“The Weight of My Skeleton is My Only Honesty”: Language and the speaking body in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat*

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Abstract:

This thesis proposes a detailed study of the novel *Agaat* by South African author Marlene van Niekerk (first published 2004). A particular focus throughout is on constructions of identity and subjectivity, and the novel is considered as writing within and against both the Realist tradition as well as the South African genre of the *plaasroman* and/or farm novel. The translation of the novel into English by Michiel Heyns (published 2006) is used as primary text, which furthermore raises questions of language and interpretation already implicit in the narrative, questions which provide a compelling filter for reading the novel in its entirety.

In the Introduction, I briefly delineate the novel's storyline. This serves to introduce the novel's thematic concerns and outlines the linguistic complexities which emerge as a result of the novel's structure. An exposition on Realism in the novel follows, where I suggest how a consideration of the Realist tradition might be useful in exploring the mimetic effect in *Agaat.* Next the appearance and history of the *plaasroman* and farm novel in South African literature is considered.

In Chapter One, the novel's structural elements are examined in greater detail, through a close analysis of the five different narrative voices of the novel. I suggest that the novel is an elaborate study of identity and subjectivity which simultaneously uproots questions of voice and authorship. While the subject matter of the novel and the attention to details of farming and the physical environment makes it seem a near-historical record and places *Agaat* within the genre of the *plaasroman,* the effect of the different voices of the novel is to undercut fundamentally any stable narrative authority.

Agaat is nevertheless an incredible compendium of the nitty-gritty of life. In Chapter Two I explore the manner in which the body and the self are located within a very particular landscape and setting. How and for what purpose is subjectivity and identity refracted and articulated through metaphors of space and the experiences of place? In the

course of a close reading of the novel, I draw on broadly post-structuralist conceptions of language, as well as South African critics' writing on the genre of the *plaasroman.*

The third and final chapter examines the novel *Agaat* in translation. *Agaat* is a deeply literary novel, drawing on a remarkably wide lexicon of cultural references, suffused with questions of interpretation and a compelling and complex inquiry of language. The English translation by Michiel Heyns remains a novel of and about Afrikaans. Quite how this is achieved raises questions of translation pertaining both to the 'postcolonial', if one reads South Africa as such, and to the specifically local. To this end, a brief context to translation and language politics within the 'postcolonial' and South Africa is considered, before engaging in a closer examination of the techniques by which *Agaat* was translated from Afrikaans into English. I conclude with remarks regarding the success of the translation into English and suggest that the translation is masterful but that its most striking characteristics depend on a local South African reader.

Opsomming:

Hierdie tesis behels 'n noukeurige studie van die roman *Agaat* (2004) deur die Suid-Afrikaanse skrywer Marlene van Niekerk. Die klem val deurgaans op die konstruksie van identiteit en subjektwiteit, en die roman word beskou as 'n reaksie teen, maar ook 'n uitbouing van die tradisies van Realisme en die Suid-Afrikaanse plaasroman/"farm novel". Die primêre teks vir hierdie ondersoek is Michiel Heyns se Engelse vertaling van die roman (2006), wat verdere vrae rondom taal en interpretasie laat ontstaan. Sodanige vrae is alreeds implisiet in die narratief gesetel en verskaf 'n indringende lens waardeur die roman in sy geheel gelees kan word.

In die Inleiding gee ek 'n kort oorsig van die verhaalloop, wat ook dien as 'n bekendstelling van die roman se temas en die linguistieke kompleksiteite wat ontstaan as 'n gevolg van die roman se struktuur. 'n Beskrywing van Realisme in die roman volg, waarin ek suggereer dat 'n beskouing van die tradisie van Realisme nuttig kan wees vir 'n

verkenning van die mimetiese effek in *Agaat*. Volgende word die verskyning en geskiedenis van die plaasroman en "farm novel" in Suid-Afrikaanse literatuur bekyk.

In Hoofstuk Een word die strukturele elemente van die roman in groter detail beskou deur middel van 'n noukeurige analise van die vyf verskillende narratiewe stemme in die roman. Ek stel voor dat die roman 'n verwikkelde studie van identiteit en subjektwiteit is, wat terselfdetyd ook sekere vrae rondom stem en outeurskap ontbloot. Die onderwerp van die roman en die aandag wat dit skenk aan noukeurige beskrywings van boerdery en die landelike omgewing skep die indruk van 'n historiese rekord en situeer *Agaat* in die genre van die plaasroman, maar die effek van die verskillende stemme is dat enige stabiele narratiewe outoriteit op deurslaggewende wyse ondermyn word.

Desondanks bly *Agaat* 'n indrukwekkende kompendium van die materiële aspekte van die lewe. In Hoofstuk Twee verken ek die manier waarop die liggaam en die self gesetel is binne 'n baie spesifieke landskap en ligging. Hoe en om watter rede word subjektiwiteit en identiteit versplinter en geartikuleer deur middel van metafore van spasie en die ervaring van plek? Deur die loop van 'n noukeurige lees van die roman betrek ek breedvoerig sekere post-strukturele gedagtes oor taal, asook Suid-Afrikaanse kritici se beskouings oor die genre van die plaasroman.

Die derde en laaste hoofstuk ondersoek die roman *Agaat* in vertaling. *Agaat* is 'n diep literêre roman. Dit betrek 'n merkwaardige verskeidenheid kulturele verwysings en is deurspek met vrae rondom interpretasie en 'n indringende en komplekse ondersoek na die aard van taal. Michiel Heyns se Engelse vertaling bly 'n roman oor Afrikaans. Presies hoe dít bewerkstellig word opper sekere vrae oor vertaling wat verwys na die "postkoloniale", as mens Suid-Afrika in hierdie lig sou beskou, en ook na die spesifiek plaaslike. Daarom word 'n opsommende konteks van vertaling en taalpolitiek in die "postkoloniale" en in Suid-Afrika belig, voordat die tegniek waardeur *Agaat* van Afrikaans na Engels vertaal is, van naderby bekyk word. Ek sluit af met opmerkings oor die sukses van die vertaling na Engels en stel voor dat die vertaling meesterlik is, maar dat die mees treffende aspekte daarvan 'n plaaslike, Suid-Afrikaanse leser vereis.

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INTRODUCTION

"The Weight of My Skeleton is My Only Honesty" [1]: Language and the speaking body in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*

I

The novel *Agaat* by South African writer and academic Marlene van Niekerk was published in Afrikaans in 2004 and appeared two years later in English translation by Michiel Heyns. *Agaat* tells the life-story of Milla de Wet, a 70-year-old woman who lies dying of motor neuron disease on her farm in the Overberg region of the Western Cape from late 1996 to early 1997. She is progressively crippled and unable to speak, with little and eventually no means of communication, but her mind is lucid (at least if her narrative is to be believed) and she also retains her senses, particularly of smell and hearing. The bulk of the novel is ostensibly Milla's first-person interior monologue, as she lies on her deathbed, interspersed with memories recounted in the second person and passages from her diary. Milla is nursed by the novel's title-character, the woman Agaat Lourier. It appears that the 'coloured' Agaat is the 'white' Milla's maid, but, as gradually emerges in the novel, she is also her erstwhile adopted daughter and the surrogate mother of Milla's only child, the boy Jakkie. The novel becomes as much the life-story of Agaat and the recounting of the two women's relationship as it is Milla's memoir. By the time Milla lies dying, the now-grown Jakkie has lived in Canada for a decade after deserting from the apartheid-era army and Milla's husband Jak has died in a gruesome car accident. At the start of the novel Agaat has for a few months been reading aloud to Milla from Milla's diaries from the 1950s through to the 1970s and this recitation continues throughout the novel.

It emerges piecemeal through a retrospective piecing together of memory that Agaat, as a five-year-old, was 'adopted' or 'fostered' by Milla. This was neither a socially nor legally

[1] This quote is from page 102 of the novel *Agaat*. All references to *Agaat* through-out this thesis are, unless otherwise noted, from Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004). Heyns, Michiel (trans.). Jeppestown & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball & Tafelberg, 2006. Henceforth only page-numbers are given as reference.

sanctioned process and its legitimacy is further problematised by the text. The details of Agaat's origins are central to the novel – both how it was recorded (or not) and/or remembered by Milla and how or if Agaat remembers it herself. It is the central question which Agaat is driving towards in her reading aloud of Milla's diaries and so also becomes the novel's impetus. It is only in the final chapter that we read Milla's full recollection of the day she took Agaat from her family and only in the epilogue that Agaat's fairy-tale like version is heard. These central themes emerge in the present tense of the novel, narrated by Milla. The extracts from Milla's diaries, as they are read by Agaat, recount the past and Agaat's reading aloud is the manner through which she confronts Milla with their shared history.

Much of the impact of *Agaat* and the exposition of the novel's themes depend upon its structure, specifically the use of four different narrative voices in the novel's main section and a fifth voice in the Prologue and Epilogue. In Chapter One of this thesis I examine this structuring in detail to suggest that Marlene van Niekerk is subtly but persistently questioning the limits of language and narrative, and the possibility or otherwise of constructing a stable sense of self through narrative means. These voices are briefly: Milla's first-person present-tense monologue; the second-person passages where Milla addresses herself about her past; extracts from Milla's diaries (also written in the first person and present tense); first-person stream-of-consciousness interludes; and Jakkie's first-person present-tense narrative in the Prologue and Epilogue. Each narrative strand or technique contributes to the construction of its fictional subject(s) in different ways. As a result, an elaborate study of subjectivity simultaneously uproots questions of voice and authorship and in the process, the enterprise of writing – literature – itself.

How Agaat came to Grootmoedersdrift is the mystery at the heart of the novel, but her relegation at the age of thirteen from child to maid is equally central, to a degree neither Milla nor Agaat can ever adequately articulate or explain. Her history is only revealed in the novel's final chapters, but Agaat was born on Milla's mother's farm, the biological daughter of Milla's former nanny, Maria Lourier, and "Damon Steefert, a man from Worcester with a long jaw but for the rest from the dregs" (654). Maria was already in

her forties with grown-up children when the child was born with a stunted arm and hand. Agaat was severely abused and neglected by her biological family (including some kind of sexual abuse, though these details are scanty and never directly addressed). She does not talk but only makes a "scraping sound" when she is asked her name. As Milla recalls in the final chapter of the novel: "That was the beginning. That sound …. Ggggg at the back of the throat, as if it were a sound that belonged to yourself" (657). When Milla's mother tells Milla about Agaat, the child is about five years old. Milla subsequently finds Agaat and, appalled, takes her home to Grootmoedersdrift. Milla and her husband Jak have been unable to conceive after seven years of marriage and Milla 'adopting' Agaat at least in part fulfils her desire for a child of her own. Milla teaches Agaat to speak and she is baptised within the NG Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church). Milla lavishes Agaat with attention and teaches her the linguistic-cultural heritage from whence she comes and which was primarily taught to her by her father: Afrikaans folklore and song and the names for all the natural life on the farm. But Milla's attitude towards Agaat is nevertheless complex – she is herself taken aback and embarrassed by the strength of her feelings for the child.

Agaat is a 'coloured' child effectively adopted by a 'white' woman in rural South Africa in the 1950s. (She is furthermore the child of farm-labourers, so the proscriptions against farm-owner Milla's adoption of her are not only racial but to a lesser degree also class-based. Race and class are notoriously intertwined in South Africa.) Milla is sometimes maternal and loving and sometimes harshly disciplinarian. She is hurt when the unconventional adoption is criticised by others, and particularly rails against her husband's and mother's scorn, but she can never overcome her own prejudices. It is never clear what Milla's plan is for the child whom she both tries to keep "in her place" (575) and from whom she also seeks comfort, even creeping into the child's bed when the abusive Jak beats her. However, when Milla falls pregnant, when Agaat is thirteen, Agaat is made into a servant. She is removed from her room in the farmhouse to a back room, is given new clothes of the kind that house maids typically wear, is taught housekeeping and farming tasks, and is paid a daily wage. Milla's ambivalent feelings towards Agaat, from Agaat's childhood through to the present-day of the novel, resonate with generally

strained race relations in Southern Africa, but are furthermore complicated by the particularly problematic division(s) between 'Afrikaner' and 'coloured' identity. The 1950s were the first decade of rule by the Nationalist Party, who came to power on the apartheid-ticket and this was thus a period when 'separateness' between so-called cultures and races became ever-more ideologically entrenched. However, such separation between 'white' and 'coloured' Afrikaans-speakers has always been problematic and is, according to some, fictitious. One complicating factor is a shared language that emerged as a hybridised creole amongst the 'mixed race' peoples who would eventually be labelled 'coloured' under apartheid laws. Afrikaans, originally derided by Dutch settlers as a 'kitchen-language' spoken by slaves, was later appropriated as a nationalist rallying call for the ('white') 'Afrikaner volk' in the early 20th century. As such, Milla and Agaat's relationship, fraught as it is with simultaneous intimacy and disavowal, can be read as broadly symbolic of the complex ties between 'Afrikaner' and 'coloured' notions of identity.

Yet it is not only its structure and the fundamental incongruities this structure creates which makes *Agaat* an astounding novel worthy of academic scrutiny.[2] If Marlene van Niekerk profoundly problematises language, she never lets her reader forget that it is a speaking *body* who speaks (or writes), an affective entity in a physical world. *Agaat* illustrates Bakhtin's assertion that "the human being in the novel is first, foremost and always a *speaking* human being; the novel requires speaking persons bringing with them their own ideological discourse, their own language…" (116; my emphasis). I would argue that the prioritising of *felt* experience and the senses proposes an innovative conception of self (at least within a South African literary tradition). Van Niekerk destabilises *fixed* notions of identity and self based around race or social position, instead illustrating a profoundly personal and linguistically constructed sense of self.

While the novel's various voices serve to unravel narrative authority and certainty, the novel is also a remarkable compendium of the nitty-gritty of *life*. The life it documents is

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[2] The dedication at time of writing of the latest issue of UNISA's *Journal of Literary Studies* (September 2009) to Marlene van Niekerk's work is just one sign of the writer's topicality.

life on a farm, the idea of which is so central to the ‘South African psyche’, if one can speak of such a thing, or at least the South African *‘white’* literary psyche. This centrality of the farm in white and particularly Afrikaans fiction is widely documented in South African literary criticism. Chris van der Merwe suggests that

> the presentation of the farm in Afrikaans fiction reflects the historical process of urbanisation in South Africa; but more than that, it reflects ideological changes that took place. Fiction presents the reader with a history of events as well as a history of ideas. The ideological developments which can be traced through fiction, form an important part of the history of a country. (“The Farm” 162)

He goes on to suggest that as “Afrikaner ideology” has changed over the course of the past century, so

> the farm continually changed its face, appearing inter alia as an idyllic home; as the locus of a hard but morally sound way of life, as the root of racism and oppression, and as a place of isolation and loneliness. The farm is seldom an ideologically neutral space in Afrikaans fiction; through its portrayal, the writers position themselves in their examination of and involvement in the rise and fall of an ideology. (*ibid.* 165)

It is thus tellingly in its *specificity* (and not its generality nor its ‘type’ as *plaasroman*), that the novel *Agaat* and the spaces of the novel must be examined. The detail of farming and gardening, nursing and illness, mountain, forest and sea, is wrought in a grinding, sometimes almost crushing, realism. This aspect and its achievement makes the novel worthy of study. The *plaasroman* will be discussed in further detail later in this Introduction, and this exposition serves as a precursor to Chapter Two, where the main consideration is the depiction of the spaces of the novel and crucially, the manner in which the characters relate to these spaces and understand themselves through them. The

question posed in Chapter Two is broadly: how is subjectivity, and identity, refracted and articulated through metaphors of space and the experiences of place?

It is necessary to clarify what is understood by notions of identity and place. While both ‘space’ and ‘place’ are relevant in what follows, I work from the distinction between the two made by Viljoen, Lewis and Van der Merwe: “Space in the most abstract, theoretical sense, is pure extension – an open area without boundaries …. As soon as we inhabit certain spaces, experience them, start telling stories about them, they are transformed into places with boundaries and associated with emotions and meaningful events” (14). In using metaphors of space to anchor herself in her body, Milla turns sometimes frightening and overwhelming spaces into navigatable – and hence understandable - places. Similarly, identity and subjectivity are related but distinct concepts. I understand ‘identity’ as a public role or set of roles: a stable if not fixed self which can be understood, reacted to, indeed ‘read’, by other people. According to Hofstede, "identity is determined by the symbols, the rituals, the heroes and ultimately by the value system of a community" (qtd. in Du Plooy 47). Subjectivity is in turn the interior *experience* of that self - how it *feels* to be that identity. Katherine Woodward explains that “[t]he concept of subjectivity allows for an exploration of the feelings which are brought and the personal investment which is made in positions of identity and of the reasons why we are attached to particular identities” (39). The analysis which follows in Chapter Two examines the close interplay between identities and their concomitant rituals, public and private, which provoke a subjective relationship to the land.

Finally, *Agaat* is also an ode to (and originally *in*) Afrikaans. In my study of the novel, I use the English translation by Michiel Heyns as my primary source, yet translated into English it remains a novel of and about Afrikaans. *Agaat* is a deeply literary novel, drawing on a remarkably wide lexicon of cultural references. In the English edition, these lexical references are both translations from the original Afrikaans and also include insertions from English (primarily British) literary culture. In Chapter Three of this thesis I address such questions of translation, which pertain to both the ‘postcolonial’, if one reads South Africa as such and more usefully, I would argue, the specifically local.

To speak of 'cultural value' is never a neutral enterprise and yet I cannot but consider this novel a repository of both a language and equally a (series of) historical moments and as such a novel of *profound* cultural value, within Afrikaans letters and in its translation into English, within the South African arts and international literature.

When considering translation it is useful to be reminded of the etymology of the word itself, which has at its root the meaning of "carrying across" [3]. This is noted by Eve Bannet, who writes that "translation, *Übersetzung* and *traduction*" as well as metaphor all "etymologically mean to carry something across" (583). She also observes:

> If, as Jakobson argues, 'for the linguist, like for the ordinary language user, the meaning of a word is nothing but its translation by another sign which can be substituted for it' …, then all forms of understanding, explanation, repetition, interpretation, and commentary which involve rewording or substitution are translations …. Interlingual translation can be treated as a boundary situation, as a test case, and as an avenue through which other modes of rewording and re-(a)signing can be rethought. (579)

Translation is a useful conceptual tool to understand the very fabric of the novel *Agaat*, even in its original Afrikaans. While Chapter Three examines the novel's literal translation from Afrikaans into English, a concern and fascination with translation infuses my analysis throughout this thesis, founded on Walter Benjamin's conviction that "translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test" but that "all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of language" (18 – 19). *Agaat* is a novel that explicates this foreignness of language, and offers in its place a thoroughly embodied response to the world made foreign.

[3] I am here indebted to my supervisor Prof Dirk Klopper who has more than once reminded me of this.

II

When I praise the book *Agaat* as a "compendium of the nitty-gritty of *life*", I am considering the genre of the novel as a whole as fundamentally Realist. I am starting with the conviction that the novel in its many incarnations through the centuries is still at heart concerned with mimetic *representation,* even if the effect of much (literary) fiction is to destabilise and to problematise precisely how the world is represented on paper. This is founded on a further conviction that the greatest novels, including the novel *Agaat*, are compelling and ultimately memorable because they 'feel real' (and consequently, because of the techniques through which they 'feel real'). *Agaat* is a novel which calls on the senses in a particular way, and recreates a place in such rich detail that one finishes reading the novel believing that not only the Overberg-region but also the farm, the drift, the expansive garden and the large echoing farm-house that Marlene van Niekerk describes really are there. Realism might be a (set of) technique(s) routinely problematised yet the critique Van Niekerk subtly yet soundly levers at language and narrative is dependent on the skill with which her characters live and breathe out of the pages of her novel, in other words, how they appear to be corporeal beings located within a certain space, place and time.

