its "simplest form, a grid of ten squares by ten squares" (Burgelin and Mai 14). Within these squares all of life is encompassed—individuals, others, possessions, pasts, futures, presents. This practice recalls Bachelard's observation that "memories are housed" within the house itself and that "all our lives we come back to them", pulled towards that in which we are kept (Bachelard 8). Bachelard further observes that these houses in which our memories are stored "can be drawn" (48) and "we cover the universe with drawings we have lived" (12). The "drawings need not be exact", rather "they need only to be tonalized on the mode of our inner space" (12), with the result that "all the spaces of our past moments of solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us" (10). In other words, memories, housed memories, are constitutive parts of the self, for it is through them that "we learn to 'abide' within ourselves" (Bachelard xxxvii). The self is a house, with many rooms in which are stored those things which "were so that I may still be" (Perce, W 13).

Rooms are not merely emptiness surrounded by four walls. We "write" rooms, we "read them" (Bachelard 14). All of their components—structure, contents, significance—contribute to that which they are, namely "the resultant of living" (Wood and Beck 174). For Perce, the act of living is "to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself" (*Species* 6). In order to understand this viewpoint, it is necessary to remember the extent to which Perce's project was influenced by games with words. For example, he viewed *lire* (to read) as an anagram of *lier* (to join together), and considered there to be a strong connection between the two meanings of *pièces*: pieces (say, of a puzzle) and rooms of a building (Lévy 39). Thus, for Perce, the pieces of a

puzzle are spaces, such as the spaces or rooms that comprise his grid of the apartment block in *Life a User's Manual*, or even as chapters in a book. To read (*lire*) a room, therefore, becomes a significant act. It is a joining together of spaces. Just so is the act of writing, which Perec views as trying “meticulously to retain something, to cause something to survive, to wrest a few precise scraps from the void as it grows, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark or a few signs” (*Species* 92). Retaining those “precise scraps” is to inhabit the spaces or rooms in which they are kept.

It is this relationship between the self and the rooms of memory that Moolman depicts with great effectiveness in his *A Book of Rooms*. He has taken a life (his own) and separated the events and memories of that life into different rooms, where each is a new poem, creating the architecture for an unusual building—the building of the self, where the inhabitants are the same man over time, linked to one another through objects, events, memories, smells, and other people.

The collection consists of 35 poems. They can be read individually. However, approaching the collection as a single narrative, divided into sections, contributes towards an understanding of the poet-speaker's key concerns, allows for recognition of those themes which recur throughout the text as a whole, and gives insight into how those themes interact with one another. Each poem has a title that begins with the words “The Room of”, for example, “The Room of Growing”, “The Room of Impressions and First Appearances”, “The Room of What He Excels At”. The poems are separated into four parts—or storeys—*Who*, *What*, *Why*, and *When*. These divisions bring together poems that relate to certain aspects of the poet-speaker's developing identity over the years. *Who*, for example, might be considered the ground floor of the building, and deals with poems related to the poet-speaker's difficult formative years—childhood and the early part of young adulthood. *What* (second storey) engages with what he has become in his troubled adulthood, while *Why* (third storey) examines how he came to be the way he is, what the reasons are behind his choices, thoughts, and actions. Finally, *When* (the attic), the most abstract of the parts, seems to be preoccupied with the past, returning to the when's of his life that have led to what he has become as an adult.

Each room has been given a subtitle. The subtitle gives personal insight into what the poet-speaker identifies with that room/memory. These personal associations can be related to lighting, scent, objects, phrases, or any other thing of significance. Thus, the opening poem, “The Room of Maybe”, which houses his earliest memories, is subtitled in the following way: “*Black & white light. Dog-eared*” (13; original italics). The black and white colouring conveys a sense of age, such as an old photograph or film. It also suggests distance—the room is so far away now that it can no longer be seen clearly; it “comes in and out of focus” (13). The colours of it are remote, faded. The fact that the room is described as dog-eared suggests its importance. It is a place that has been returned to often, a place to be noted, remembered. In “The Room of Rural Teaching” it is the different environment that is recalled in “*Hot glare. Cicadas*” (27), while the happier “*Bright sunlight. Fat smell of frying*” precedes “The Room of Family Holidays” (23). Less clear, perhaps, is the subtitle of the poem “The Room of Free-falling, Forever, Not Downhill”, which is a sequence of numbers, repeated six times: “1-2-3. 1-2-3. 1-2-3. 1-2-3. 1-2-3. 1-2-3” (55). The significance of this—is it counting, is it repetition?—is not readily available to the reader.