One might furthermore say that a novel like *Agaat* feels 'real' because it accords with the reader's experience of lived life, or rather, accords with our own experience just enough to be believable and to *expand our own experience.* To follow Paul Ricoeur, as paraphrased by Willie Burger:

> Through the reading process a possible world is opened up in front of the text, and the reader enters this possible world by means of the imagination. The reader thus experiences the horizon of experience (the world of the reader) and the horizon of the imagination (the world of the text) simultaneously, and these horizons merge, leaving the (world of the) reader changed. When it is said that one is *moved* by a work of art, in this sense it would mean that one has moved out of one's own world into another and

> that this experience changes one as one's worldview and perception of oneself are changed in the process. (30, emphasis in original)

Any novel can be seen as *translation* in and out of language (rather than and not necessarily between languages): a (fictional) world is created in the text, which, although fictional, is enough of a translation of lived experience that it accords with, or translates, our experience of our world(s) and enables and encourages us to enter "the world of the text". For a (semi) fictional account of this translation between fiction and reality, which is implicit in the act of writing and reading, I turn to JM Coetzee, from his fictionalised memoir *Youth.* Coetzee is discussing his young protagonist's study of *Madame Bovary* and his desire to meet a woman like its title character:

> Of course Emma Bovary is a fictional creation, he will never run into her in the street. But Emma was *not created out of nothing*: she had her origin in the flesh and blood experiences of her author, experiences that were then subjected to the transfiguring fire of art. If Emma had an original, or several originals, then it follows that women like Emma and Emma's original should exist in the real world. And even if it is not so, even if no woman in the real world is quite like Emma, there must be many women so deeply affected by their reading of *Madame Bovary* that they fall under Emma's spell and are transformed into versions of her. They may not be the *real* Emma but in a sense they are her *living embodiment*. (Coetzee *Youth* 25; my emphasis)

What is crucially important is that it is not simply a translation from the 'real' into language (and hence the text) that occurs in the process of writing fiction and reading it – we in turn also translate from language into 'reality', making sense of the world around us through the (meta) narratives and the building blocks of language at our disposal, not least those we encounter in literature and other written texts: "we are not constituted by memory alone, but by *the act of language*, by the enunciation of memory in and through language" (Du Plooy 47; my emphasis).

In the novel *Agaat* there is a continuous layering of detail to substantiate the body and physical experience. There is at the same time a continuous awareness of the one-sidedness of this bodily experience and the unreliability of representing it in *text*. *Who* is speaking in the novel is questioned (is it Milla or Agaat, or even Jakkie?). On a more ontological level, whether or not this person could be speaking (within the logic of the novel) and what kind of *text* is subsequently created in their telling, is also under scrutiny. Hence the reader not only confronts one (or more) very unreliable narrator(s), but the unreliability of text itself. This is contained within the fundamental impossibility of Milla's telling her life-story at all. She is incapable of communicating, locked within her body as she is. It is also apparent in the hesitance around writing expressed in Milla's diary. While writing is something she feels compelled to do, she is also quite aware that it is an ordering of truth, a way of organizing how she understands the life around her on the farm, and at the same time, she is sometimes scared of putting things down on paper. There is the very tangible sense in the novel that writing both has the power to change how things are remembered, while it also has the ability to *cement* and so to make one confront what one wishes to avoid.

Clearly a novel's claim to verisimilitude is not simple. What accounts for 'real' or 'life-like' is ever undergoing revision, not least within literature. The history of the novel as a genre can be seen as a tug-of-war between improving realistic depiction, and destroying – or deconstructing, in late(r) incarnations – those attempts. Stephen Mulhall puts it thus:

> The history of the novel since Defoe, Richardson, and Sterne might … be written entirely in terms of the ways in which novelists repeatedly subject their inheritance of realistic conventions to critical questioning in order to *re-create the impression of reality in their readers* (in large part by encouraging those readers to see prior uses of convention to represent the real as merely conventional in contrast with their own, far more convincing ones). This reflexive or deconstructive operation is not something that began with the modernist literary projects of Joyce and T.S. Eliot; it can be traced back through Hardy and Dickens, Austen and Scott, to Swift and Sterne and

> so to the origin of the genre itself. In effect, then, it is not simply that the novel has a cannibalistic relation to other literary genres; from the outset, its practitioners had a similarly Oedipal relation to prior examples within the genre of the novel, and so to the prior conventions within which they necessarily operated. (Mulhall 145, my emphasis)

At the heart of the project of the novel is a questioning of the process by which 'reality' is rendered on the page. Language is never *quite* up to the task of representing reality and so almost every generation of writers has concocted new tricks, or at the very least decided to abandon (and/or subvert) those practised by the generation before. Here we see Marlene van Niekerk falling squarely into the novel's historical trajectory, as outlined by Mulhall. To "re-create the impression of reality in [her] readers" Van Niekerk combines a staggering degree of exact (and at times excessive) detail with a highly self-conscious and multi-layered awareness of the ambiguous power of words. In other words, Van Niekerk's Realism is heavily inflected by both Modernist and broadly 'post-Modernist' literary techniques – the use of stream-of-consciousness, unreliable and self-conscious narration, a deliberate reliance on psychology and a profuse intertextuality.[4]

The conventions of Realism have been criticised for naturalising or normalising the status quo, and so in effect 'masking reality', particularly by Marxist-inclined critics. Dennis Walder writes:

> [the] realist form of the novel has been attacked by some modern critics, not so much for constructing the illusion of reality *per se*, but because in so doing, it is argued, it produces overcomforting fictions and passes these off as how things really are …. Instead of challenging their readers' perceptions and expectations, realist novels cater for and confirm all their most deeply held preconceptions. (56)

[4] See Van Niekerk's comments on quite consciously using – and preferring – fiction-writing as a means to explore psychological concepts (in *Agaat*) and philosophy (in her debut novel *Triomf)* (qtd. in Burger "Marlene van Niekerk oor haar skryfwerk" 152).

Some realist novels of the early 19th century might buckle under the charge of confirming preconceptions (see for example the now-familiar charge against Jane Austen that she gives little if any voice to the working class and entirely elides Regency England's colonial project), but from the genre's earliest materialization, realist novels also used such techniques to show the cracks and fissures in the social order (or competing social orders). It is useful (and particularly useful considering the problematics around the individual and language-use that emerge in *Agaat*) to remember Mikhail Bakhtin's insistence on the novel as 'polyvocal' and his suggestion that

> What is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one's own language as it is perceived in someone else's language, coming to know one's own belief system in someone else's system. There takes place within the novel an ideological translation of another's language, and an overcoming of its otherness – an otherness that is only contingent, external, illusory …. The primary stylistic project of the novel as a genre is to create images of languages. (in Morris 120)[5]

III

This polyphony of 'languages' and hence ideological positions is important when we move to a consideration of the *plaasroman*. It is easy to consider the earliest examples of the genre by writers like C.M. Van den Heever and D.F. Malherbe as 'typifying' the genre as a whole, but this is revisionist. It is a tendency which almost achieves the same as that which the genre on a whole is lambasted for: naturalising or 'immortalising' an Afrikaner past on the farm. Ampie Coetzee questions the validity of considering this 'genre' generic at all; or perhaps more accurately, the usefulness of such a classification, when so many of the novels speak 'against' each other, offering little similarity in

[5] It is somewhat self-evident yet crucial to remember that Bakhtin's use of the term "language" should be understood broadly as "any communication system employing signs that are ordered in a particular manner", whereas he uses "national language" to denote "the traditional linguistic unities (English, Russian, French, etc.)" commonly defined by the word (Holquist 430). In this spirit, a "person enclosed in a totally unitary language cannot perceive an image of that language since they cannot get outside it. Their consciousness, their ideological perception will be bonded to their words. Only a relativizing of one language against the outlines of another allows one to construct the image of a language and so break the bonds of any language's absolute authority" (Morris 113).

outlook other than the outlook of being *from* a farm located within South African borders. Coetzee encourages us to rather see all the instances of the *plaasroman* as instances in the much broader narrative around land in South Africa (which includes laws and speeches), which all reflect something about the "discourse on land and power" historically (and contemporaneously), and not to consider the *plaasroman* as "represent[ing] a microcosm – or metaphor for the Afrikaner, for instance, as literary historians would like to say – because it is part of the macrocosm of a South African reality" ("My Birthright" 129).

Conflict over land is endemic to South Africa and land and issues of land are entirely implicated in the idea of the 'Afrikaner'. Consequently, the farm and the Afrikaner are historically impossible to disentangle: "historians have created the construct that the beginning of land was the beginning of the Afrikaner", to such a degree that "the land and the Boer have been one for a long time, and the perception has been created that identity and land are equal" (A. Coetzee "My Birthright" 133-136). In the 1920s and 1930s many Afrikaans-speaking 'white' South Africans moved from rural to urban areas (due to a variety of factors, including industrialisation and the Great Depression). This move both coincided with and helped spur the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, which in its attempts to (re)forge a sense of nationhood (to some degree dormant since Afrikaner defeat in the Anglo-Boer War) drew on an Afrikaner history of the *trekboers* and an 'inalienable' affinity with and to the land of South Africa. The Afrikaner *'volk'* were repeatedly conflated, as God's Chosen People, with the Biblical Jews delivered out of Canaan, as the *volk* were delivered first out of Europe and then out of the British Cape. This project of nation-building was also, as has been documented extensively, concerned with establishing a *cultural* legitimacy for Afrikaners, on an equal footing with any in Europe (if on African soil). This attempt drew, similarly to German Nationalism, on an idealised and valorised past, a "romantic nationalism" (see Van Wyk Smith's "Boereplaas to Vlakplaas" 17). In this milieu the farm became even more potently symbolic (as did the conflation of the Afrikaans language or '*mother*-tongue' with hearth and home) as "Afrikaners saw the farm as a central emblem in their national discourse of self-justification" (*ibid.* 18). It is in this environment that the earliest examples of the *plaasroman* are written and published. It is already (as the people who call themselves

Afrikaners move from the farm to the town and city in great numbers) describing an idealised past, or a present which *longs* for an idealised past, where the problems of the present (modernity, industrialisation, drought and struggle) are brought into relief by this evocation of more traditional (and generally conservative) ways of living. These novels serve to some degree to create a collective 'memory' of this rural past, and as argued previously, the error of considering these first novels typical of the genre as a whole in a sense cements this collective memory further.

Any idyllic recollection was however always fragile, not least because Afrikaners equally held on to ideas of their forefathers and mothers as tough fighting frontier-folk, who carved out the land through sweat and toil. This is parodied in *Agaat* in Milla's mother's eulogising her "great-great-great-grandmother who farmed there all alone for thirty years after her husband's death … There was a woman who could get a grip and hit home, blow for blow", which Jak mockingly echoes (when he is safely out of Ma's hearing):

> Once upon a time, long ago, when the world was young, in the time of the Lord Swellengrebel … there was a great-great-great-grandmother Spies, a boer woman without equal….And she called her farm Grootmoedersdrift after herself and laid out its boundaries, with, can you guess with what? With lynx-hide thongs! (28 – 29)[6]

Van Niekerk's parody also serves to illustrate how each subsequent generation has 'rewritten' the *plaasroman*. Every novel set on or in opposition to a farm in the last eighty years has uniquely captured a particular *zeitgeist*, to the extent that what defines it generically is a concern with *land*, with farm, with farm as symbol – and little else cohesively. They must be read in context, rather than continuously refracted back onto the Van den Heever and Malherbe novels.

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[6] See Van Wyk Smith's less parodic and even more bombastic example, from William Plomer's 1925 novel *Turbott Wolfe*: "Venturing like Scythians over rocky illimitable wastes, in those days unmeasured, they had come in mighty tented waggons that creaked and groaned, crude magnificent arks, on stupendous wheels, forced up and down the roadless uneven hills by straining teams of titanic oxen" (qtd. in Van Wyk Smith "Boereplaas to Vlakplaas" 21)

For South African literature written in English it is another story. Chris van der Merwe is blunt: "The identity of the Afrikaner is rooted in the farm, that of the English-speaking South African was formed in the city" ("The Farm" 161). I would argue that such bald cultural division has limited use, but it does explain in simple terms why comparatively little English-language literature relates with "farmscape".[7] It also points to the contrivance of unifying national narratives. According to Viljoen, Lewis and Van der Merwe "the South African identity remains largely contrived. Since 1994, there has been a deliberate project of unifying a divided nation by means of shared symbols like the new flag, heroic incidents such as winning the Rugby World Cup" (4). Malvern van Wyk Smith likewise cautions against the idea that there is a common unity in our local *literature*, particularly that written before the mid-1990s:

> far from demonstrating an 'anxiety of influence', Southern African writers, until relatively recently, have rather enacted an 'anxiety of non-influence'…While this is not a stance that can demand our admiration, it is also not one that can simply be wished away in the interests of a laudable cultural reconstruction and development programme … ("White Writing/Writing Black" 83)

If it is inaccurate to speak of *one* South African literature across racial or linguistic lines, then it is equally misleading to conflate the Afrikaans *plaasroman* with the English 'farm novel'. According to JM Coetzee:

> For two decades of this century, 1920 – 1940, the Afrikaans novel concerned itself almost exclusively with the farm and *platteland* (rural) society, with the Afrikaner's painful transition from farmer to townsman. Of major English-language novelists, on the other hand, only Olive Schreiner (in *The Story of an African Farm*, 1883) and Pauline Smith (in *The Beadle,* 1926, and in the stories collected in *The Little Karoo*, 1925, rev. 1930) have taken farming life as their subject. (*White Writing* 63)

[7] See Van Wyk Smith's coinage of "farmscape" in "Boereplaas to Vlakplaas".

Coetzee goes on to argue that the English novelists "conceive – indeed, cannot help conceiving – the farm in a wider context than the Afrikaans farm novelist" and that they "at the very least … provide a foil to the *plaasroman*, throwing its preconceptions into relief" (*White Writing* 63 – 64). This strikes me as somewhat simplistic (and/or dated), but the 'farm novel' and the *plaasroman* are patently different genres (even if the literal equivalence of the two terms is misleading). It is therefore once again useful to return to Ampie Coetzee's notion that novels (written in any language) about the land are part of a "discourse on land and power" broader than mere literature. Each novel should be considered independently within a wider context at its time of writing and/or publication. This is a more useful way of considering *Agaat* in English translation, than trying unsuccessfully to shoe-horn it into the relatively meagre English tradition of the farm novel. The English edition then necessarily broadens the debate around land and concomitantly, identity and self-hood.

IV

In the opening chapter of *Agaat* a distinctly meta-fictional list appears, ostensibly of books Agaat repacks on the bookshelf in Milla's room, books that Milla "threw out" in her "great clearing-out" but which Agaat kept (14). The books include titles from the South African "canon", both new and old, like *Seven Days at the Silbersteins ("Sewe dae by die Silberstein's",* in the original Afrikaans edition*), July's People, As I Lay Dying ("Ek stamel ek sterwe"), The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena ("Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena"), The Story of an African Farm* and *In the Heart of the Country.* The connection between the story that is about to unfold on Grootmoedersdrift and these novels chronicling South African farm- and country-life is made even more self-consciously apparent when Agaat comments to Milla that "not one of" the books she is repacking and has read aloud to Milla "was as good a read as my [Milla's] diary, all you had to do was fill in the punctuation and write everything out in full, then you had a best-seller" (14). There is more than a certain irony here. The novel we are reading contains Milla's diary verbatim – idiosyncratic punctuation and abbreviations included - and it is Milla's commentary in the present-tense that holds the narrative together.

Michiel Heyns, who translated *Agaat* into English, suggests that the novel "really takes the *plaasroman* by storm" and "deconstructs all those things that are sacred to the *plaasroman*" whereupon his interviewer Leon de Kock suggests the novel does this "very consciously" and that "the bookshelf [discussed above] was like a reading list … as if to say, 'Here are the books I'm rewriting …'". Marlene van Niekerk's response is that it was very deliberate ("*Dit was baie aspris, ja*") (all qtd. in De Kock *Intimate Enemies* 137 – 138). Considering the utterly central role that the farm has in the novel *Agaat,* it would not have seemed out of place had it been named *Grootmoedersdrift* instead. The choice to title the novel *Agaat* instead is particularly interesting when considered counter to the books listed above, against which Van Niekerk "rewrites" the novel. Marlene van Niekerk has also said that Agaat, the character, remains the "Other" and the "secret" and "a projection, a ghost of all the characters' desires and fears" (my translation, qtd. in Prinsloo and Visagie 47-48). Naming the novel after this resonant void constantly calls to mind, when reading the novel, something which is essentially unknowable, rather than the farm itself, which can be staked, mapped, typologised, for which there is a long tradition, also richly illustrated in the novel.

CHAPTER ONE

"Haven't you perpetrated enough writing in your life?"[8]: The narrative structure and voices of *Agaat*

Agaat is constructed in five quite distinct narrative styles or 'voices'. While Milla is to all intents and purposes the only narrator throughout the bulk of the novel, the cumulative effect of the novel is still that of a multi-vocal text. Each different way of telling reveals a Milla unreliable and contradictory in different ways, who pays somewhat different attention to the other characters of the novel. Through the deployment of these substantively different methods of telling, ideas of interpretation – or of translation, if within one language – are embedded in the very structure of the novel, in the central question of what it means to speak and to speak for an other (or to be spoken for by an other).

This chapter provides an analysis of each of these narrative voices, which are I) the present-tense first person narrative from the point of view of Milla; II) the unsettling second-person or 'accusative' passages which appear to be Milla addressing herself about her past (and her younger self), and so recount the past in the past tense; III) the extracts from diaries that Milla wrote in the 1950s, '60s and '70s (which are, in the present tense of the novel, being read aloud to Milla by Agaat); and IV) shorter lyrical, or poetic, stream-of-consciousness passages (which are also in the present tense, but start at a point in time a little before the present tense of the first voice). Every chapter of the novel's bulk include sections in each of these four voices, while V) the Pro- and Epilogue of the novel (25 of the novel's 692 pages) are narrated in the present tense by the grown-up Jakkie.

I

Each of the novel's twenty chapters opens with a section, usually comprising roughly half the chapter's length, narrated in the first person by Milla. The central problematic for the

[8] See *Agaat* (16)

novel’s interior logic soon becomes clear: the narrating voice cannot speak and is dependent on an initially unnamed “her” or “she”. In the second paragraph of the first chapter this voice (not yet revealed as Milla’s) says “this morning I had to stare and stare at the black box…Eventually I managed to catch her eye, and point my stare, thére… thére!" (9). It is another two pages before the “her” or “she” is called by name and revealed as the title-character Agaat. A few pages later we read “Yes or no I can signal. Or I can close my eyes” (13). This first voice emerges as a record of Milla’s thoughts, memories and feelings. It includes what Agaat says to her and how Agaat interprets Milla’s thoughts and speaks them back to Milla. Fragmented conversations blur with Milla’s thoughts, which track Agaat’s movements through the farmhouse as Milla hears her and imagines what she is doing. It must be emphasized how much of the first voice is taken up by this ceaseless attention to (imagined) detail that never lets us forget quite how dependent upon Agaat Milla is and feels. Milla’s internal monologue also often consists of a hyper-real and quite hypnotic (or exhaustive) attention to the minutiae of her room, the procedures of Agaat nursing her, and lyrical flights of fancy into the past and also outside the confines of the sick-room to the Overberg region beyond. Yet at the core of this voice is the slippage in thought and speech between Milla and Agaat.

When the novel starts, Milla has been unable to speak for three years but was still able to write by using a splint or glove of sorts to hold the pen, until fairly recently before the novel’s present. In the opening chapter Milla’s last attempt to write is described. She tries to write the word “map”, to tell Agaat that she wants to see the maps of the farm, but the effort this costs Milla is an illustration of how much energy goes into her (mostly futile) attempts to communicate as she would like to:

> I want to write.
> To the string running down my right arm I devote particular attention. I imagine that it’s dark brown. I gather it into a thick smooth bundle, shiny as kelp in the swell, an elegant tassel at the far end, long sensitive strings of seaweed with fine ramifications in each of the first three fingers of my right hand.

> I wait for the right moment. Nothing to lose. Breathe in, send the signal, breathe out for the leap.
> Write!...
> With extra momentum I force the command down into my hand to the furthest extremities.
> Write!
> I manage to draw one leg of the m before the pen slips away from my fingers and rolls over the bedspread and falls from the bed.
> My hand lies in the splint like a mole in a trap. (22)

When Agaat comes back to Milla's room and pulls off the splint, Milla imagines the splint "like the arm-guard of a falconer" and goes on to wish "if only my word would come and perch on it, tame and obedient, if I could pull a hood with little bells over its head" (40). Two things are striking here. The word (in this case, "map") is the smallest unit of meaning that the complex sentence-structures of language have been reduced to. The word is not even a word yet, it is not even, as Milla wishes it to be, the two down-strokes of an "m", roundness of the "a" (etc) (or "k-a-a-r-t" in the Afrikaans). It is an interior, calibrated action – "send the signal", "I force the command" – and as such, is something that emanates from *inside* Milla. Yet crucially, what this extract demonstrates, is that this word, which is standing in for the more complex structures of language (the spoken sentence "I want to see the maps of the farm"), is also exterior or 'out there'. The word could once be tamed, could be made to "come and perch", but it is now out of Milla's control. Because it has no *actual* weight the word fails her. Language seems as though it comes from our deepest core, but when we cannot speak or write, or otherwise communicate, its systematic nature emerges: it is outside us, a system that will no longer bend to our will. According to Merleau-Ponty: "we live in…a linguistic world 'where speech is an institution'" (qtd. in Vasterling 212). Furthermore, "language … is never purely creative expression; it is also, at the same time, inscribed in established systems of expression, of vocabulary and syntax" (Vasterling 212).

The above extract is also an example of the heavily metaphorical and poetic interior language with which Van Niekerk writes Milla, whose inhabiting of the world has, as her paralysis advances, been replaced with a finely-observed inhabiting of her body. Her body has become the only landscape in which she can still roam, and she observes it with the same attention to detail with which she remembers the landscape of the farm, and often in metaphors taken directly from the dramatic mountain- and seascapes of the Overberg region. Earlier in her description of using the splint to try to write, she says: "I gather my resources. *I try to find handholds inside myself.* Rye grass, klaaslouw bush, wattle branches to anchor myself against the precipice. Diehard species. *I feel around inside myself*. There's still vegetation, there's water, there's soil" (16, my emphasis). This near-constant exploration of the landscape to understand the self is crucial to the characterisation of Milla and is particularly evident in this first voice. This understanding will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 2, where I take as my starting point the role that "spatiality" plays in the "processes of identity construction" (Viljoen et al 2).

Milla and Agaat's communication is in part achieved through Milla blinking yes or no to Agaat's questions. But often these are not simple queries, but complicated constructions that echo Milla's thoughts and desires. Milla imagines fluent conversations between the two of them, or relays (to the reader) what she is apparently telling Agaat by simply looking at her in a certain way, or "signalling" to her, as Milla calls it. This communication, through looks whose meaning Milla imagines Agaat to understand, is clearly untrustworthy – both between Milla and Agaat, and in the manner in which it is relayed to the reader. At one point Agaat says: "We must eat early tonight. I want to get working". Milla responds: "Work, for the night is coming, *that's what I think, but what I signal is*: that will be fine. I've been wanting an egg for a long time" (159, my emphasis).[9] This kind of logically *impossible* communication is so recurrent through the novel that the reader is beguiled into believing it. Much of the effect of and the comedy in the exchanges between Milla and Agaat depend on this fundamental impossibility. In the

[9] "Work, for the night is coming" references the 19th century hymn which opens with these lines. This brief extract thus also illustrates the constant and complex interlayering of literary and musical references, and translator Michiel Heyns's skill in finding appropriate English replacements for the original Afrikaans (which is in this case virtually identical: "Werk want die nag kom nader" Van Niekerk *Agaat* 167).

above example what is striking is not only the assumption that Agaat will understand Milla's *look* to mean "Yes" as well as the subtly resigned "that will be fine. I've been wanting an egg for a long time", but moreover the implication that if Milla had *wanted* to, she could have instead signalled her first thought, her 'real' thought: "Work, for the night is coming". How would this be possible outside the realm of mental telepathy (even if one accepts that some level of 'telepathy' can develop between people, especially in a relationship as intimate as Milla and Agaat's)? The system of *signalling* through looks alone is being treated like a language by Milla. Despite Milla's ardent desires that it could replace her lost language its depiction in this voice also illustrates its limits.

In the course of the novel Agaat works out a more dependable system for Milla and her to converse through. She points at an alphabet chart and at individual words hung on the walls of Milla's room, Milla blinks yes or no, and Agaat then painstakingly cobbles together the old woman's clipped, abbreviated thoughts. Milla observes:

> But it's getting more complicated. Now she's added to the alphabet auxiliary lists on slips of paper, opening phrases and conjunctions...
> There's a whole grammar developing there on the wall. Every day there's more of it. Question mark, exclamation mark, swearword, dots to mark an implication. A skeleton of language, written down in print and in script with a Koki chalk, bigger, more complicated than Agaat on her own, than I or the two of us together could think up. (436)

This is a system constructed ostensibly so that Milla can still have some autonomous hold on language, and crucially, it gives Milla access to the *system* of language, which exists outside and beyond the private world of the two of them, which is "bigger, more complicated…than…the two of us together could think up". But it is also at the same time only "a skeleton of language", not full-bodied. It is up to Agaat to "flesh out" Milla's spellings, to give body to her thoughts through actually speaking them out loud, and placing stresses and intonations (in some instances parroting Milla's particular tone of phrase perfectly).

As in the earlier example of Milla attempting to write, the *physical* dimension of language and expression is being highlighted: language is the ability to articulate, through breath and vocal chords, or through the physical act of writing, or in the case of the alphabet chart-system, a combination of these, *pointing* at the right letter and *sounding* it out in combination with the rest (or deciding not to). The system also becomes, ironically, another way for Agaat to withhold speech from Milla, in an exercise of power. Milla rightly distrusts the new system (while being dependent on it):

> It's only common decency, her responding, I spelt out for her. But she often remains quiet. Or she says, next sentence please. Or she shrugs her shoulders, which means, you answer it yourself. Or she puts down the duster [used to point at the letters and words] and walks out. Or she looks at me until I shut my eyes. (437)

As the novel progresses, there are clear parallels between Agaat's interpretation for and of Milla and her constructing this system of communication for her on her deathbed, and the process through which Milla taught Agaat to speak when she was a little girl. Milla had to coax language from Agaat, through various elaborate games and tricks, including eye-gestures, and the symbolic use of fire and bellows. The alphabet chart that Agaat unearths for the "grammar developing there on the wall" is the same Biblical-themed chart with which Milla's mother taught Milla to read, and which Milla used to teach the young Agaat to read and about the Bible. When Agaat brings the chart to her room Milla wonders:

> … about the timing of the sudden appearance of our new means of communication. The old alphabet chart … did she avoid it because she was too tired? Because she realised she would be empowering me in my last moments here where I no longer hesitate to speak my mind? Because she could guess what would come out, what hád to come out between us? (434)

When thinking back on Agaat as a small child Milla reflects on the circularity of their relationship: "Barely alive and I her source of life. Now it's the other way around. Me dying and she to accompany me" (435). When recording the process of teaching Agaat to speak, Milla writes in her diary: "I want Agaat to understand that if you call things by their names, you have power over them" (527). Later on, Milla explains compound words to Agaat by showing her all the different kinds of agate in her father's "old minerals book". Milla tells Agaat:

> All the world is in your name. The things of the world are tied to one another at all points with words I say & we know one thing through the name of another thing & we join the names together. It's a chain & if you move one link then they all move the possibilities are endless. (625)

Much of the first person can be read as a meditation around this question: who has the power over "things" if it is unclear who has called them by "their names"? In this section, where Agaat articulates many of Milla's thoughts, does this mean this "power" now resides with Agaat? The question is particularly resonant when one considers how Agaat herself is named. (Agaat's naming and baptism are recorded in Milla's diaries, and moreover, in the diaries that are only read aloud by Agaat in the last chapters of the novel, during Milla's last days. As previously stressed, this mystery provides the impetus for the novel's progression). Agaat's biological family called her "Asgat". According to her older sister Lys: "She doesn't really have a name, we call her Gat, Asgat, because she sits with her arse in the ash in the fireplace all the time" (666). "Asgat" means "Ash-arse", literally "Ash-hole", and is deeply pejorative, even though it is offered as a 'non-name' when Lys claims that "she doesn't really have a name".[10] It is the local Dutch Reformed Church minister or *dominee* who suggests to Milla the name "Agaat" for the little girl, which is "Dutch for Agatha…a semi-precious stone…[which] you only see the value of … if it's correctly polished" and adds that "it's from the Greek 'agathos' which means 'good'". The *dominee* suggests (as recorded in Milla's diary) that "if your name is good…it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like a holy brand it will be, like an immanent

[10] See Mark Sanders' *Miscegenations* (24) for a further discussion of the name Agaat.

destiny, the name on the brow, to do good, to want to be good, goodness itself" (487). The small child goes from "not really having a name", or a name that signals both destruction *and* waste (fire and ash), as well as being crudely anatomical, to being called "Good", a name that is also linked to the solidly material, as a semi-precious stone. Yet the *dominee*'s claim that a name can be a "self-fulfilling prophecy" is at odds with Milla's notion of having power over something if you can call it by its name. Is Agaat good because of her name or is Milla good – and powerful – for having named her?

Milla "[makes] it her business to turn the name of rejection and abjection into something good" (Sanders 24), but Agaat's (re)christening is clearly set within certain nationalist-religious (white and paternalistic) terms. Agaat's christening is a macabre apartheid comedy with the set an empty church and the leading lady is the uncomprehending child (the ceremony takes place when no-one else is in church because the 'coloured' Agaat is not otherwise welcome there). The brute force by which she is made compliant is at odds with the supposedly holy or righteous task. This self-important righteousness is echoed when Milla writes in her diary following the discussion around Agaat's new name: "Then we knelt and he [the *dominee*] prayed for me and for Agaat and the commission I'd accepted and he thanked the Lord for another heathen soul added to the flock by the good work of a devoted child of God…" (487). Here we see echoed the idea that apartheid was a God-ordained civilising mission.

However, what is illustrated through the personal history of Milla and Agaat are the *complexities* of this "civilising mission" at the personal level. The novel as a whole is a testament to the unravelling of intention behind such compulsions, or in T.S. Eliot's words, quoted as the English edition's epigraph: "motives late revealed, and the awareness / Of things ill done and done to others' harm / Which once you took for exercise of virtue". It is perhaps too easy to deconstruct Milla's motives as fundamentally ignoble. Marlene van Niekerk has been harshly critical of Milla, saying that she "weighs in on the scale of evil much heavier than Jak" and that her "rescue" of Agaat is an "act of bloodlust" (qtd. in De Kock "Intimate Enemies" 141 – 143). However, the author also acknowledges that Milla

> knows that something is awfully, awfully wrong in all of this, but she can't get to the place where she can acknowledge it, or find it, so strongly has she integrated notions of order, notions of subservience, notions of power … I wanted to make the reader very uncomfortable, knowing something is bad and not being able to grasp what is bad, because you're under a rule of rhetoric and a rule of order that doesn't allow you to see how bad it is.
> (*ibid*. 143)

Milla's impulse to rescue the small child from unimaginable depravity stems from good. Yet the moment the child Agaat is handed from her sister to Milla "notions of order, notions of subservience, notions of power" begin to play out.

It is also interesting to note how the reciprocity of language and communication between Milla and Agaat is echoed in the physical act of nursing or caregiving. [11] When Agaat is a little girl, and is being taught to speak, she is being nursed to health by Milla (she is treated for worms, has her rotten teeth pulled, and is coaxed to relax enough to let Milla bathe her). It is only through this continuous care that she starts to speak. It is somewhat ambiguous whether she could speak, but didn't because of the trauma of her abuse and of her being removed to Grootmoedersdrift, or if she never spoke before, though her sister Lys also tells Milla that "She can talk too if she wants to" (667). Milla mothers her, but also loses her temper with her, and punishes her. Agaat is smacked with a feather-duster Milla calls "Japie", and forty years later Agaat uses a feather-duster she also calls Japie as a pointer for the alphabet-chart she brings into Milla's room, another darkly comic inversion that is also an interesting link between physical punishment and the potential (psychic) retributive power of language.

In this regard it is interesting to consider Jean-François Lyotard's conception that "thinking and suffering overlap", with *suffering* located in the Kantian sublime as the prerequisite for his sense of "authentic articulation" or creative rather than "ordinary"

[11] This was brought to my attention by Dr Ralph Goodman's comments at a postgraduate symposium in the English Department, University of Stellenbosch, September 2008.

expression: “Not the capacities of a body-subject in tune with the surrounding world but rather the receptivity of a body-soul forever haunted by the ‘sublime breakdowns’ resulting from an excess of affections is what conditions authentic articulation” (Lyotard qtd. in Vasterling 217). Agaat is sometimes tender towards Milla, and at other times harsh, even cruel. Caregiving is shown as a fluctuation between nurture and punishment, as is language. Systems of language are sometimes proffered in seeming good will – Milla teaching Agaat to speak is crucial to making her ‘human’, making her ‘good’, and Agaat’s alphabet-chart system makes communication between her and Milla possible. However, these systems are at other times withheld or causes for conflict, like Agaat’s refusal to carry on interpreting Milla if she asks her questions Agaat doesn’t want to answer, and Milla’s frustration while coaxing language from Agaat. The teaching of language is then also a *form* of caregiving.

Agaat on occasion parrots Milla’s lost intonation and tone of phrase back at her, so that Agaat is in effect in conversation with Milla, but speaking for both of them. But as these ‘conversations’ are still *reported* by Milla (as the narrator), these obtuse sentences are Milla’s thoughts, first spelt out then strung together by Agaat, spoken by Agaat (and at times answered by Agaat) but told to the reader in the first person *by* Milla:

> She puts down the stick. She reformulates my question for me in my own strain, with all my modulations of indignation. And with her own increment of pepper.
> Whát, I ask you for the how-manieth time, happened to your brown suitcase that I put on the half-shelf of the washstand in the outside room...
> Absolutely right, I blink. How excellently you can guess at the senile thoughts of an old woman. What is your reply to this? (444)

While these “senile thoughts” are spoken in Milla’s “own strain” with her “modulations of indignation”, they are *not* Milla’s when Agaat has spoken them. Agaat also “charges [Milla’s] sentences with her own resonances” and to Milla “I sound like running commentary rather than original intention”, despite her interpreting Agaat’s facial

expression as "saying": "I just spell out everything for you and say it out loud so that you can hear what you sound like" (437). Sanders argues that it is here (if anywhere) that "Agaat emerges as a focaliser…with her mimetic citation of Milla's words" (25). But interpretation is always a two-way process between them, and the reader cannot trust the (implied) agency behind the words, anymore than it seems either of the two women can trust whether she is speaking or being spoken by the other. As Milla laments: "my language feels like a brutal instrument with which I am torturing myself" (438). If the two women's "imagination is a shared one" and they "thought each other up" (as Milla claims 211-212) then this sense that Milla's language is *torturous* is yet another interesting echo of Lyotard's conception of creative expression as pain.

Agaat, presumably when she is uncomfortable with Milla's spelt-out or "signalled" questions and/or wishes to punish Milla for them, answers nonsensically, by reciting from instructional farming and embroidery manuals or with her particular sing-song mishmash of children's songs, poetry and Biblical allusions. In one example, Milla spells out "did you start the fire in the hayloft?" (431) which is answered by Agaat with a recitation from the Farmer's Handbook on the correct maintenance of a cream separator (to which Milla sardonically thinks: "Douse the fire with cream. Extremely original"). Agaat was taught a language, figuratively and literally taught a liturgy (since she was also taught Christianity), and through this language, taught a way of negotiating the world, but in her deliberately nonsensical mixing up of cultural references it becomes clear that she has, as Milla at one point says, made these cultural references into a "veritable Babel" (365), stripped of their previous contextualised meanings.

Agaat brings the world to Milla, and is her link out into the world, and there is often no clear separation between when it is the one and not the other who is, to use Butler's terminology, *performing* "the meaning conventions and the discursive practices she complies with while speaking and writing" (Vasterling 208). This voice is emphasized because it forms the first part and main body of each chapter, and because it is at least apparently from the first person point of view. The artifice of the first person narrator serves to mimic our own internal monologue, and as such, is a device to bring the reader

closer to this unknowable mute woman. Even if, on closer inspection, Milla's voice is not really her own, at least not in the sense of the traditional narrator, hers *is* the voice of the narrator. Through the most conventional narrative voice, Van Niekerk writes a voice which is profoundly unreliable and which, while it alludes to the past, is resolutely stuck in or focused on the present.[12] While it is the voice closest to novelistic convention, it is the voice through which the reader learns the least about Milla and Agaat's history. For this history, the reader must be directed to the other more complex narrative voices.

II

While each chapter of *Agaat* opens with the longer section in the first person discussed above, the order of the subsequent three sections changes around – a shorter passage written in the second person, or a series of entries from Milla's diaries, or, on a few occasions, an even shorter lyrical interlude follows. In the second-person voice questions of narrative voice and the central question of "who is speaking whom?" are still paramount, and so this voice is examined next. These passages follow one another chronologically in time (while at times skipping forward a few years), but do not have a clear connection with or bearing to the primary first-person sections, though there are occasional *echoes* from each in the other – a kind of fore (or after)-shadowing.

The use of the second person in fiction is unusual, particularly in English, and implies a shift in perspective (especially if, as here, these passages follow seemingly more conventional first person-telling, either in the first-person passages, or in diary form). The following two examples illustrate this shift:

> My hand lies in the splint like a mole in a trap.
>
> *

[12] Heilna du Plooy, writing about Breyten Breytenbach's novel *Dog Heart* and his use of a "'transparent' English in which the underlying Afrikaans grammar and idiom are clearly perceptible" points out that "the present tense for narrating […] is customary in Afrikaans, rather than the past tense, which is generally used for narration in English" (Du Plooy 47-48).

> The first time you slept with Jak, was the day after he came to declare his intentions to your parents. He was eager to get away that morning after the engagement, eager to get away from under your mother's eyes…(23)

And:

> Her fingers are cold on my eyelids.
> Rest, she says, it won't be long now, we're almost there.
>
> *
>
> The first letter you intercepted was addressed to Jakkie at Langebaan, his official numbers and codes written in stiff black block letters on the envelope. You wanted to know what Agaat had been writing to him, sitting there in her room for hours on end. (451)

The use of the second person implies a different *engagement* with the text than either the first person narrator (who is clearly present in the text) or the third person narrator (whose engagement the reader might wonder at, but who is traditionally assumed to have a certain distance from the fictional proceedings). The second person implicates both a speaker (an addresser) and an addressee (the person being addressed – the "you"). The addressee in *Agaat* is soon made clear: in the first example of the second person in the novel, in Chapter 1, we read "You knew it, Milla Redelinghuys" (23)[13], while, as is discussed below, the reader is also summoned by the accusative "you". It seemed to me at first self-evident that the *addresser* was also Milla: Milla was addressing herself about her younger self, a present-tense speaking to herself about her younger self (but *not* Milla addressing her *younger* self or speaking back in time to her younger self).[14] In the first example above, taken from the second-person extract which describes the day that Jak

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[13] Milla's maiden name is Redelinghuys, her married name De Wet. Names are clearly allegorical in the novel – Milla herself points this out when she writes "I was born Redelinghuys, house of reason" (238). She was born into the "house of reason", and she marries "the law". Jak de Wet as the violent, virile Father seems at times almost a caricatured symbol of the punitive apartheid law (see also Chris van der Merwe's Litnet review).

[14] This distinction is borne out in the text by the mixture of the past and present tense – for example, the addresser asks "How did you experience him then? Can you really remember it?" (23) which indicates a latter (present) knowledge or perspective.

and Milla first visit the farm Grootmoedersdrift (and first have sex), after visiting Milla's parents, Milla's mother is called "your mother" once, but this formal (distancing) naming immediately shifts to "Ma" (see 23) – never "your Ma", always "Ma". This intimate naming, in the extract above, is combined with details which could only be known to Milla, and a style of telling which fluctuates between narrative description and thought and opinion clearly Milla's. Milla is undoubtedly the focaliser: "…you looked down at the keys nestling between your thighs in the dip of your dress…You imagined how you were going to unlock all the doors" (23) and later "[a]nd then, money wasn't everything, work rather, toil and sweat and grit. There was a great deal of work to be done on Grootmoedersdrift before it could be called a model farm. That you never hid from Jak. And you didn't fool yourself either…" (24).