Returning to the dog-eared “The Room of Maybe”, here Moolman introduces the reader to two bedrooms, the first of the poet-speaker's life. The initial one is “indistinct” (13), and is memorable only in three ways: in the form of an object—“a small wooden bed/ with low sides”—and in the form of two senses:

[...] the *smell* of
the brown shoe polish
(always Nugget) that his mother smears onto an old *lappie* at
night and pins inside
his little vest to stop him coughing (13; initial emphasis added)

and the
[...] *sound* of
his own small voice
calling up to her from out of the drowned end of a dark passage-
way (13; emphasis added)

The image created by this bedroom is of a small, sickly boy who is afraid in the dark away from his mother.

The second bedroom (in the same house as the first) has previously been used variously as “a junk room, work room, sewing room” (13). Perec writes that “each room has a particular function” (*Species* 28). It is only when this room has the function of being his bedroom that Moolman’s poet-speaker has any interest in it, only then does it have real value and influence, for “the resurrected space of the bedroom is enough to bring back a life, to recall, to revive memories, the most fleeting and anodyne along with the most essential” (21). It is enough simply to know that “the wall was on my right, the door beside me on the left” (21) for a flood of memories to ensue.

The role of the bedroom in bringing memories to the fore is evident in “The Room of Maybe”. The bedroom contains two doors, one of which “leads / into the lounge” and the other “into the back garden” (*Book of Rooms* 13–4). This garden has, amongst other things, a “vegetable patch” belonging to his *oupa*, and trees, bricks, and “a stack of rusted metal poles” belonging to his father (14). The effect of this bedroom is very much like that of the child’s drawing of a house which was discussed earlier. Here, in this bedroom, a whole life is fused together. It is the place where the young poet-speaker sleeps, the place that connects him to the rest of the house (where he plays, eats, etc.). In addition, it links him to the outside, and to the family members that people his young life.

There is also a third door in the bedroom, a door that “is never opened” (14) and which is blocked by his bed. It is unclear whether this is in fact a real door, for it is never revealed where it leads, and further details of it are limited to the “small things that crawl under this door at night / and scuttle about / beneath his bed” (14). It is because of these things that he is in need of “a plastic under-sheet / to protect the mattress”, though he ought long since to have “outgrown the / weakness” of wetting his bed (14). These things “crawl up his trouser / leg every night and / soak into his sleep” (14), with “long wet feelers crawling over his face and rough claws / around his throat/ pulling him down, down into the airless pit beneath his dreams” (15). The suggestion here is that the crawling things are not insects. They are his fears, his weaknesses, his disabilities that find him even in the safety of his bedroom (bolted and secured against the outside), and which continue to find him in all the rooms of his life.

3

Perec, as well as looking behind the wall, is known for the way in which he plays with lists or catalogues, such as when he describes, for example, the contents of a building or room in great detail. It has been suggested that Perec is likely to have been, if not directly inspired, then at least influenced by the artist Daniel Spoerri in this regard (Schwenger 142). Spoerri is known for his *Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, a work begun on October 17, 1971 at 3:47. He traced the numerous objects on his desk onto a map, outlining and numbering each item. He then engaged with each object by noting down a description of it, stating how it had come to be in his possession, and what it had been used for. The ‘anecdoting’ of the items means that a narrative developed where it might otherwise have been absent (Schwenger 142). Perec embarked on a similar project in 1973 in the form of an essay entitled “Notes Concerning the Objects that are on my Work-Table”. The essay, as one might expect, details the items present on his desk. Five years later Perec revisited the project, this time at a different desk, with different objects, calling the resultant essay “Still Life/Style Leaf”. Here follow the third and fourth sentences, the latter most resembling a list:

Set next to one another at the left-hand end of the table are two rectangular desk trays of heavy glass. The first contains a whitish eraser on which appear in black the words STAEDTLER MARS PLASTIC; a polished-steel nail clipper; a matchbook proffering on an orange background a red motif in the style of Vasarely; a Casio pocket calculator on which the number 315308 read upside down spells the word BOESIE; a kind of ornament comprising two tiny intertwined crocodiles; a brass fish with glass eyes whose ventral fin is a kind of reel that winds and unwinds the tape measure concealed within the body (its tip is actually the creature’s tail); and, pinned to a piece of thin cardboard, three bars of a medal on which oakleaves and acorns are minutely chased and on each of which can be read, respectively, SE BASTO-POL, TRAK-TIR, and ALMA. (299)