This detailed interior insight and focalised thought is typical of an omniscient narrator. But while sophisticated readers might speculate about the viewpoint of the omniscient narrator, and how the author shapes a reading through the use of the narrator (and so query the always-implied detachment of that voice), one wonders even more at the level of insight a second-person narrator can have because there is more *'person'* attached to the second-person than to the omniscient third person. Novelistic convention teaches us to accept the disembodied third-person narrator as being 'all-knowing', 'all-seeing' – as is implied in the word 'omniscient' – while still being precisely *dis*embodied. The infrequent use of a second-person voice equally teaches us to wonder at the *intention* behind its accusations, and intention implies a subject.

However, some critics have suggested that the novel can or *should* be read as Jakkie's creative reconstruction of the last month of his mother's life, and then a reading of the second person voice becomes more problematic. According to Chris van der Merwe,

> the fact that the perspective switches between "me" and "you" can mean that Milla sometimes addresses herself as "you" (and so is speaking with herself); or the "you" can mean "a person" [or "one"]; or it points towards

> the novel being a type of dialogue between Jakkie and his mother in which they reach out to each other and reproach each other[15].

Van der Merwe, I believe erroneously, disregards the systematic way in which the second person is used (or, in his terms, "the perspective switches between 'me' and 'you'"). It only occurs in these distinct passages (under present consideration) which are always an interrogation of the past, particularly of Milla and Jak's marriage and community. But Van der Merwe's second contention, that the "you" can mean "a person" and so seems almost to address the reader, is compelling. I am reminded of writer-journalist Antjie Krog's comments on her own use of the "you" in her autobiographical writing, that the insertion of the "you" breaks the monotony of the "I" and thus "invites the reader in" (2005). A fiction writer like Van Niekerk employs the second person differently from an autobiographical writer for whom the "monotony of the 'I'" is, by virtue of the genre, much more pervasive, but it is worth bearing in mind that the "you" does, even on a subliminal level, *implicate* the reader. We are used to reading "you" as being addressed to us, to "me" (for example in letters). I would hazard to say that Van Niekerk's novel, especially the original Afrikaans edition, has highly literate (and mostly 'white') Afrikaans-speaking South Africans as its primary target audience and this certainly makes the idea of an *implicated* reader persuasive and contentious. I would also wager that the academic and popular interest that this novel aroused, particularly in the highbrow Afrikaans press, affirms this idea, if not of implication, then certainly of provocation.

While the effect of the accusative "you" might be to open up the text and address the reader, I hold by the contention that it is meant to be read as Milla addressing herself, or at a stretch, as Jakkie *writing his mother* addressing herself. If the latter, then the passages in the first person would also be Jakkie writing *as* his mother in the first person. Such

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[15] "Die feit dat die perspektief tussen "ek" en "jy" wissel, kan beteken dat Milla soms na haarself as "jy" verwys (dus met haarself praat); of die "jy" kan "'n mens" beteken; of dit kan daarop dui dat die roman 'n tipe tweegesprek tussen Jakkie en sy moeder is waarin hulle na mekaar uitreik en mekaar verwyt", own translation, Van der Merwe on Litnet.

distinction seems a little moot. Whether it is (and I can find no simpler way of saying this) 'Van Niekerk writing Jakkie writing Milla addressing Milla', or 'Van Niekerk writing Milla addressing Milla', the addresser is still Milla and the "you" is still Milla too. However, if one considers Jakkie as the (fictional) compiler of the novel, having imaginatively recreated the narrative using his mother's diaries, his own memories, and the scene assembled by Agaat which he finds in his mother's room upon his return for her funeral, then certain aspects of the novel do become more plausible. It makes the narrative less *impossible* – no longer the impossible interior monologue of a (now) dead woman. However, it is not at any point in the novel *explicit* to me that this is how Jakkie should be read, and the ambiguity is distinctly post-modern. It is never clear *what* this text is, as a text which always draws attention to its textuality.

On a more thematic level, if the first voice is to a large degree the older Milla observing Agaat, then in the second voice this keen eye is turned to her younger self (though as the novel and Agaat's reading aloud from the diaries progresses, more and more memories flood into Milla's present). It is through this accusative second person voice that the main characters of the novel, particularly Milla and Jak, are placed in context and described within a family, a community and a time-period. Translator Michiel Heyns describes it as "the flashback in which we are retold in fairly conventional chronological order the story of Milla's marriage" (qtd. in Felman 3). We read of Milla and Jak's somewhat fraught position within their conservative white farming-community, where they both remain, in different ways, outsiders. For Milla, this is because of her cultural and artistic pretensions – she studied classical music, she tries to establish both a reading and a gardening club amongst the farm-wives – and because she is conspicuously more practically involved with farming Grootmoedersdrift than is expected of a woman. Jak, on the other hand, stands out as he is not from a farming background (he was the only son of the doctor in Caledon and studied law in Stellenbosch). While he attempts ambitious mechanised farming in shows of macho bravado, he remains at heart somewhat of a dandy, more comfortable in his mirror-lined study lifting weights than astride a tractor. Early on in the novel Milla tells herself: "You'd noticed how meagre his knowledge was. His so-called diploma, he'd just seen to it that he enrolled, attended one or two classes, never even did

the practicals. You had to teach him to sit on a tractor. A cow's udder gave him the creeps" (67). Jak and Milla have a place in the community through their wealth, and their other outward markers of 'respectability', such as Jak's political involvement (including being asked to join the Broederbond) and Jakkie's eventual if short-lived success in the army. But their unconventionality simultaneously makes them outsiders.

The second person voice is also the *harshest* of the four different narrative strands, uncompromising in documenting the hardships of domestic and farm-life, from Jak and Milla's violent fights (both verbal and physical) to the many challenges and near-disasters on Grootmoedersdrift. The older Milla berates herself with unpleasant insights which the younger Milla could not or would not grasp. She is particularly disparaging of what she considers her younger self's wilful blindness. This contrast is particularly clear if one compares the diaries to the passages in the second voice. Yet this voice is also, as the fullest chronicle of life on the farm in the Overberg and of Milla's younger years, a voice full of sensual and sensory detail. In the opening of the novel, Milla's last failing attempts to write and her sense that she is "locked up in [her] own body" (21) stand in juxtaposition to the young Milla in the second-person passage who introduces Jak to Grootmoedersdrift and tries to instruct him gently in the subtleties of mixed farming in their first year of marriage. Here it is clear that Jak is coming to the land through Milla's body, or that gaining access to her body is closely tied to the project of farming Grootmoedersdrift. The tone of the introduction to the farm and its physical location is at times almost Biblical, and the relationship between land and sex closely intertwined:

> That was the day that you crossed the Tradouw pass for the first time with Jak de Wet, the great Tradouw, the deep Tradouw, the way of the women in the Hottentot language, as your father had explained it to you when you were little.

> You were a real woman now, a ring on your finger. Now the two of you just had to get to the other side. You were excited about it. So many times you had fantasised about how it would be to make love to him…(33)[16]

This erotic *potential* in Jak and Milla's courtship leads to a marriage where sex is almost systematically an act of abuse. There is a clear hint of what is to come the first time they sleep together. Although, as Milla tells herself, "neither of you wanted to wait, you were just as passionate, as reckless as Jak" she is quickly "dismayed" and thinks "no, not like this":

> but you gathered yourself into yourself. From inside you protected yourself while he drove home his will. It will come right, you thought …. You were taken aback at the quantity of blood on the spread afterwards, but he shrugged it off [saying] Now you're well broken-in. A little crash course. Don't be so namby-pamby. (48)

In one of the harshest passages in the novel, Jak first beats Milla, then as good as rapes her, right before she tells him she is pregnant. Milla has just "disgraced" Jak by speaking critically about local farming practices at a New Year's party, at one point declaring that "If a farmer clears and levels his land year after year it's as good as beating his wife every night" (114). Jak shouts at Milla:

> If you want to be my soil, I'll do on it as I want to. Slapping is nothing! Shoving is child's play! Now tell me, pray, what kind of soil are you? … Grade yourself for us, perhaps it will be of use to the man who has to plough you! … What does one do with soil, eh? … You drive a post into it…you quarry out a dam! (115)

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[16] In the UK and USA the novel *Agaat* was published under the title *The Way of the Women*. According to translator Michiel Heyns "the British publishers of the translation declined to use the Afrikaans title, opting instead for the more market-friendly *The Way of the Women*; they also stripped the text of the stress marks which I'd retained from the Afrikaans to punctuate the rhythmical patterning of the original" (Heyns 126). This extract provides a certain contextualisation for choosing this title (which seems rather incongruous in other ways). The Tradouw pass, the literal passage between Milla's mother's farm, and her – and Agaat's – own farm is symbolically too "the way of the women" (not least as the dramatic scene of Jakkie's birth).

What is illustrated is his cruelty but also the insistence on the body as land, and in Milla's case, the erstwhile farmer as farmed.

The second person passages both contextualise and contradict the extracts from Milla's diaries. These passages provide the details which would seem unnatural in somebody's private diary (and in Milla's sometimes telegrammatic style). But it is also in contrast to this second voice that Milla's self-fabrication or wilful silences in the diaries become apparent. The addresser in the second person seems to understand that when Milla writes in her diary, she is *ordering* the truth, and that what is left out of the diaries is that which cannot be understood, or that which she does not want to understand. In the second person, when Milla is confronted (in an oblique way) by the farm-workers about an instance of Jak's cruelty and loss of control, we read that "What you had to understand, what had been implied as understood, was more than you could write down in a day" (141). Here it is clear that Milla's habitual (and lengthy) diary-writing cannot order the whole truth of that incident.

While the second person or accusative "you" is alienating, this voice is also in certain ways closer to a conventional omnisciently narrated narrative than any of the other voices in the novel. It is paradoxically in these passages, where Milla is *doubly* present – as both the addresser and the addressed – that the voices of Jak and Agaat ring out the clearest, in what appears to be their own intonation and in their own words. It is here that Jak's verbal (and physical) battery rises from the page, yet these are also the only passages where we hear something like his version of events:

> There's another story here, Milla, he said, you don't want to hear it because you can't manage anger and disillusionment and breakdowns…Perhaps you'll understand it better in the form of a fairy tale. Perhaps you'll get the point then…
> Once upon a time there was a man who looked at himself in the mirror and thought he was good enough, said Jak….
> He was word-perfect as if he'd rehearsed it many times in his head… (356)

Milla often expresses shock at both Jak and Agaat's words. When she overhears Agaat treating the labourers' children for worms, she is horrified at Agaat's vicious scolding and at her kicking out at the children:

> You had never seen Agaat like this, had never heard her talk like this. You saw the adults standing laughing at the performance, but not full-out…
> Rubbish! she screeched and she up and kicked, one, two kicks into the bundle with her black school shoes so that they [the children] dispersed chow-chow. (288)

Later on, Milla wonders to herself: "Where did the words come from? You hadn't taught her like that. Clump-arse. Pauperworms…The cruel hand, the hard foot …" (290). Here Milla is making the clear connection between her own and Agaat's "words", or manner of expression (and by implication, understanding), if under negation. "You hadn't taught her like that" expresses surprise that Agaat can speak in a way not learnt directly from Milla. When Jak's voice is recorded, it is often this contention that "there is another story here", or another version of events on Grootmoedersdrift than the story Milla tells in her diary, that is emphasized. In Agaat's disciplining the labourers, her tone and her words are out of keeping with Milla's understanding. Both Jak and Agaat's voices point to *other* ways of telling and of reckoning. It is interesting though that it is under profoundly unsympathetic circumstances that these alternative narratives come through. It is also interesting that in the voice which summons the reader the most (through the "you"), the voices which are not heard directly through most of the narrative also come out the clearest.

If this second voice is read not only as *Milla* addressing herself, but also where Jakkie's authorship shines through, and where the reader is summoned through the second-person "you", then it becomes ever more difficult to untangle the point of view through which Jak and Agaat's voices is channelled. This multi-vocality appears more like the work of the traditional omniscient narrator who "can be thought of as something of a ventriloquist – able to inhabit and utilize a variety of voices" (Walder 33). But the narrator or

addresser here has an embodied intentional voice, very unlike the traditional omniscient narrator. In these textual spaces, where Agaat's and Jak's voices are heard the clearest, we resist Milla's control of the narrative (and her hold on truth-telling). Yet as readers who have no other recourse to hearing Agaat and Jak's speak than precisely through Milla's voice, we are also paradoxically subject to Milla's control.

III

The sections from Milla's diaries appear in the novel in the order they are read aloud to Milla by Agaat. Agaat chooses which entries to read and when. This is crucial, as it is the only one of the five narrative voices which is literally *through* Agaat, while it is also the only one which is categorically in Milla's words (within the logic of the novel). Milla also picks up on memories from the diaries in the first person (quite naturally, as they would come to mind as Agaat reads aloud to her), and as the novel progresses, the lines between the sections start to blur.[17]

If the first voice details Milla and Agaat's present, and the second voice is the section most focused on Milla and Jak, then the diaries tell the story of Milla and Agaat's *past* and hold the key to the secret of Agaat's origins and, crucially, how much Milla knows or remembers or allows herself to remember. It is only through the diaries that the skein of the past can be fully unravelled, and it is the reading of the diaries that acts as a catalyst to the revelations in the second voice. But as Mark Sanders posits, "[t]here is an enduring textual silence in Milla's diaries as to the precise circumstances of Agaat's adoption". Sanders goes on to argue that "[i]f Agaat cannot properly have known Milla's motivations and intentions, she cannot fully measure Milla's culpability. The dynamics of reparation and retribution that involve the two women give rise to an aporia" (Sanders 3).

[17] For example, at the beginning of Chapter 19 (578 – 579), Milla seems to slip into the past, reliving how she taught Agaat to sharpen knives when she was a little girl, while the middle-aged Agaat sharpens knives (dramatically, indeed Gothically) over her head.

The question of culpability does provide the tension in the novel. Who is the "noonday witch": Agaat or her accuser Milla?[18]

The self-conscious honesty of the second-voice passages is not entirely absent in her diary, where Milla also hints at the power that setting something down on paper has for her. When she discovers that Agaat has been breast-feeding Jakkie, she does not want to write it down. Her entry starts: "It's been 3 days now & I still don't know how to write it up & if I should write about it at all if writing can countenance it. J. would murder her if he were to know. Can't tell it to anybody" (205). Milla's fear at putting into words what she has seen is clear and she fears further if her "writing can countenance it": if her *language* and hence her system of understanding can incorporate and order what she has seen. The tender secret moment she sees between Agaat and baby Jakkie is finally described thus: "I listen to the little sounds it sucks & sighs it's a whole *language* out there in the outside room I can almost not bring myself to write it" (206; my emphasis), a repetition of the idea that to write it down is to *do something* to the memory of the event, to somehow render it more important and to somehow *make it real*.

In the diaries, the religious or Biblical justifications for apartheid and its inequalities – including Agaat's relegation from adopted daughter to house maid – shine through the most clearly. It is interesting that it is in the most *private* space (fictionally speaking) of the novel that this learnt ideology is, quite literally, inscribed.[19] Milla recounts the *dominee* in Witsand's preaching on "the spies in the land of Canaan" which according to Milla is:

[18] "Noonday witch" is a reference to a "symphonic tone poem" of the same name by Dvorak. Jakkie sends Agaat a recording of the music, which Agaat plays to Milla: "a gift from Jakkie on her last birthday…to remind her how she had 'snatched him from oblivion' on the Tradouw" (329).

[19] The manner in which South African Afrikaner (colonial) history and religion were entwined is also clear in a later diary-entry, where Milla describes Agaat's early education: "I feed her a bit of (*religious*) history. Good Friday, Easter Monday, *Van Riebeek Day, Day of the Covenant*" (572, my emphasis). Milla is aligning the two holiest days of the Christian calendar with the public holidays commemorating Jan van Riebeek stepping onto Cape soil (turned into a celebration of so-called *discovery* akin to Columbus Day in the USA) and the Battle of Blood River, where victory by the Voortrekkers over the Zulus was credited to a covenant made with God.

> a wee bit over-inspired perhaps but still a striking analogy…The application turned out to be the border war & the instruction to the Afrikaner spies just as to the children of Israel & see the land what it is; & the people that dwelleth therein, whether they be strong or weak, few or many [etc, in Biblical language]… The dominee warned from the pulpit against false prophets who speak excellent Afrikaans & cite the Bible & don't hesitate to undermine their own nation in their mother-tongue and in their church. (427)

Milla's dedication of her diaries to Agaat, which is written in the familiar language of the Church, frames the novel. In the first chapter Milla recounts that Agaat "tore out my inscription in the front of the first booklet and fixed it on the reading stand right up against my nose. *As directed by the Almighty God*, it says there" (10; italics in original). A few lines later Milla suggests that Agaat has put it constantly within eyesight as if it is "proof that everything she reads to me from the little books was written by myself", whereas according to Milla "I was young. And it was not the first entry. The real beginning of it all I never wrote down" (10). This torn-out sheet appears again, in its entirety, in the Epilogue, when Jakkie is in his dead mother's room and puts a date to the entry: "14 September 1960, a month after my birth" (681). It is thus clear that Milla wrote the dedication after Agaat had been cast out of the house to the outside room, although she wrote it down in the front of the earliest diary entry dating from 1954, which chronicles the period when Agaat was first 'adopted'. With that in mind, the silence at the heart of the inscription is striking. There is no mention of Agaat's relegation outside, which is a symbolic negation of the earlier circumstances of Milla taking Agaat in, or of Milla and Agaat's sometime mother-child-like relationship, nor any intimation of the role that Agaat played in Jakkie's birth, arguably saving both mother and child. Instead the inscription is formal and antiquated:

> I Kamilla de Wet (neé Redelinghuys) dedicate this journal to the history of Agaat Lourier…so that there may be a record one day of her being chosen and of the precious opportunities granted to her on the farm

> Grootmoedersdrift of a Christian education and of all the privileges of a good Afrikaner home. So that in reading this one day she may ponder the unfathomable ways of Providence, who worked through me, His obedient servant and woman of His people, to deliver her from the bitter deprivation in which she certainly would have perished as an outcast amongst her own people. I pray for mercy to fulfil this great task of education that I have undertaken to the glory of God to the best of my ability… (681)

While Agaat is driving towards the “first entry” mentioned by Milla through the course of the novel, in her reading aloud of Milla’s diaries, it is important to note that Milla from the very start admits that it is a futile chase: “the real beginning of it all I never wrote down”. Like the writer of a good detective story, Van Niekerk prepares the (careful) reader for what is to come. It is testament to her craft that despite this early admission on the part of her narrator, she still keeps this “beginning” as the locus for both Agaat’s and so the reader’s search throughout the novel. According to Sanders, “Wishes or wishful thinking, what Milla writes in her journal establishes a pattern of imperatives noted down as facts” (22), though Milla (in the second voice) appears to be quite self-aware of the structuring project of the diaries, as discussed earlier. There are, however, also exceptions to the charge that Sanders levels at Milla’s diary-writing. At certain points, her diary reveals the deep pathos of the relationship between the little Agaat and her lonely caregiver. When Agaat first speaks, Milla draws on all the powers of her imagination, which in the novel as a whole are readily evident (and strikingly so in the interior monologue of the first person), while also once more highlighting the ‘power’ of words:

> Why is it taking me so long to write it up? … It’s too precious! It’s too fine!
> Words spoil it…
> I imagined the tip of her will as the rolled-up tip of a fern…A tender green ringlet with little folded-in fingers?
> I bent it open with my attention.

> Then it came into my ear, like the rushing of my own blood, against the deep end of the roof of her mouth, a gentle guttural-fricative, the sound of a shell against my ear, the g-g-g of Agaat. (520)

This recollection is not only deeply moving, but that "gentle guttural-fricative" remains at the heart of what Agaat is, in the novel that bears her name. Throughout the novel there are such pointers to the *sensory* level at which language is experienced, before it becomes a *system*. Before a child can talk coherently, it must learn to reproduce the sounds it hears adults make. Language is a question of mechanics before it becomes linguistic or conscious.

In the novel, the diaries are the *primary* material of the (fictional) history that is being told of life on the farm Grootmoedersdrift in the second half of the twentieth century. But if, as I am arguing, the use of these contrasting and contesting narrative styles is an interrogation of narrative, or rather, an interrogation of the *'truth'*-claim of narrative, then it is certainly at heart an interrogation of 'self-writing' (diary-writing). The other modes of writing, while themselves unreliable in various ways, all point to the central evasiveness of the diaries, the sense in which *this* Milla is not the Milla characterised through her 'own' first or second person voice. As Jak accuses her, "there's another story here" (356). One might argue that this can also be explained by the passage of time. The Milla of the diaries is younger and more naïve, and it is only at the end of her life that she is willing to confront the 'truths' of her life-story. The different sense of self-reflexivity can also be explained if one once more considers Jakkie as the creator or writer of the story being told. Is Jakkie functioning as *Van Niekerk*'s alter-ego? Either way, Milla is being *re*-written through this voice. The second person passages are to a great extent a confrontation of what Milla knew but would not admit to knowing, where writing it down in the diary would be such an admission. The clearest illustration of that process is the central question, the revelation of which forms the climax of the novel – how exactly Agaat came to Milla, and what Milla's motivations were for her "adoption".

After Agaat asks Milla, still as a small child, why the farm-children say she comes from a "drunkcunt on the other side of the mountain", Milla wonders in her diary: "Don't quite know what story to tell her. Perhaps just the simple truth". She then corrects herself: "I must in any case first write it down myself before I forget it, what it felt like, how it came about. The *commission*, the *task*, spelt out in black and white, for her sake" (573, my emphasis). Milla shifts from uncertainty ("Don't know quite what story to tell her") to a quasi-Biblical sense of godly injunction that again suggests the colonising or 'civilising' mission. A few days later Milla has once more put it off: "I want to write up the beginning of the story but it's hot and I'm sitting here on the stoep and I'm feeling exhausted…Because some days I really don't know anymore" (575). It is in the second voice, and only in the final chapter of the novel, that the story of Agaat is finally recounted, and Milla first admits:

> There was in any case something cryptic about the beginning, You always told yourself, one day…Now you understand the actual reason. Or one of them.
> It wasn't meant for the diary.
> Nothing about it was meant for the diary.
> It would have to be taken up in to the family saga direct: Grootmoedersdrift, farm, house, *man, wife, child.*
> *First child.* (653; my emphasis)

Here Milla makes a distinction between her own writing ("the diary") and "the family saga direct". A saga is mythological and functions on a much grander and less literal scale than 'mere' literature. She is intimating that 'the real' would have to be rewritten or rethought and expanded to include what happened on Grootmoedersdrift and all which it portends: that Agaat was in fact her and Jak's first child.

IV

By far the most impenetrable sections of the novel are the short italicised stream-of-consciousness passages which at the start of the novel predate the present-day, going back to when Milla first falls ill. The first such passage starts with the question "*how does a sickness begin?*" (35).[20] As the novel progresses, and Milla's illness progresses too, these sections catch up to the present day, and in the closing pages of the last chapter (just before the Epilogue) it is in this narrative style that Milla's death is figured: "*so with open eyes into the white light so whispering to my soul to go/ in my overberg/ over the bent world brooding/ in my hand the hand of the small agaat"* (674).[21]

Strictly speaking these sections are in the first person, and from the rest of the novel, more than the sections themselves, it is evident that this "I" is also Milla. Agaat is addressed on a few occasions and the passages also contain snatches of dialogue between Agaat and Milla (though these are not grammatically marked as dialogue). These interludes are written in an unmediated, deeply private language – internal language almost before it is subsumed by grammar, were such a thing possible, or, in Julia Kristeva's terms, "poetic language". It is "felt" language – language on the level of the senses, language not as a means of communication, but as a means of anchoring oneself in place. This sense seems to be born out by Van Niekerk's own presumably fictionalised but rather mysterious description in her professorial inauguration speech refering to her recent projects, where she speaks of translating a type of "sound poem" left to her by an equally mysterious former student: "I scrap the adjectives, I scrap the ideas, I link the words to meaning only in the most cursory sense, because meaning is of secondary importance. What is important, is the materiality of the words".[22] Although *Agaat* was published four years before this speech, it seems to me that in these interludes in the

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[20] Please note that punctuation is all but done away with in these entirely italicised sections. Quotations follow the original.

[21] See the end of Gerald Manley Hopkins' "God's Grandeur": "Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastwards, springs - / Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings". In Afrikaans this last section reads "in my overberg; liefhebbend; in my hand die hand van klein agaat". The novel's translator, Michiel Heyns has said that *liefhebbend*, which means "fond" or "loving" in Afrikaans, "encompasses everything 'feminine, an active enfolding of language'…" (qtd. in Meintjies 78)

[22] "Ek skrap die adjektiewe, ek skrap die idees, ek heg die woorde net-net aan betekenis, want betekenis is bysaak. Wat belangrik is, is die materialiteit van die woorde", own translation, Van Niekerk *Intreerede* 14.

novel meaning is also of “secondary importance” (“betekenis is bysaak”). What is important is the *felt* quality of the words: a reminder of that “gentle guttural-fricative” g-g-g in the word Agaat (and also the word “Asgat”) which is in some sense Agaat’s only truly personal expression.

I remain on some level unconvinced of the effectivness of these sections, within the structure of the novel. I occasionally skipped these sections upon first reading the novel, and I have heard the same confession and an attendant frustration from other readers. There seem to me two perspectives from which these sections can nevertheless be particularly fruitfully examined. The interludes are the only part of the novel where one does not question the narrative authority. This is Milla’s interior *felt* experience. It is where the reader is most lost in the purely *private*. There is no shadow of Agaat’s intonation, compared to the diaries where the entries are read aloud by Agaat in an order she has chosen, or in the first person sections where the narrative often consists of Milla’s thoughts as they are spoken aloud by Agaat. This is naturally either directly Van Niekerk’s handiwork, or her poetically imagining Milla falling ill *through* the equally fictional Jakkie. However, in the interludes I am without doubt as to whose experience I am reading. That is not to say that Agaat is absent. She could never be absent in any truthful exploration of what it is to be Milla, evident when Milla silently implores Agaat to tell her doctor “our imagination is a shared one, tell him we thought each other up” (211-212). As Milla reflects on her impending death, this same sentiment is spoken in the lyrical style of the interludes: “*carve the meaning of everything on my headstone in her mouth I place my last word and in her eye over my departed body the curse or blessing”* (423). When Milla finally slips into death the inseparability of the two is equally clear in her final words: “*in my hand the hand of the small agaat”* (674). But here the very difficulty of the narrative style becomes important.

This strange internal language (which is tiring to read) is on a fundamental level incapable of telling a story. In order for a *narrative* to come into being or to ‘tell a story’ it is necessary for a writer (or a story-teller) to rely on the *external* grammar of language, for both grammatical sense and meaning-construction. Lyotard’s “already thought” or

"inscribed" does lead to "ordinary" or "inauthentic" articulation. But language which relies only on felt experience, and on no or few meaning conventions, although it might appear closer to our experience of our internal consciousness, becomes futile on its own, in its incapacity to captivate us and to *move time* forward. While each of the previous three narrative strategies contain their individual limitations, they do advance an interpretation of a certain set of events. The interludes are not interpretative but purely expressive. In reflecting Milla's interiority more fully than any other section of the novel, they also contribute, paradoxically, to the rewritten 'Realism' of Van Niekerk's craft. But while they may be beautiful and disquieting, they are even more incapable than the other voices of standing alone.

V

The novel opens and closes with a present-tense interior narrative by Jakkie, who is returning home to Grootmoedersdrift from his self-imposed exile in Canada to bury his mother. In the prologue he is on the journey home to South Africa from Canada as Milla lies dying. He relates how he has tried to explain South Africa and his particular birthplace in the Overberg, on the farm, to his adopted countrymen. In the epilogue, Jakkie is flying back to Canada, after Milla's funeral, and recalls Agaat's careful and masterful orchestrating of Milla's final rites. If considering *Agaat* as a rejoinder to the *plaasroman*, it must appear ironic – yet ironically apt too – that Jakkie, a 'white' man, a supposed 'Afrikaner' and the seemingly rightful heir to the farm Grootmoedersdrift, opens and closes the novel, as a 'white' man arriving from somewhere else.

What is crucially important to remember here, however, is the sense in which Jakkie is *not* typical. He was born as the long-awaited heir to Grootmoedersdrift, suggestively in 1960, the year South Africa voted to become a Republic (and was entering into a decade and a half of unbridled 'white' and particularly 'Afrikaner' authority following the outright banning of all liberation movements in 1959). Yet this man who returns to bury his mother cannot typify the militarised Afrikaner elite (if any such type exists, an idea literature since the 1970s seems to contest). Jakkie has been raised by Agaat. Agaat is herself illustrative of the problematics surrounding notions of 'pure' Afrikanerdom. She

can be seen to parody an idea of an über-Afrikaner, in her dress, her handiwork, her farming- and folklore-knowledge (and not least her memorising all forgotten verses of *Die Stem*), yet because of her skin-colour (and her position until Milla's death as a servant), she is denied any recognition as an 'Afrikaner' by the surrounding community. Her raising Jakkie further questions how 'Afrikaner' history and 'culture' is contained, preserved and passed on. Both Agaat and Jakkie destabilise the racialised fictions upon which notions of the 'Afrikaner' are based.

It is Jakkie who quite literally sketches the lay of the land, the traditional novelistic function of the opening pages: "Took a sheet of paper and a pencil when people here questioned me. Drew a map, lifted out a little block from the map of Southern Africa … enlarged it freehand onto a sheet of paper" (5). According to Sanders, "It is through Jakkie, who from childhood was very close to Agaat, that the consequences of past deeds play out" (19). If the novel is meant to be read as though it is written, in its entirety, by Jakkie – as though he, using the diaries he finds in Milla's room after her death (arranged there by Agaat), imaginatively recreates and then writes the story of his two mother's lives – then this is, according to Chris van der Merwe, the "answer for readers who have wondered how the lame Milla could tell and write down her story". He continues:

> memories must be transformed into art. The artwork brought into being between the prologue and the epilogue is Jakkie's recreation of his memories – a polyphonic composition ... Behind Milla stands Jakkie, the creator of the story. The fact that the perspective switches between "me" and "you" ... points towards the novel being a type of dialogue between Jakkie and his mother in which they reach out to each other and reproach each other.[23]

[23] "...herinnerings moet tot kuns getransformeer word. Tussen die proloog en die epiloog is die kunswerk wat tot stand gebring is, Jakkie se herskepping van sy herinnneringe - 'n polifoniese komposisie…Agter Milla staan Jakkie, die skepper van die verhaal. Die feit dat die perspektief tussen "ek" en "jy" wissel… kan daarop dui dat die roman 'n tipe tweegesprek tussen Jakkie en sy moeder is waarin hulle na mekaar uitreik en mekaar verwyt", own translation, Van der Merwe on *Litnet*-webpage

But whether it is he who brings the two mothers to life and voice in the intervening 600-odd pages or not, Jakkie manages such a feat of ventriloquism of the two, that it seems as though we do not hear *his* voice at any point, other than when it slips through in letters and telephone conversations relayed (apparently) by his mother.

Jakkie's voice in the pro- and epilogue furthermore gives a sense of the South African contemporary context which is only ever obliquely hinted at in the novel itself. Jakkie offers specific critical opinion, about his moving to Canada, his mention of other soldiers from the Border War, and the headlines in South African newspapers. *Agaat* follows one *plaasroman* characteristic in being an *idyll*, in the sense of it being set firmly in one place, almost resolutely ahistorical and apolitical. History and politics are not directly expanded or expounded upon by Milla as narrator, but enter subtly, as *intrusion* on the De Wet family on Grootmoedersdrift.[24] In Andries Wessels' illuminating reading of *Agaat,* comparing it to the Irish Big House novel, Wessels points out that both the Big House-genre and *Agaat* rely on a "personal and intimate narrative within a broader significant political-historic context", and that in the Big House-novel, and arguably in *Agaat*, "the *house* or estate becomes a metaphor for the family who live there and the class to which they belong".[25] Jakkie does not abide by this rule of genre, and his voice includes an insight and clarity not quite allowed in Milla's thoughts and reminisces. An example is in his thoughts about Agaat at his mother's graveside: "the lessons of the masters engraved in her like the law on the tablets of stone, deeper and clearer than I could ever preserve it" while "her creator [Milla] is keeping remote control. Six feet under" (682).

Jakkie returns to Grootmoedersdrift less as the returning prodigal son than as that exemplary *other* to the 'Afrikaner' who does not appear in this novel at all: the enquiring, book-learned Englishman. In the examples of novels traditionally thought of as

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[24] As Marlene van Niekerk confirms in an interview: "For me it was a completely intimate history that played itself out on Grootmoedersdrift. I didn't at first think of the bigger political landscape, although I was naturally aware of certain allegorical impulses" ("Dit was vir my 'n heel intieme geskiedenis wat hom op Grootmoedersdrift afgespeel het. Ek het nie in die eerste instansie gedink aan die groter politieke landskap nie, hoewel ek natuurlik bewus was van sekere allegoriese impulse", qtd. in Wessels 32).
[25] "Die huis of landgoed word 'n metafoor vir die familie wat daarin woon en die klas waartoe hulle behoort", own translation, Wessels 34.

plaasromane from the 1920s and 1930s the Englishman (and/or the Jew) often represented an incomprehensible, threatening progression of Modernity and Capital, as a Cosmopolitan quite alien to the novel's rural setting.[26] Jakkie now lives in Canada, an interesting foil to the 'post-colonial' (and democratic) South Africa (as a country which is likewise 'post-colonial', but somewhat more successful at wrapping up the distasteful aspects of its history than South Africa, and here comes to represent the 'first' or 'developed' world). Jakkie is immersed in the English language, and he has turned his past into just one facet of his area of academic study: ethno-musicology. This vocation is another distancing, which allows him to view his own culture through the lens of study, and likewise reducing his mother(s) to object(s) of study.

In the Prologue, Jakkie speaks of the difficulty of translating or explaining the place-names of his childhood, and includes Latin names for the flora and fauna of the region, in contrast with the local Afrikaans names. Jakkie's questioning of translation here implies a considerable distance from Afrikaans – the ability to see his own history in relief, as an outsider, and as something unconnected to himself (he says in the Epilogue that South Africa is "not a country for me to live in. To study, yes", 682). If one examines Jakkie thus, it becomes more compelling to think of him as intended to be understood as the novel's creator and to see the novel as an ethnographic *project* or creative re-creation. This reading of Jakkie has particularly interesting repercussions when considering the translated English edition of the novel *Agaat*. If Jakkie is thought of as the implied *author* of the novel, then in the original Afrikaans, he is writing this (rather gargantuan) novel *in* Afrikaans, but with an outsider's eye, even, yes, a *translator's* eye. Ethnography as a discipline is at heart a translation, as anthropologists themselves are aware – see Aram Yengoyan's claim that "the tensions in translation have always plagued anthropology, be it in its scientific version or humanistic side, with the persistent question of how cultural translations can be made without destroying the very subject which we are attempting to convey" (25), as well as the very title of the book his essay appears in: *Translating Cultures: Perspectives on translation and anthropology*. One could perhaps argue that

[26] I must here credit Prof Dirk Klopper, who guided me in thinking this through and providing an historical context.

the original Afrikaans novel *already* functions as a translation of (and by) the 'anglicised' Jakkie, or that it is written as someone *returning* to a language after a long absence, someone who is no longer within his language and by (crucial) extension, with*in* his culture (if Jakkie ever truly was). The novel's playfully deft and dexterous style might speak against this. What happens when this (Afrikaans) novel is in turn literally translated into English? One might say this translation is only the obvious next step. The importance of language and intimations and problems around translation are introduced in Jakkie's prologue. In the Epilogue Jakkie broods over *what* language would suffice to take him from the Overberg back out into the beyond. The Epilogue ends with the lyrics of a Danish song, words that are incomprehensible to all but the fewest readers. It seems Marlene van Niekerk returns once more to the idea that "What is important, is the materiality of the words". Language hangs, unfettered to meaning and the reader is left unsure of the very word.

CHAPTER TWO

“Place, just like the self, is a series of stories”[27]: the self, the body and the land

"I page myself to the outside. The sounds of the last harvest come to inscribe themselves in me." (*Agaat* 103)

I

One way of reading the novel *Agaat* is as a lengthy meditation on the limits of the human. In the course of the novel Milla is becoming less and less. At one point this frustration is expressed by her during a visit by the doctor, Leroux, who has just “look[ed] at my eyes as if they were the eyes of an octopus, as if he’s not quite sure where an octopus’s eyes are located, as if he doesn’t know what an octopus sees” (211). Milla bristles when she imagines that the doctor looks at her as though she is something as alien and strange as this sea creature. When she imagines that the doctor “doesn’t know what an octopus sees”, she is in essence accusing him of being unable to empathise with her – to *see* out of her eyes. To lack empathy for someone is to fail to consider them an equal. Then:

> Agaat’s face is above me, her cap shines white, she looks into my eyes. I blink them for her so that she can see what I think. The effrontery! They think that if you don’t stride around on your two legs and make small talk about the weather, then you’re a muscle mass with reflexes and they come and flash lights in your face. (211)

Milla takes further umbrage at the idea that she is not wholly human because she is not “striding around on her two legs making small talk about the weather”, but her own interior monologue also confirms this sense of *in*humanness. In this narrative of her dying days, the life of the farm around her is recounted in a manner that acts as a powerful substitute for her physical incapacitation. The distinction between her physical self as it

[27] Viljoen, Lewis & Van der Merwe 8

lies dying and the geographical beyond often collapses. A relationship to space and place requires one to move around in it. If I have never experienced the sea, then no number of movies, photographs, stories or poems can replicate the *experience* of sand, sky and vast wet waves for the first time. But after I have swum in the sea, I can recreate it in my memory and this is a spatial, as much as a sensuous, memory. Milla will not restrict her sense of self to the physical body that lies dying in its sickroom. In her incessant return to the lands outside, there is the constant reiteration that we should understand her by and through that which lies beyond her. We can only know what it feels to be Milla, if we can *feel* her living in the land. This crucial connection between the geographical space around Milla, and her sense of self, recalls what Viljoen et al posit:

> A sense of self seems to require a sense of belonging at least somewhere, even if temporarily …. The processes of constructing different spaces … are intricately linked to a (narratively) constructed identity at a specific moment and woven into a (discursively) constructed space. (20)

When Agaat exercises Milla in an early chapter of the novel, Milla describes the regime thus: “My arm terminating in its stiff claw swings through the air. Agaat is breathing faster, her eyes are shining …. My other arm is a lighthouse tower. It sweeps over wild waves. Agaat blows the horn. Two bass notes” and as Agaat “bends [Milla’s] dangling feet up and down” the reader is told that

> Agaat plants corner posts. She puts them into holes. She hammers them in with a ten-pound mallet. She anchors them with braces, she paints them silver, she hangs the droppers. I smell tar. She sets up the drawbar. She tightens the wire till it sings. My ankles, my toes. (85)

This physical fitness regime has become, in Milla’s mind and so in the narrative of the novel, a practical farming task – that of constructing a fence – and one carried out by Agaat. The overriding impression is that Milla can only articulate the sensations of her body, and her reactions to these, through recourse to a descriptive language of the

physical phenomena of the surrounds. In the first voice, most of these descriptions to a greater or lesser degree track Agaat, as she goes about her routines on the farm – or, as in the example above, as she nurses Milla, and Milla assigns imaginative interpretations to these routines. This tracking is overwhelmingly physical and the effect is almost as though Milla is imagining that she is the one doing the tasks in and around the farmhouse. However, Milla is not imagining that she *is* Agaat in these descriptions, at least not until the very end of the novel where the boundaries between the two of them at times erase completely in Milla's mind. Instead, for the bulk of the novel she 'imagines' with such attention to detail that the effect is as though the narrative here was focalised through Agaat, a strange recourse in the first-person. What is at work here is a subtle and odd *appropriation*, to which I will return.