For Perec, projects such as these serve as “a way of talking about my work, about my history and preoccupations, an attempt to grasp something pertaining to my experience, not at the level of its remote reflections, but at the very point where it emerges” (“Still Life” 143). In other words, this is not mere descriptive cataloguing. This is autobiography. Some have criticised Perec’s style, calling it a “mania of observing and describing all” (Koons 186), however, there is a sense, too, that “as you read Perec’s descriptions, you increasingly succumb to the feeling [...] that this is important, though you can’t say how” (Becker 71). It would seem that the importance that Becker cannot put his finger on lies in the fact that it is through description that the narrative emerges, that the things—

objects, people, situations—are brought to life. The story is not confined to the objects, rather “still life is always capable of generating narrative motion” (Schwenger 143).

Moolman, too, generates narrative by means of description in *A Book of Rooms*. He achieves this in several ways, as can be seen in the second poem in the collection, “The Room of Green”. This poem is comprised almost entirely of description in the same cataloguing tradition as Perec’s “Still Life/Style Leaf”. He describes the bookshelves, windows, views, and walls of the doctor’s surgery that he often visits as a child, remembering, too, the various decorations, as well as the doctor himself with “hands the size of a bunch of bananas” (16). Firstly, catalogue-like description enables the narrative to be located securely in place. A room is comprised of its structure, contents, and meaning. It is a place of amalgamation. This description of the doctor’s surgery—the contents and structure—establishes its significance. It was important enough to the poet-speaker’s young self that he is able to recollect it in later years in such detail. Moreover, it confirms that which has been hinted at in the preceding poem, and which remains a theme throughout: that the poet-speaker suffers from ill health, something which separates him from others and makes him feel isolated. This room, therefore, symbolises the painful reality that he speaks of much later in “The Room of White”:

[...] The body he was left with at
birth after there was
nothing else left to fill up the blank spaces The body he has always
been ashamed
of because it cannot be trusted to stay upright or dry [...] (48)

Secondly, through detailed description, the room is animated. This is not any doctor, any place. This is a *specific* doctor—the one who races vintage cars, yes, but also the one who is always changing the poet-speaker’s

bandages, cleaning
his dressings, removing his stitches, cutting off his old plaster
casts with a small electric circular saw or a large pair of silver cast scissors, and
putting on a new one
all tight and wet and hot, hardening clean and white
in minutes (17)

It is the specificity that lends the room authenticity as autobiography, and which breathes life into the text. These are not details listed without purpose.

Thirdly, description peoples the poet-speaker’s life. Not only is the doctor described—his interests, his soft voice, his hands—but insight is also given into the people in the boy’s life and how he engages with them. Thus, the boy’s fear of placing his dirty boots on the narrow examination bed arises from a fear of his father’s disapproval, and introduces the complicated relationship the poet-speaker has with this parent. It paves the way for his memory of “the voice of his father, saying he will lose it all / everything” (43) and for his confession that “sometimes he / wishes his father did not ever come back” (18). Furthermore, his listing of the “over a hundred toy cars of all makes and models” (17) that the doctor has on display suggests the boy’s difficulty around his peers:

His favourite, though, is the red and white Chevrolet El Camino
convertible with fins
Because it looks as if it could swim underwater like a great white
shark Because then
all the bigger boys at school (with names like Tasso and Vickus
and Ferdie) would
leave him alone (17)

This is the isolated, different child, and within this room, that difference is magnified.

Finally, Moolman, in the long poem, “The Room of In One Place (cont.) aka The Room of Nothing Happened”, explains his project clearly, emphasising the importance of the use of detailed description. His aim is to “put down the whole story of what happened and what did not and / what never would” (47),

[...] And in his remembering, and in the putting down on
paper of all of
his memories, in the remembering of them there

[...] he will undo the
knot that had cut off the light to his heart at birth And he will kick
it loose from him [...] (74-5)

Through memory, and relentless detail, Moolman seeks to write away his poet-speaker's isolation, and the consequences and experiences of a life always affected by his body's failures.