In the sections of the novel detailing the past, primarily the passages in the second person and the diary-extracts, there are also close correlations between the land around her and Milla's physical experiences of living, particularly marriage and motherhood. This is expressed in the extract which follows, which is from one of the lyrical interludes (which do not form part of the sequential narrative of the plot):

> *... soil is more long-suffering than wheat more long-suffering than sheep soil sickens slowly in hidden depths from tilling from flattening with the back of the spade from heavy grubbing in summer wind i am neither sheep nor wheat did i think then i was god that i had to lie and take it did i think then i was a mountain or a hill or a ridge and who told me that and who decided stones had no rights for stones can waste away from being denied from being abused and* <u>*who decided who is the ploughed and who ploughs*</u> *.... i smother in words that nobody can hear i clamp myself gather my waters my water-retaining clods my loam my shale i am fallow field but not decided by me who will gently plough me on contour plough in my stubbles and my devil's-thorn fertilise me with green-manure and with straw to stiffen the wilt that this wilderness has brought on this bosom and brain?*
> (35; italics in original, my emphasis)

From questioning who it was who informed her she was "a mountain or a hill or a ridge", this strangely disembodied – or perhaps entirely *embodied* and hence in the process *de*subjectivized – voice goes on to express herself precisely as *soil*, the very *stuff* on which the produce of the farm emerges and depends (and the importance of which Milla struggles so hard to impart to her husband Jak).

In this inter-connectedness between the body and place, *rituals*, both institutionalised, and the private kind that start off as daily repeated acts, have special significance as acts which locate the body within a particular place and give the body a way of being in this place. In *Boyhood,* J.M. Coetzee's account of his South African childhood, a striking formulation of this connection between belonging to the land and ritual is made, the sentiment of which also holds true for the farm Grootmoedersdrift (and the people who live there). When describing his boyhood visits to the family farm, Coetzee writes:

> *I belong to the farm*: that is the furthest he is prepared to go, even in his most secret heart. But in his secret heart he knows what the farm in its way knows too: that Voëlfontein belongs to no one. The farm is greater than any of them. The farm exists from eternity to eternity. When they are all dead, when even the farmhouse has fallen into ruin like the kraals on the hillside, the farm will still be there.
>
> Once, out in the veld far from the house, he bends down and rubs his palms in the dust as if washing them. It is ritual. He is making up a ritual. He does not yet know what the ritual means …" (Coetzee *Boyhood* 96; italics in original)

Coetzee never expands on what the ritual 'means', but the implication is that the young protagonist is making up a ritual that connects or ties him to the farm, even if his 'most secret heart' knows this to be ephemeral. It is necessary to *enact* such a ritual – even when one does not know 'what it means' – for one to feel a sense of belonging. The making and enactment of ritual is necessary. In the absence of ritual one makes it up.

It seems useful to extrapolate from Judith Butler's theories regarding performativity to approach thinking about ritual, and more crucially, what the performance of these rituals might do. Veronica Vasterling, in discussing Judith Butler on "The speaking embodied subject", writes that "the subject does not produce, invent or create the meaning of the words s/he cites; s/he is an effect of, or constructed by the meaning conventions and the discursive practices s/he complies with while speaking and writing" (208). Butler herself defines performativity "*as that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names*" (qtd. in Osborne and Segal 236; italics in original). In her reformulation of Foucault, Butler writes that "construction is neither a subject nor its act, but a process of reiteration by which both "subjects" and "acts" come to appear at all. There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability" (9). What interests me here are the many small acts which create a physical relation between bodily being and the surrounding world – or "create" the bodily being itself, as it can understand itself (or *be* 'understood'). These 'small acts', in the form of rituals both private and public, are not only a way of acting out an identity which can be read by those around one, but go much deeper than that.

With reference to "ritual", I do not only mean ritual in an institutionalised sense, like religious ceremony, though these are also relevant in *Agaat*. I am primarily referring to private rituals that the characters within the novel create and *per*form. An example are the rituals of cooking illustrated in the novel. In a farm-kitchen, like the one at Grootmoedersdrift, certain dishes are prepared at certain times of year and for certain occasions. Making these dishes again and again comes to have symbolic significance within the farm-house, and within the kitchen. Meals connect the farm's production with the domestic space of the house – the lambs reared (and slaughtered), the vegetables grown and the dairy products made are quite literally a transformation of the produce of the farm into something the family consumes. However, these meals also have a deeper significance. This is borne out when, at the end of the novel, Agaat makes Milla a "last meal" of "leg of lamb, complete with the knuckle-bone. Garnished with rosemary, blue blooms and all. Fatty rind crisp and brown" (581). Milla describes and interprets the meal as follows: "Eat me a psalm of pumpkin and sweet potato, the orange and the ochre"

(583) when Agaat "dishes a plateful" (for herself to eat, as Milla cannot). The meal has a pseudo, even parodist, religious value: there are overtones of the Last Supper, that the lamb is 'sacrificial' and the meal is compared to a 'psalm'. Furthermore, the meal is significant because the eating of these particular dishes, all made from products on the farm, are a way of merging with the farm. There is a focus on the visual aspect of the meal in this description – the "blue blooms" of the rosemary, the "orange and the ochre" of the vegetables – and there is a sense that it is the outside of the farmland being internalised, when literally consumed. Here it seems to me that a similar process is at work, perhaps more decisively if less consciously realised, to the one evident in Coetzee's *Boyhood*, when the young protagonist attempts to wash his hands in the dust of the farm he so strongly wants to identify with.

It is also worth considering the importance of Agaat eating this meal *on behalf* of Milla. This is one of many instances where Agaat functions in some capacity as Milla's doppelgänger. Agaat, not least in the novel's present-day, acts *for* Milla, and appears to be Milla's creation or "dark little storage cubicle" (576), which is how Milla describes Agaat as child. Marlene van Niekerk has highlighted the ambiguity of Agaat's position, in pointing out Agaat's use of "mimicry" as a "weapon". She claims: "In Agaat the mimicry contains something somewhat sardonic, and has become a weapon".[28] Through the rituals of cooking, first Milla, and now Agaat, are yoked both to the produce of the farm, and to the farm-kitchen in which this produce is transformed into fragrant sustenance. Both outside influence and private performance are at work. Enacting these taught and learnt cooking-rituals produce again a *type* of femininity as these 'ways of cooking' characterize a certain rural 'Afrikaner' woman, specific both to a particular place – the Overberg – and to a time – the mid-20th century.[29] More interestingly, however, the performative nature of these rituals binds the individuals enacting them to the kitchen, farm-house and farm in such a way that what is produced is not just a socially approbated identity, but at a much deeper level, is of bodily-felt subjectivity.

[28] Own translation, "Bij Agaat heeft de mimicry iets sardonisch, het woord een machtsmiddel", Van Niekerk qtd. in Hart, no page number.
[29] As Andries Wessels has noted, Agaat is the "heir to a tradition which doesn't recognise her" (own translation, "die erfgenaam van 'n tradisie wat haar nie erken nie", Wessels 38).

This becomes all that more complex when the rituals of cooking produce something which is *eaten*.

Might ritual in this sense usefully be aligned with the role of language? Both are structuring systems through which meaning is created *in the actual making*. My suspicion here is that ritual creates meaning out of the spaces we inhabit in a similar fashion to how language creates meaning out of our internal (psychological/ subjective) landscapes. Ritual ends up bringing about an embodied response where language locates us psychically.

II

The action of the novel *Agaat* rarely moves off the farm Grootmoedersdrift. Every relationship in the novel revolves significantly around the farm and its production. When Milla and Jak marry, the two of them inherit Grootmoedersdrift from Milla's parents, whose (newer) farm Goedbegin lies near Barrydale on the other side of the Tradouw Pass (in the Little Karoo).[30] In the opening chapter of the novel Milla recalls her younger self bringing Jak to Grootmoedersdrift for the first time, the day after he has “declared his intentions” to her parents (22). In this opening chapter, there is a close and clear alignment between Milla’s body – and sexual access to her body – and the farm, and more specifically, the farming practices tied to the farm.

As the two of them drive over the pass, Milla fondles Jak while she catalogues all the things that need to be done on the farm. Her list becomes a euphemistic ‘talking dirty’ till Jak is “wild” and promises “I will do everything … Plough and sow and shear and milk … And help you make a garden … Like paradise .… And never leave you” (32). Jak’s

[30] The fictional Grootmoedersdrift is based on the farm Grootvadersbosch, near Swellendam. Francois Smith, in an interview with Marlene van Niekerk, calls Grootmoedersdrift a “straight counterpart of the famous Swellendam farm Grootvadersbosch” (own translation, “’n regstreekse teenhanger van die bekende Swellendamse plaas Grootvadersbosch”). Changing the name from “Grandfather’s Forest” to “Grandmother’s Ford” (or “Passion”, see Jakkie’s attempts in the prologue of the novel, 6) clearly comments on the role of women in Van Niekerk’s novel, or a changing of priorities in her novel, though, as Smith also cautions, the novel is not a “simple inversion of the patriarchy which is a given in the traditional farm-novel” (“’n Eenvoudige ommekeer van die patriargie wat in die tradisionele plaasroman ‘n gegewe is, is dit ook nie”).

intentions to Milla are expressed through what he will do on the farm, and to the land. His promises to her to "never leave you" can be read as the end-result of the promised practical farming – plough, sow, shear, milk, plant a garden – and as such, seem as much a promise to the land, as to Milla as person. The correlation between Milla's body and the farm is being further developed: Milla makes Jak promise, not to be faithful to *her*, to cherish and protect *her*, but instead she asks him to promise a set of practices to the *farm*, the completion of which will tie him to her. At the same time, making this set of promises to the land is a way of gaining access to Milla sexually. They consummate their union for the first time following this journey to Grootmoedersdrift (though its violent nature is only recounted later in the novel).

There are multiple motifs introduced in this early section: the close alignment between Jak's treatment of the earth and Jak's treatment of Milla, Jak and Milla's divergent visions when it comes to the farm that will become their life-project, and Milla's interpretation of self through the land which runs so strongly throughout the novel. Milla is shown from the beginning of the novel to have a knowledge of the farm, and of farming, which surpasses Jak's. That the farm is passed down through her family, and furthermore through the matrilineal line, stresses this, and establishes Milla as the natural heir of Grootmoedersdrift. But Jak soon starts to have his own ideas of how things should be done on the farm, and this juxtaposition between Jak and Milla's competing philosophies is a theme throughout the novel. These farming practices, including (though by no means limited to) attitudes towards livestock, shape the two protagonists' engagement with the land and also becomes representative of what they each desire (and ultimately fail to provide) within their marriage. The promises that the young Jak makes to Milla the first time she shows him Grootmoedersdrift are never delivered on. Instead it is, ironically and tellingly, the sometime daughter-maid-doppelgänger Agaat who helps Milla plough, sow, shear, milk and plant a garden.

Milla espouses an older, more 'natural' or holistic attitude towards the earth, as opposed to the mechanised and increasingly technology-dependent methods adopted by Jak. Milla favours mixed farming – a mixture of crops and livestock – and old-fashioned near-

folkloric remedies, where Jak stands for mono-culture and a dependence on laboratory-produced fertilisers:

> Modern appliances are the answer, Milla, he [Jak] said, these aren't the Middle Ages any more. Why churn on with lucerne and lupines and compost when there's fertiliser?
>
> It's all about synergies, Jak, you [Milla] tried to staunch the flow, a game one has to play. With nature. It's subtle. Nature is subtle and complex. Everything is important. To the smallest insect, even the moldering tree, the deepest stone in the drift. (86 – 87)

Here too, as in the earlier extract detailing the start of their marriage, the correlation between the land and Milla's body is made immediately. [31] Milla relates the conversation above when she is describing her and Jak's early years of marriage, when Milla is trying and failing to fall pregnant. Jak counters the above exchange with: "You're a fine one to talk! …. Subtle! Bah! Nature! and you can't get pregnant!" (87). Later on in the same chapter Milla says that Jak "dreamed of a completely mechanised farm that would require only one or two pairs of hands" (91), while Milla's ideas sound to him like "hotnot farming" (69). Whereas Jak's style of farming is connected with high-apartheid modernity, Milla's philosophies tie to an almost indigenous reliance on intuitive, rather than scientifically proven, methods. It is pertinent, and complex, that these traditions, which Agaat learns and continues, stem to some degree from a 'coloured' and originally Khoi (in Milla's parlance, 'Hottentot') knowledge of the land. However, Agaat is taught this folklore by the 'white' Milla, which is yet another indication of the complexity of the 'coloured' – 'Afrikaner' relationship. The 'Afrikaner' bond with the earth is after all dependent on *labour*, provided by families like Agaat's biological family, and individuals like Agaat herself.

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[31] This correlation is common in South African writing about the land. See for example Malvern Van Wyk Smith's commentary on Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* that "landscape and female body are constantly analogous objects of [anti-hero Mehring's] predatory gaze" (30).

While Milla's theories of farming ultimately endure on Grootmoedersdrift, it must be noted that Jak's methods are at first remarkably successful. He and Milla disagree on the correct method for growing wheat: "He wanted to sow all the fields at the same time every year with wheat. You maintained a four-stage cycle was best .... He wanted to plough straight down with the fall of the land on the steep slopes .... Over your dead body, you said, there hád to be contours ... ". Jak eventually purchases a "large tract of adjacent hilly land", "fortune favoured him" and "he brought in five bumper crops in consecutive years" (70 – 71). He uses this profit to buy "stud animals to improve the cattle and sheep herds", and after five years he sells the land to a neighbour and starts farming cattle (see 109). Jak sells the land just as his fortunes would otherwise have turned. (The farmer he sells to is bankrupted. This reversal of bounty is according to Milla's logic because of Jak's exploitation of the land, see 110).

Jak's (initial) success is in keeping with his virile, masculine persona and the description of his wheat-farming is juxtaposed with Milla's 'unnatural' lack of femininity exemplified by her inability to fall pregnant. Jak tells Milla that "now it's only you who must show that you can increase abundantly" while he "taps against [her] stomach as one would tap against the glass of a silent clock to see if the hands won't move" (71). Jak never lets Milla forget that he thinks her abnormal and unnatural. In these early sections of the novel, where Milla's attempts to fall pregnant are described, there is a constant interplay between the ever-deteriorating relationship between Milla and Jak, their position on the farm within the wider community, and the farm's success. Thus the space of the farm is crucial to the construction of identity of the couple. Farm and social standing are intimately inter-connected. In the descriptions of this period, which appear in the second-person passages, these three aspects – personal, social standing, and farm production – are all described concurrently.

Milla's inability to adhere to social expectation (and produce an heir) result in alienation and loneliness. Milla remembers her friend Beatrice's gossip about the neighbourhood and local politics where Milla "on [her] own terms [was] not an item. Barren. Dry ewe. You felt that everybody was against you" (87). Milla describes telephone conversations

with her mother, and while her mother is the only person she can turn to, in these conversations the topic is also pregnancy, and Ma advocates "traditional remedies. Like standing on your head afterwards, like drinking an infusion of stinging nettle" (88). As Milla becomes more desperate for a child, and her marriage becomes a violent farce, she desires Jak only for his "seed", while she "fertilises" herself with iron-rich foods. She even tries to inseminate herself with his semen, as though, if one recalls the earlier stream-of-consciousness passage, she were a field which, if primed correctly, would bear harvest. As much as Milla is connected to the farm by outside expectations, she also clearly correlates herself with it and its production. Thus expectation arising from social position, and identity, which grows from social status connected to farm-ownership, result in a deep-seated bodily *affect*. Little is as deeply personal and *bodily* as a woman falling pregnant and giving birth, yet this (in)ability becomes entangled with the productivity of the farm.

Jak's "book learnt" style of farming has been acquired at Elsenburg, the agricultural college attached to the University of Stellenbosch. Since a university is always a potent site of ideological production, another link is made between Jak's practices and the mechanisms of apartheid. Jak would have studied at Elsenburg in the 1940s, when many of the men who went on to legislate under the Nationalist dispensation were at Stellenbosch. His staunch belief in laboratory-developed farming aids is in direct keeping with his trust in the apartheid state and its armies (and his later desires that his son succeed within these ranks). Yet Milla's philosophies are not ideologically neutral by comparison. Milla's trust in older farming traditions is in many ways resonant with early exemplars of the *plaasroman* which set up – or quite consciously serve to illustrate – a distinction between modern and traditional. As Ampie Coetzee observes: "a wondrous past was created, where dispossession and expropriation did not exist, where life still had meaning – before the disruptions of Depression, drought and industrialisation" ("My Birthright" 137). This kind of romanticising (rather than romanticism) can be read as a deliberate ideological ploy aimed at establishing Afrikaner claims to the land in opposition, primarily, to the British claim, but also, and certainly in later periods, to indigenous claims. However, even in the early *plaasromane* this depiction was complex

and layered. *Somer* by C.M. van den Heever (published 1935) is often considered a prototype of the *plaasroman*, but Chris van der Merwe insists on Van den Heever's "ambivalent" attitudes:

> the central theme of the book is transience. Everything is changing; by implication, the agrarian way of life is included in the change, as well as the Afrikaner's position of land-owner …. *Somer* deals with man's attempt to find security on earth and, simultaneously, with the futility of the attempt. ("The Farm" 168 – 169)

Any romanticising of hardy old *Boer* ways in South African (literary) history is as much an ideological ploy as Jak's nationalistic dreams of mechanisation. The latter remind one of various thinly-guised racist apartheid (and colonial) mythologies, still familiar enough to South Africans today, which insist on South Africa as the only 'technologically advanced' country in Africa, by virtue of the driving might of the 'white' man. Milla and Jak's philosophies, though they are divergent, can both be read, to varying degrees, as serving the status quo of the time, Milla's the still-continuing project of affirming Afrikaners as the rightful custodians of both a nascent culture and the land in South Africa, and Jak's the chauvinist bravado of the apartheid army-state. Thus any easy binaries within the novel are disrupted. One cannot in this novel unproblematically oppose a negative masculine, mechanised 'modernity' with a positive feminine, organic 'tradition', however tempting it might be to do so.

Milla's approach is more sympathetic, however, than Jak's, not only because we only get Milla's "side of the story" in the novel, but also because of the current prominence of the 'green movement' and a concurrent emphasis on organic practices and celebrated rediscoveries of older 'natural' methods. In terms of Ampie Coetzee's argument that the *plaasroman* be read as "part of the macrocosm of a South African reality" (*My Birthright* 129), rather than only as literary genre, Van Niekerk's novel can be seen as both commentary on the land-politics of the past but crucially also as part of "the narrative

around land" (*ibid.*) in the South African contemporary. This is also a point where examining the novel in its English translation yields interesting perspectives.

Jak's agricultural endeavours are showy, much like Jak himself – they have a false lustre which belie the reality. He brings in bumper-crops – but sells the land just in time, before it becomes uncultivable. He is more at home in his mirror-lined study, lifting weights, than involved with the day-to-day running of Grootmoedersdrift. He is a lawyer who never practices, a husband who doesn't husband. Throughout the novel, it is through Milla's – and increasingly Agaat's – interference and hard work that matters are set right on Grootmoedersdrift. A few striking examples from the novel serve to illustrate this. When Jak first removes the salt-licks from the grazing pastures, the cows start eating the skeletons of the animals he has secretly shot around the farm and eventually develop life-threatening botulism. It falls to Milla and more significantly Agaat to set things right (228 onwards). The manner in which Agaat mimics an older 'Afrikaner' way-of-life is highly suggestive. A gang of convicts is hired to clear the land of all skeletons after the disaster, and Agaat leads them across the farm, in song. A year later Jak's new herd of Simmental cows are left to graze on a part of the farm where wild tulips grow, with dire consequences: "Let loose in a green camp they would eat as if they were being paid for it, the young tulips first. And that would make them thirsty. And then they would drink. And water on tulips, that everyone knew, was as good as arsenic" (254). This time it is resolutely Agaat who takes control, doctoring the cows and the prize-winning bull with remedies she knows by heart from the old Farmer's Handbook (260 onwards).