4

In *Species* Perec poses the question: "How are we to speak of [...] 'common things,' how to track them down rather, flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they remain mired, how to give them a meaning, a tongue [...]?" (210). He attempts to answer this question, as has been discussed, in various ways, such as his use of catalogic description. The ordinary objects that comprise his lists are individually important too, for it is through our association with objects that we "make order" of who and what we are; they serve as a "framework of experience [...] to our otherwise shapeless selves" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 16) and become representatives of aspects of our lives, able to give insight into our identities at a mere glance.

Having already explored the bedroom, it is now time to turn to that which gives a bedroom its function—the bed. For Perec the bed is "the individual space, *par excellence*, the elementary space of the body" (*Species* 16; original italics). It is a space of privacy and possession. More important, however, is his view of a bed as a place where "unformulated dangers threatened, the place of contraries, the space of the solitary body encumbered by its ephemeral harems, the foreclosed place of desire, the improbable place where I had my roots, the space of dreams and Oedipal nostalgia" (17).

Beds repeatedly appear in *A Book of Rooms*, playing a significant, if understated, role. It is easy to see how they fall into Perec's definition of what beds are. The bed as "a place where unformulated dangers threaten" has already been observed in "The Room of Maybe" where it hosts many crawling things which cause the poet-speaker to wet himself. It is also "the place of contraries" in "The Room of Family Holidays" where the

second bed is a source of continual dispute
between himself and
his brother Because both boys always want to sleep right by the
window so they can
be the first to see the ocean and to see the sun come up (23)

This squabbling is returned to regularly throughout the anthology—"they / argue all the time and / cannot share anything between them" (13)—and lasts until his final year of high school when he considers himself too mature for such pettiness and "magnanimously allows his brother access to the bed by the / window without any / argument, and with only a superior smile" (23). It is the rejection of this bed that gives the poet-speaker the sense that "he is on / the brink of something/ very significant in his life, something almost adult" (23-4). That something leads him to another bed, the bed of a tall blonde girl, where "together they listen to a stretched tape of the Beatles" (25; emphasis added). Later, on New Year's Eve, he watches the same girl talk to another boy and he is reminded of who he is: "the boy with a hole in his heart" with "differently- / sized orthopaedic boots" (25). This realisation recalls Perec's consideration of the bed as "the space of the solitary body encumbered by its ephemeral harems" (*Species* 17), a place where Moolman's poet-speaker is troubled for many years by the fact that "he is alone, with only his hands to console him" (42).

But, at last, "at the grateful age of twenty-seven years, three / months and fourteen / days" he "leaves his long childhood behind" (45). Now, his hands, finally, "taste and touch and see everything in the whole world / they have always wanted" (45). The bed, rather than a place of isolation, now becomes a "place of desire" (Perec, *Species* 17), represented as "a white king-sized bed with a red / bolster pillow" (*Book of Rooms* 47). But the bed of desire cannot remain so. It becomes, too, the place of Oedipal nostalgia, though nostalgia is perhaps too gentle a word for what Moolman depicts as a haunting. The white king-sized bed recalls another bed, the "white uniform" one in which the poet-speaker's father died (44). His father now returns to him, causing him to hide

Because the ghost
would not approve of him
sharing a table and bathroom and a white king-sized bed with an

older woman
and divorcee (48)

It is also the place where “his mother’s arms rear up suddenly between / him and the woman in / the bed” (53), his mother who always wants to protect him because of his disabilities. Moreover, the bed becomes the site where he is confronted by the deficiencies of his body once more, perhaps more starkly than before, because he hoped “everything small and crawling with feelers / and claws inside him” would “disappear or at least change beyond / recognition” (52) once he had a loving, sexual relationship. The bed is supposed to be a “space of dreams”, but in it the poet-speaker is unable to find any escape, not from himself. He is drawn ever downward into “the roots” (Perec, *Species 17*) of what he is.

5

Through *A Book of Rooms*, Kobus Moolman takes us behind the wall, into the building of the self, giving the reader access to its many rooms, and the events, people, and objects that comprise a life. Moolman achieves this by means of his detailed catalogic descriptions of the rooms, and the subtle way in which the objects he lists echo and respond to those in other rooms, bringing to the forefront the preoccupations of his poet-speaker. The past, through this process, is able to be recovered and recorded as narrative.

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