The disasters are Jak's doing – he does not know any better, which is in keeping with the novel's complex interplay between patriarchal and matriarchal practices, and the claims to tradition with which they are variously associated. But the *methods* through which the situations are remedied come out of *The Farmer's Handbook*, a textbook which, although printed as early as 1929, adopts a distinctly (and familiar) Nationalist tone, to judge by the extract from the "Foreword by His Honour General J.G.C. Kemp, Minister of Agriculture", quoted in the epigraph to *Agaat*. To some extent it is in keeping with *plaasroman* convention (if one can speak of such) that tradition triumphs over modernity

(or are brought into tension with one another), and the fact that these traditions are executed by a *'coloured' child* further complicates these conventions.

Later in the novel, Agaat's upper hand during times of crisis is imbued with a more sinister sense, and Milla wonders to what degree Agaat is not the cancer as well as the cure for some of the near-calamities on the farm. But an examination of the earlier, more strictly agricultural near-disasters, and their eventual remedying, proves interesting in another respect. The older values are premised on symbiosis. But in *Agaat* their exposition in opposition to modernity is also reminiscent of the early *plaasroman*, which has been aligned with a patriarchal, conservative and racially inflected position. Accordingly, stereotypical alignments along gender lines are challenged as symbiosis and a rewritten patriarchy (into matriarchy) are aligned, and these values are eventually seen to be *more enduring,* if not always more *successful*, than the heavily mechanised later "High Apartheid" values exemplified by Jak. In the eventual transferral of the farm to Agaat it is these values, passed down along the matriarchal line (to Milla's mother, to Milla, finally to Agaat), that survive. In other words, the power-play in *Agaat* is not an uncomplicated reversal of patriarchy, as Andries Wessels has also noted. According to Wessels "both sexes are implicated" in the dysfunction of the De Wet family, and this has broader historical, political and cultural implications on a national level (own translation, 37). The power-play can more fruitfully be thought of as a rewriting of patriarchy – both in Milla's following of a tradition which might seem to lie 'closer to the earth', but has a historical connection to a racially inflected literary practice, and crucially, in Milla's inability to meaningfully transcend the conventionally proscribed relationships on the farm – with the servants, with Agaat and with her husband.

At the heart of Milla's attempts to win Jak over to her way of viewing the farm (and how the farm should be farmed) lies her desire for him to understand how she understands *herself* through the farm. It is at heart a desire for him to *know* her. In his negation of her philosophies, lies his negation of her, not least bodily. Crucially, as suggested earlier, this too can be inverted: in Jak's rejection of Milla's physical affection and intimacy, lies his negation of her understanding of the land around them, and so, within the logic of the

novel, because we are indeed never told Jak's "other story" (as Milla remains narrator throughout), a resulting negation of any understanding of the land from his point of view. We do not see Jak 'relate', in both senses of the word: to have a connection with, and to tell or describe. All his ways of relating are either violent or repressive – shooting, kicking, undermining – or based around competition, like his fanatical athletic endeavours.

A telling incident occurs when Jak shows off his newly built abattoir to Jakkie, upon the latter's visit home for his final birthday party in South Africa (he deserts the army and clandestinely leaves the country soon after):

> Jak held open the door of the new abattoir for Jakkie. He'd always been squeamish, he said, about the slaughtering on the block, the old axes and the knives at the draining-gutter under the bluegums, where the dogs lick, where the gauze cage sways in the wind.
>
> An abattoir was an asset on Grootmoedersdrift, he said, solidly built, complete with shiny steel surfaces, neon lights, completely automated bearing-surfaces, industrial refrigeration plants. Jak tapped against the wall, stroked the shiny surfaces with the back of his hand. (591)

In Jak's description of the old slaughtering block and the new abattoir we see both his and Milla's attitudes made manifest. The slaughtering block was resolutely in and of the farm, and the farm as a symbiotic system, a system that is in turn placed *in* nature, "*under* the bluegums", where the wind blows and the dogs are free to lick. Jak's description of the abattoir could not more clearly place it *apart from* or superimposed *upon* the farm. There is nothing organic about the new structure, with its "shiny steel surfaces, neon lights" and "industrial refrigeration". This all reassures this brutal man who, caught in a sensitive moment, is compelled to "stroke[d] the shiny surfaces". But he then takes "[t]he [sheep's] head from the slaughter, belonging to Dawid and company, that they'd not collected yet" (591) and cuts it up "like the pieces of a jigsaw". Jak is entirely oblivious of the convention that the "people" (the "volke" of the Afrikaans

edition) on the farm receive the sheep's head to cook and eat. Instead, he sweeps "the blocks into the off-cuts pail with the back of his hand" (592), before shooing Jakkie on to the next stage of the tour of new developments on the farm. Jak's attitude represents a living *outside* of history, an imposition but never an assimilation.

III

Throughout the novel the reader is made aware of circularity as scenarios return in subtly different form, for slightly different effect. A case in point is the scene of the sheep-slaughter when Agaat is a child, which resonates with the scene at Jakkie's eighth birthday where he is forced to dock a lamb's tail, using a knife given to him by Agaat. In both instances the unwilling child has to have his or her hand forced. Both episodes take place in the farm-yard and there is a large teasing crowd watching each time. The farm-workers tauntingly sing at Agaat (96 – 99), while the children at Jakkie's birthday party call him a "sissy" and a "girlie" (323-324). One of the aspects which is the most interesting to note in both these examples is the sense of *repetition* – both children, a generation apart, are being made to partake in a ritual, against their wills, which is presented as something *natural* to the order of the farm. "Maids", like Agaat, help with the slaughter. There is always the underlying sense that Agaat owes Milla usefulness, as implicit thanks for rescuing her from an unimaginable future, and if Agaat is to be *useful* to Milla then she must learn to slaughter, and learn not to be squeamish. For Jakkie to take the next requisite step along the road from infancy to manhood, he must likewise dock a lamb's tail. These are both necessary rituals on the farm.

If Milla orients herself in relation to the land, and her identity is simultaneously expressed and constructed through the space around her, then the essential impossibility of gaining any hold on or sense of Agaat by the same criteria becomes clear. Where Milla, *as narrator*, articulates how ritual influences her subjective response, in Agaat we only see the *enactment* of this but we never gain access to Agaat's inner world. Agaat's rituals are provocative and revelatory, but they remain *acts*, whose profundity can only be guessed or gestured towards. Unlike some critics (see for example Prinsloo and Visagie) I am resistant to reading Agaat as a 'subaltern' figure and as a 'postcolonial' rewriting of

the ‘coloured’ woman, within which logic her methods of expression, for example her “St Vitus dance” which Milla cannot understand and her embroidery, are read as ‘true’ self-expression. Agaat’s ‘creativity’ or agency, ‘power’ if you will, is much too complicated for that. It is an inversion, a confusing negative twisting.

The complexity of Agaat’s agency can be gauged through an examination of her embroidery. Embroidery gives her a channel of expression otherwise denied her within the novel, but it is ironically at the same time an integral part of making her into an Afrikaner – and then into an Afrikaner servant. According to Andries Wessels, Agaat is “the heir of Grootmoedersdrift’s matriarchal dynasty and, in terms of broader allegorical significance, indeed of Afrikaner culture”.[32] At the front of the novel are three quotations from the three books Milla uses to teach Agaat: the *FAK Volksangbundel* (or “National Anthology of Song of the Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Organisation”), *Borduur Só* (“*Embroider Like This*”), and the *Hulpboek vir Boere in Suid-Afrika* (“*Handbook for Farmers in South Africa”*). Wessels suggests that the quotations indicate that these three books “were part of a larger national project – the promotion, development and preservation of the ‘Afrikaner volk’ and its culture”.[33] Agaat perfects embroidery into an expressive art-form, and through this art, especially her tightly embroidered caps, she makes subtle and complicated comment, though she also tries to retain control over who interprets this commentary. Milla tells us that “[n]obody, nobody except Jakkie when he was small, was allowed to look at it straight on…When she caught me staring, she made me feel as if I were peeking through a transparent blouse” (371). Only once, when Agaat falls asleep at her feet, can Milla closely examine her cap. Milla observes “a design of musical notation…notes and keys and staves”, but that is not all:

> Am I seeing straight? A harp it seems to be, a syrinx, a tambourine, a trumpet, the neck of a lute. And hands I see, all the wrists bent, all fingers on strings and valves and stops .… It’s like looking into clouds. Everything

[32] “Agaat is die erfgenaam van die matriargale dinastie van Grootmoedersdrift, en in terme van die wyer allegoriese betekenis, van die Afrikanerkultuur”, own translation, Wessels 39.
[33] “…dui daarop dat elk van die drie boeke deel was van ‘n bree volksprojek – die bevordering, ontwikkeling en instandhouding van die Afrikanervolk en sy kultuur”, *ibid.*

> is possible. Wings … angels' wings. They arch out gracefully from the backs of the musicians. But the trumpet-player has a pig's snout. And the beak of the harpist is that of a bat. A wolf, grinning, beats the tambourine. A baboon with balloon-cheeks blows the syrinx, a rat with tiny teeth hangs drooling over the lute … the whole merciless music she crumples with one stroke against my ankles. (372 - 373)

Agaat has used her cap, which symbolises her role as servant, and used her embroidery, a craft linked with Afrikaner femininity, to turn the bonnet into a strange canvas for her own virulent imagination. It is interesting to note that the cover of the original Afrikaans edition of *Agaat* shows a textured piece of embroidered cloth, furthermore foregrounding embroidery. In comparison, the English edition shows an old-fashioned farm stove, which seems to insist on emphasising the kitchen, the space to which Agaat is relegated when she is made from daughter into maid, rather than highlighting the subversive creativity she expresses through embroidery.

Marlene van Niekerk has also discussed the importance of Agaat's embroidery in the novel, and how it fits with her own "obsession" as a writer with the idea of how "someone who is subjected to a form of power, can take aspects of that power, and mime them back, and make themselves stronger in the process" (qtd. in De Kock *Intimate Enemies* 141). She explains:

> Agaat can take the embroidery and make it into … a sign of her own power, which is in any case doubtful, because the power is a compromised one. But it is a place where she, with the master's tools, erects for herself a little bit of autonomy, a kind of sovereignty, and it is important that this sovereignty is a form of art. (*ibid.*)

Agaat's embroidery becomes a physical embodiment of the process of making new meaning out of the shards of taught language, a process she also exemplifies in the novel,

in her "veritable Babel" of jumbled inter-cultural references. This seems to me highly resonant with Bakhtin's conceptions of the dialogical:

> The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his [sic] own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (77)

Willie Burger points out that "a tight connection is repeatedly made between Agaat's embroidery and the telling of stories". Embroidery "doesn't just serve as decoration, but is a way of making sense".[34] Burger draws a close parallel between Agaat's life-project, the embroidering of Milla's shroud ("the fourth dress of a woman", or "*die vierde rok van 'n vrou*"), and the telling of Milla's story, which is the basis of the novel itself: "The shroud being embroidered is the life-story, the rearrangement of the memories of a life".[35]

It is necessary here to examine in more detail the questions that arise from the novel around notions of separate 'Afrikaner' and 'coloured' identity/identities. Afrikaans, as has often been noted, arose linguistically as a creole of Dutch, Malay, English and African languages, in the kitchens of the Cape Colony – kitchens staffed by slaves, and with time, by the 'creolised' locals of the Cape, the forebears of the peoples known today

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[34] "'n Nou verband word herhaaldelik gele tussen Agaat se borduurwerk en die vertel van stories", Burger 181, and "Wat ook hieruit blyk, is dat borduur nie … bloot dien as verfraaiing nie, maar dat dit 'n manier is om sin te maak", own translation, Burger 182.

[35] "Die doodskleed wat geborduur word…is die lewensverhaal, die herrangskikking van herinnerings van 'n lewe", own translation, Burger 181.

in South Africa as ‘coloured’.[36] The first book published in what is recognisably Afrikaans was the Koran, which is often called on as evidence for how far the origin of the language lies from the ideas of racial ‘purity’ that beset it in the 20th century. Afrikaans was never a ‘white’ language, and the attempt to make it so was a deliberate, crafted ideological *project*, which has been extensively documented (discussed further in Chapter 3). The compulsion to separate ‘white’ Afrikaner identity from ‘coloured’ identity can and perhaps *must* to this day be read as a spurious extension of the same, an attempt by ‘white’ Afrikaans-speakers to distance themselves from what is (still) perceived as the ignobility of settler forefathers who fathered more than they (often) took credit for. It is a closing off or demarcation of cultural identity, an act by its very nature is repressive.

One danger in a reading of *Agaat* and the inter-relationship between Milla and Agaat is that the ‘coloured’ is then simplistically thought of only as the ‘other’ to the ‘white’ Afrikaner. This can result in a denial of the possibility of and articulation of ‘coloured’ *self*-identity. Is the ‘Afrikaner’ likewise the ‘other’ to ‘coloured’ identity? Rather than frame this in stark dualistic terms, ‘Afrikaner’ and ‘coloured’ might be seen as implicated in one another’s identity, such that each is the foundation of the ‘other’s’ inscription. It is pertinent to note that deductions such as these around identity are hardly new in the *plaasroman*, and do not appear only in novels published post-1994. Jan Rabie advocated substituting the terms ‘Afrikaner’ and ‘coloured’ with “white and brown Afrikaners” as early as 1958, according to Chris van der Merwe (“The Farm” 173).[37] In Rabie’s depiction in his novel *Ons, die afgod* coloureds and Afrikaners “share a history, language and religion, yet they are divided in their day-to-day living by the barriers of tradition and law”, says Van der Merwe. He continues: “Rabie emphasizes the anomaly of the Afrikaner who is intensely proud of his language, but who rejects the Coloured people who use it as their mother-tongue and helped to form it” (*ibid.*). Hence we are reminded

[36] “Creole” is defined as “*n*[*oun*] Language of mixed origin: a language that has evolved from the mixture of two or more languages and has become *the first language of a group*” (my emphasis, Encarta - Bloomsbury Concise English Dictionary, “creole”).
[37] This resonates with contemporary assertions of “Afrikaan” identity, rather than “Afrikaans”(and particularly “Afrikaner”). Proponents of this nomenclature identify themselves as Afrikaans-speakers but eschew racial classification and/or separation.

that Van Niekerk's "rewriting" of apartheid-era ideological assumptions is not always a "rewriting" of the *plaasroman* genre, but is sometimes in keeping with a genre which, in its subsequent elaborations, historically questioned the status quo.

At the same time, one is in dangerous territory if one conceives of 'coloured' identity as only enmeshed with ('white') Afrikaner identity. "Colored identity is … a complexly constructed hybrid", as Viljoen, Lewis and Van der Merwe remind us (4) and 'black' African notions of self should also be considered in any nuanced interrogation of identity in South Africa. There are no significant 'black' characters in *Agaat*, and this absence is certainly telling.[38] Of course, historical and/or geographical factors concerning settlement are partly to blame for this absence. Nevertheless, a charge levelled at 'coloured' South Africans is their perceived unwillingness to align themselves with 'black' Africans, which is often read as being symptomatic of ingrained apartheid dogma. Agaat's racism can be seen as an illustration of this. A consideration of this 'black' absence is pertinent to the study of space and place which the subject of the *plaasroman* invites, though it may not necessarily be applicable to *Agaat*. Malvern van Wyk Smith follows Jeremy Cronin's analysis of Roy Campbell and reminds us that

> inherent … in a semiotic procedure that seems to invite attention to the landscape rather than its occupants is … the temptation to elide the distinction between the South African terrain and its indigenous people, to demonise the African presence itself, and hence to move the question of occupation beyond the realms of human agency, political negotiation, and colonial responsibility… ("Boereplaas to Vlakplaas" 24)

If Agaat is constituted within the book almost entirely as Milla's 'other', as her "dark little storage cubicle" (576), if she is the avatar through whom Milla imagines roaming

[38] In one of the few references to 'black' Africans in the novel, Milla overhears Agaat telling the head-labourer Dawid her plans for when the "oumies" finally passes away. She tells him that he must decide "which three of the six [labourers] and their families will go … those who stay on, they must stop breeding or I'll have the women fixed, sooner rather than later … if I need people for big jobs, I'll hire kaffirs on contract, as at shearing time, it's much simpler and cheaper too …" (330). Here the derogative language of Jak (and by implication, the *baases* of the old South Africa) lives on in Agaat's mouth.

the farm, if she was as Milla describes Agaat to herself, "invisibly inscribed, from the moment you took her in, with your and Jak's pronouncements, your prescriptions and pronouncements" (554), and if it is more difficult (though not impossible) to ascertain the degree to which Milla was likewise inscribed by Agaat, then this is crucially *because of the novel that Marlene van Niekerk has written*. The complex narrative structure, a web of voices all of them Milla's, does not discount Agaat having self-identity, but it prohibits the reader's *access* to it. Marlene van Niekerk reminds the reader herself that "we don't know what Agaat really thinks and feels. Because we can't".[39] 'Coloured' identity does remain a dualistic (and impenetrable) 'other' of the Afrikaner if we only hear 'white Afrikaner' points of view. Agaat is certainly a strange and forbidding creature between the pages of the novel she is the namesake to, but the reader will never know how strange.

IV

Near the start of the passage, where Agaat is first taught to slaughter, Milla writes in her diary:

> Took the precaution yesterday of devising a whole list of things to be done today so that she can stay busy one shouldn't have too much time to think on a day like this. First little routine chores with which to warm hr up sweeping the stoep washing dishes doing laundry & ironing & folding & packing away then the sheep-slaughtering. (95)

Agaat is taught to slaughter on the same day that she is turned out of the main house to the maid's room that Milla has, less secretly than she imagines, prepared for her in the back yard. The proceedings of the actual slaughter are noted down as "lessons" that Agaat has to learn: practical matters like what to feed the animal prior to slaughter, and how to avoid the "convulsion kick" or "death throe" after the animal's throat has been slit (see 96 onwards). These practical lessons are Agaat's baptism into her new role on the

[39] "…ons weet nie wat Agaat regtig dink en voel nie. Want ons kan nie" (own translation, qtd. in Prinsloo and Visagie 48).

farm. She is no longer considered a child who must be sheltered from the practices of the farm-yard. When Milla notes the things she needs to buy for Agaat in her new role as nurse or maid, one of the last items is “Farmer’s Handbook (Pa’s old copy, A. must learn the principles old & new methods you never know & it’s good discipline)” (52). Sheep-slaughter is a farm ritual which was not expected of her in her *old* role, but there is the sense that learning to slaughter a sheep according to the correct method will teach her a new way of *being*.

Later in the novel Agaat is punished by Milla for her behaviour at Jakkie’s christening:

> Deliberately upset a jug of milk on the tray & the guests’ shoes were full of dogshit because she hadn’t swept the garden path. Remained sitting in the car during the christening service even though Dominee had said she could sit in the side-room & listen to the service. Didn’t even want to pose in the little church park … for a photo with Jakkie … (222)

Agaat is rebelling because the christening gown she embroidered for Jakkie, “good enough for a little prince” (220), is not used, nor is she allowed to carry him into the church. Milla writes: “But it’s obviously unheard of, a coloured girl in church & everything has already been arranged in any case, & Jak’s niece will bring him in in their old family christening robe” (220). Agaat rebels by not correctly fulfilling what is expected of her in her role as maid. Her punishment is to tan and bray leather thongs, but Agaat again reacts by deliberately sabotaging her chores (she breaks things, burns the food, lets the milk go sour, and the hens stop laying properly because of her neglect). Milla becomes increasingly angry and vindictive, making her “plough an acre with a handplough & a mule”, with an “old plough with a rusty share…& a bent beam” (224), and finally setting her an impossible task – a complicated calculation for the seeder, from which Milla has removed a rowel (see 226 onwards). Agaat, miraculously, calculates correctly, and Milla concedes, at the conclusion of this section of her diary, that “There’s not a single farmer of my acquaintance who could do that sum. How can I do it to her?” (227). It is precisely the *practices* of the farm that Agaat rebels against. Milla tells her

that "A good servant is like a shiny share that shears with ease" (224). Agaat clearly does not want to be a "good servant". But she completes the task most intended to break her spirit, the one that puts her on a par with (in fact above) the farmers of Milla's "acquaintance".

When Milla first brings Agaat to Grootmoedersdrift, she spends a great deal of time with Agaat in the outdoors. She takes Agaat to all the "little old places" that Milla's father in turn taught her to love when she was a child and which Agaat in her turn will show Jakkie, "the little old places that I showed hr myself that were my places when I was small…&that pa had shown me" (295). In these scenes there is the strong sense that inculcating a love for the outdoors, for nature and for *what lies beyond the self*, will in turn *grow* that self. When Milla is still teaching Agaat to be her child, she places value in teaching her how to live on the farm through these wild places. However, when Agaat becomes a 'maid', she is expected to pack away this relationship with the *wild* and only engage with the farm as a 'productive unit' – through gardening, tending chickens, raising her own livestock, and her servitude to the general production of the farm. This 'packing away' takes a literal bent – Milla packs Agaat's various treasures together with her Sunday-best dresses in a suitcase which she puts in the outside room. The suitcase subsequently disappears (and Agaat never appears again out of her uniform). It is not confirmed till the final chapter of the novel that Agaat buries the suitcase somewhere on the farm. One of the first nights after she is moved outside the main house, she disappears, and Milla writes in her diary, in one of the sequences where Milla's diary-writing provides an almost blow-by-blow account. The entries are named "after midnight", then "1 o'clock", "Twenty to two", "Two o'clock", "Ten past two", "Half past two":

> A. is gone! Please God she hasn't slept in her bed the suitcase is gone two Sunday dresses missing lots of clothes gone counted even 8 hairpins & a cap Lord help us! …. Now did you ever! A. is on the mountain in her new uniform! …. Can't see what she's getting up to there odd steps & gestures against the slope. (150)

The suitcase is the final object that Agaat brings back into Milla's room, in the last chapter of the novel, and, the reader presumes, on the last day of Milla's life. Agaat says:

> That brown suitcase full of my things, remember? It was as if I'd buried it there yesterday. As if it'd been sulphured ….
> Éverything is still there …. exactly as you packed it. Clothes, boots, ribbons. And shells and eggs and stones and bones, my lists, my story books, everything. Only the insects have disintegrated, and the pressed flowers are a bit ragged. And look here, even my sack with which I arrived here on Grootmoedersdrift. (648)

In the epilogue, when we finally read Agaat's fairytale-story (where she refers to herself as "Good"), the sense of burial of Agaat's previous self – the child-daughter "Good" – is made explicit:

> The woman was expecting her own baby.
> Óut she said to Good. Óut of my house, from now on you will live in a little room outside in the backyard ….
> From now on you're my slave. You'll work for a wage.
> And Good's heart was very very sore. But not for long and then it grew as hard as a stone and black as soot and cold as a burnt-out coal. And she took the suitcase filled with the dresses and shoes and things of the child she'd been and went and buried it deep in a hole on the high blue mountain across the river. And piled black stones on top of it. And trampled with her new black shoes and cocked her crooked shoulder and pointed with her snake's-head hand and said:
> Now, Good, you are dead. (689)

Agaat has buried "Good" in the beyond – "deep in a hole on the high blue mountain across the river" – the wilderness which J.M. Coetzee calls "a world where the law of nature reigns, a world over which the first act of culture, Adam's act of naming, has not

been performed” (*White Writing* 49). Within the apartheid framework Milla effectively aligns herself with by casting Agaat out of the house, there is no space for – and no words to name – the child “Good”. The young Agaat rejects the idea that she can retain both identities, ‘daughter’ and ‘maid’, and unpack the child-version on weekends (“with her white ribbons fluttering and her white bobby socks and her green dress”, 648), a version otherwise kept in a suitcase underneath her bed during the working week. Agaat is precisely rejecting a sense of identity that can be put on and taken off at will, seeing instead that what makes her *her* lies in what she *does*, what duties she *performs*, that, to return to Judith Butler, “performativity is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established […] the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed” (qtd. in Osborne and Segal 236). In somewhat more concrete terms, “the body is […] the *medium* through which messages about identity are transmitted” (Benson 123, emphasis in original).

Agaat symbolically buries the child she was when she buries her suitcase of treasured things on the mountain beyond the farm-house. In the process the interaction she was allowed to have with the wilderness is buried too. The markers of this interaction have been buried – the moths and flowers meticulously preserved, the “shells and eggs and stones and bones”, which Milla encouraged Agaat to collect, and which she used to teach Agaat about the surrounding countryside. It seems that there should be no more *need* for her to value the country-side as Milla has taught her to, perhaps because a servant should not need to explore the wilds if the wilderness inspires a certain ‘selfhood’ or subjectivity (which seems the implication of the value Milla and her father placed in the “little old places”). While her wandering is no longer encouraged after her relegation to the back room, and Milla registers her disapproval privately in her diaries, Agaat never stops her explorations.

This is first of all because of Jakkie. Agaat’s secret name for Jakkie, the “name that only she knows about”, which is revealed in the final pages of the novel, is “You-are-mine” (690). According to Buikema, Agaat

> uses her love to steal Milla's son. The child Jakkie develops a symbiotic relationship with this self-appointed mother and from their son's earliest youth the biological parents Milla and Jak assume supporting roles. (18)

The love Agaat uses "to steal Milla's son" is the only love she has ever been shown – the love which Milla used to steal *her*. An early incident, though there are many from the novel, illustrates how this love is expressed through nature. Agaat has taken Jakkie in his pram to the river, and the present-day Milla remembers:

> You knew why thére specifically. It was sorrel time. It was the time for stringing garlands of pink sorrel and yellow sorrel on the long thin leaves of the wild tulips, an old game of Agaat's, *you had originally shown her how* …. The garland of flowers, *once in spring* around *her* neck, around *your* neck. Such a garland took two hours to string and served as a necklace for a quarter of an hour. Then it was wilted. You knew that on the afternoon she would sit Jakkie down on his little blanket in the grass and plait him a garland and sing to him. In veld and vlei the spring's at play. There was a hare, a fox and a bear, and birds in the willow tree. All the old spring songs. (253; my emphasis)

Agaat is carrying on her own childhood traditions, taught to her by Milla. She inculcates a love of the wild and of folk-music in Jakkie (and the latter must surely be seen as the seed for Jakkie's eventual career as musicologist). Jakkie and Agaat have a number of games and rituals, for example their calling to each other on a ram's horn across the distance of the farm (this horn is eventually one of the few things that Jakkie takes back with him to Canada after his mother's funeral, at Agaat's insistence: "Blow me a note on it every now and again, she said, looked away. I'll hear it", 676). These games can be read as *invoking* distance, and in doing so, *space*.[40] They speak to a different relationship with the breadth of the farm than the cultivation of it. When Jakkie takes Agaat flying

[40] For a discussion of the use of the depiction of sound to create the illusion of space see Hein Viljoen's discussion of Etienne van Heerden's novel *Leap Year* ("Land, Space, Identity" 117).

during his calamitous birthday party, this conjuring up of space – crucially, *distance* – is also noticeable. But Agaat's continued roaming in the wilds is also on her own and on her own terms.

The same night that Milla suspects Agaat of burying the suitcase, she spies Agaat on the hillside:

> That to-do on the hill I can't figure out. Sideways & backwards knees bent foot-stamping jumping on one leg jump-jump-jump & point-point with one arm at the ground. Then the arms rigid next to the sides. Then she folded them & then she stretched them. Looked as if she was keeping the one arm in the air & waving …. How strange all the same. Hr head in the air, looking up at hr little arm as if it's a stick. Walking stick? Fencing-foil? Then again held still in front of hr, palm turned down palm turned up. Judgement? Blessing? Over the hills over the valley along the river? *A farewell ritual*? Where could she get it from? So weird it all is I can't put the images out of my head I think of it all the time …. Could the binoculars have been playing tricks upon me? Hr arm a pointer? Pointing-out pointing-to what is what & who is who? An oar? A blade? Hr fist pressing apart the membrane & the meat as if she's dressing a slaughter animal? But not a sheep, as if she's separating the divisions of the night. *Or dividing something within herself. Root cluster*. (151; my emphasis)

Six years later at Witsand, the seaside holiday town where the De Wets (and Agaat) spend their Decembers, Milla witnesses a similarly estranging ritual, after secretly following Agaat down the beach at day-break:

> So there she went & stood with hr face to the water upright on parade & she makes the same odd gestures as that evening on the mountain with hr arms extended in front of hr as if she's indicating points of the compass or explicating the horizon …. (315)

Agaat then takes off her clothes, revealing that

> she's wearing Ma's old bathing costume under hr clothes it hangs on her like the skin of a bat & she takes the white crocheted jersey out of the basket & she puts it on over the rest. Who is she scared will see hr kettle-spout arm hr legs hr shins the nail-clipping of a moon? (315)

Agaat walks into the sea to stand "rock-solid in the midst of the wild waves probably ten minutes", and Milla wonders "How high, how strong would the wave have to be that could flatten hr?" Agaat backs out of the sea backwards, keeping her eyes on the horizon, and the whole spectacle makes Milla "s[i]nk down behind the dune" and cry (316). There are other intimations through the novel that Agaat explores Grootmoedersdrift at night, and that the "odd gestures" are practised repetitively. They are for Milla completely indecipherable (beyond her initial attempt in her diary), to the point that she resists trying, labelling them a "St Vitus dance", calling Agaat a "witch" engaged in "satanic rites" (see for example 447).[41] One could perhaps link these rituals to the "pagan" and "pre-Christian", but to conjure up Agaat's indigenous ancestry like this seems to me dangerously close to an essentialist conception of self, that insinuates that Agaat pre- or subconsciously retains some sense of her indigenous ancestry despite her complete alienation from this tradition and her biological family.

Milla never makes the connection between Agaat's strange and secret routine and the little morning-ritual which she taught Agaat as a small child, to make the little child more in command of her body and less stiff, particularly her "crooked shoulder". The ritual seems modelled on the Sun Greeting practised in yoga, though this connection is also

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[41] A "St Vitus dance" can either refer to the spasms associated with the neurological disorder more commonly today called Sydenham chorea, or to the "ecstatic mass dances" of the 11th and 12th century, popularly connected to witch-craft or possession: "There were two kinds of dance peculiar to the Middle Ages, the dance of death, or danse macabre, and the dancing mania known as St. Vitus' dance. Both originally were ecstatic mass dances, dating from the 11th and 12th centuries. […] The St. Vitus' dance became a real public menace, seizing hundreds of people, spreading from city to city, mainly in the Low Countries, in Germany, and in Italy during the 14th and 15th centuries. It was a kind of mass hysteria, a wild leaping dance in which the people screamed and foamed with fury, with the appearance of persons possessed." (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Dance ecstasies" in "Western Dance: Christianity and the Middle Ages").

never made explicit in the text. (It also seems a little outlandish for a woman living in the rural Cape in the 1950s. Interestingly, in the original Afrikaans edition it is simply referred to as "die songroet" – not capitalised – which seems to me less resonant of the well-known sequence of yoga postures or *asana* than in the English edition, where it is called "Greeting to the Sun", which is the *asana's* common English name). Never connecting this childhood ritual and Agaat's night-time gestures seems to me a wilful blindness. In her diary of the time Milla describes the "dance" that the eight-year-old Agaat makes up:

> A. has now thought up a whole dance of hr own on the model of the Greeting to the Sun which she still does every morning. Decided to keep it up every day from the start .… Now there's no stopping her now she's even teaching mé. Again this morning we had the so-called dance of the emperor butterfly [a detailed description follows] …. A whole extended dance of the two of us it turned into this morning. First in hr room where she explained the dance & then into my room & out of my room by the door of the side stoep .… Then I chase hr & then she chases me & it triples & it leaps with extended legs over the flowerbeds … then we both roll in the grass, she half on top of me, our limbs intertwined. Caught! she shouts. Then she puts hr arms around my neck & says: Close your eyes open your eyes my Même you're my only mother. Now I'm crying too much to carry on writing here. (633)

Milla's tears when she sees the now-grown Agaat's strange ritual on the beach at Witsand subsequently make more sense, even if Milla won't make this connection herself. One possible reading is that this ritual is the only tie Agaat still keeps to the child "Good" (other than the story she tells Jakkie). Performing this ritual is also, because Milla taught it to her, a tie to the mother-figure that Milla once was to Agaat, and then disavowed. It is impenetrable to Milla because of this disavowal. To understand the ritual would mean recognising what she did to Agaat when she turned her out of the house. (It could be

argued that in the present tense, especially in her very last dying days, Milla comes to a similar understanding of the bond between the two of them, if not in these exact terms).

It also seems to me that this ritual is an anchoring in place, which situates her on the farm Grootmoedersdrift, in a manner that is *un*connected to the farm as 'productive unit', as I have called it before. It is a personal rather than a social interaction, and a wholly personal way of greeting the *elements* or the elemental. I am reminded again of Marlene van Niekerk's assertion that Agaat's "mimicry contains something sardonic" and becomes a "weapon", though the mimicry here is not Agaat affecting Milla's turn of phrase, or conforming so strictly to the dress and outward behaviour of the "meid" that Jakkie can call her an "Apartheid cyborg" (677). The reader can only imagine that *this* is a mimicry adapted to her own needs. Here I must return to the similarity between ritual and language, as structuring systems, and the idea that ritual ends up bringing about an embodied response where language locates us psychically. I wish to stretch this analogy further, in drawing once more on Jean-François Lyotard's distinction between "authentic articulation" and "ordinary or inauthentic articulation", a distinction "that is not unlike Merleau-Ponty's distinction between 'speaking speech' and 'spoken speech'", according to Veronica Vasterling (216), and in which Lyotard draws on the *suffering* he identifies in the Kantian sublime. Lyotard writes:

> Thinking and suffering overlap …. If this suffering is the mark of true thought, it's because we think in the already-thought, in the inscribed. And because it's difficult to leave something hanging in abeyance or take it up again in a different way so that what hasn't been thought yet can emerge and what should be inscribed will be. (qtd. in Vasterling 217)

Authentic thought emerges out of suffering, the wresting away from the "already-thought". Could one not likewise posit that creative *ritual* expression comes about when out of the learnt elements of ritual, one fuses them together in something new, that has authentic meaning for the individual; when out of the learnt, "the inscribed", comes the new, the authentic? One must be comfortable with the incomprehensible, and live with

(in) suffering until it finds expression: "Not the capacities of a body-subject in tune with the surrounding world but rather the receptivity of a body-soul forever haunted by the 'sublime breakdowns' resulting from an excess of affections is what conditions authentic articulation" (*ibid.*).

V

Throughout the novel the garden is the place most resonantly described, particularly in the present tense. From her room and her sickbed Milla can *smell* the flowers and she can *hear* the birds and the sprinklers in the garden. She often imagines Agaat walking through the garden, picking certain herbs, and gardening. Agaat used to bring in "fresh flowers in the vases every day" (154), but stops, apparently according to doctor's orders. But once Agaat rearranges the dressing-table mirrors, Milla can see the garden reflected back to her in its full glory, a description which serves well to exemplify many others through the novel:

> There's a view of the garden in the mirror, but sharper, clearer than a garden can be. My garden I see there, cut out on three levels, abounding with detail, the most alluring prospects …. Cautiously I sip at it, choking with emotion would spell the premature end of this story …. The mirror reveals a perfect result. The best I've ever experienced the garden. This is how I had always imagined the north-east side could look. I planned it in terms of all the different shades of blue in the catalogue. This is how I imagined it. Blue perennials, iris, agapanthus, hydrangea, bushes of kingfisher daisies, annuals sowed in the borders ever year, first for the winter plain blue pansies and forget-me-nots that started coming up by themselves in tract upon tract and then ageratum for spring, and after that for summer, cornflower, cornflower, and again cornflower. Because of blue one can never have enough in the barren yellow and brown of summer and also not in winter when it must help the rains to fall as the old people believed. (153-154)

When Agaat was a small child, the garden was still an overgrown “higgledy-piggledy farm garden” (459), not yet the garden like “Paradise” that Jak had first promised Milla. The garden is the scene for much of the instructive play between Milla and Agaat. The wild “dance of the emperor butterfly” discussed previously leads Milla and Agaat into the garden where the dance ends, and the first time Agaat signals back to Milla with her eyes they are also in the garden. (It is in fact Jak standing behind Milla’s back that Agaat is reacting to and it is certainly a foreshadowing that the first meaningful communication between them is Agaat warning Milla about Jak). A garden is a natural place for play because, to state the obvious, it is contained. It is the wilderness fenced in yet still open to the elements. The concept of the “garden” is intrinsic to Judeo-Christian and/or Western thought, elemental within our myths of origin of the Garden of Eden and the fall from grace. It is also hugely resonant in South African history – the first European settlement at the Cape was famously established to be a garden providing passing sailors of the Dutch East India Company with fresh vegetables on their journey around the Cape.

Central to the idea of the garden in general, and borne out by Milla’s actions and descriptions in *Agaat*, is that it is a place which is *planned* as well as cultivated, but for different reasons than a field or orchard. A garden’s use to a large degree resides in its aesthetic beauty. Milla starts planning the garden in earnest while Jakkie is fighting ‘on the border’ (from whence the apartheid army launched incursions into Angola). She tries to involve Jak one last time and make the planting of the garden a joint project: “A paradise, you whispered, your head on his chest, that’s what you promised me, do you remember? Long ago. A flower garden without equal. Let’s make a garden for Jakkie, he won’t always want to fly jet fighters” (458). Jak’s reply is typically contemptuous: “Go ahead, he mumbled, make your garden, you do just what you want to in any case” (459). Milla then goes out onto the stoep and imagines it, “a bower of beauty”, “a park in which you could lose yourself …. Formal of design … but informally planted” (459). What comes next is very telling: “Like a story you wanted it, a fragrant visitable book full of details forming part of a pattern so subtle that one would be able to trace it only after a while … a composition, a sonata with theme and developments and repetitions in varying keys” (459). Milla could well be describing the novel *Agaat* or one of Agaat’s

embroidered "compositions", like the rainbow she embroidered when Jakkie went to school, or the bizarre and intricate death-shroud which is a visual representation of Milla and her own life-story on Grootmoedersdrift.

When Agaat deigns to join in Milla's enthusiasm about the garden, there is the distinct sense that Agaat takes over the planning process. This example of power-play between the two women is not dissimilar to Agaat's taking over Milla's duties of looking after Jakkie when he was a small baby. Agaat personally oversees the bigger parts of the project, insisting that they get "a team of convicts from town to dig trenches, stack stone walls and dig out the flowerbeds", whom she marshals "with a short quirt … to see that there was no idling" (466). But during the planning of the garden Milla and Agaat also finally visit Cape Town together, the only time described in the novel when Agaat leaves the immediate surrounds of Swellendam (except for the annual visits to Witsand and a disastrous medal-ceremony for Jakkie at Ysterplaat). Milla recalls this trip and the other garden-related excursions, "those long hours in fragrant nurseries" as her and Agaat's "best times together" (466). When, 22 years later, Milla sees this "crowning glory" reflected in the mirrors of her dressing-table, she says "*my* garden I see there …. The best *I've* ever experienced …. *I planned* it in terms of all the different shades of blue in the catalogue. This is how *I imagined it*" (153, my emphasis). But Agaat helped her plan and plant it in the early 1980s and the garden in the present tense, after Milla's years of invasive paralysis, is *all* Agaat's doing. Milla's ownership of the garden certainly seems hubristic, but I am also reminded of Milla's remonstration to her doctor, conveyed silently through Agaat, urging that "our imagination is a shared one, tell him we thought each other up" (211-212). Who played what part in the planning and planting of the garden is impossible to disentangle, and what either Agaat or Milla's motives were or are, a densely knitted quilt of malice and munificence, with little clear "awareness; Of things ill done and done to others' harm; Which once you took for exercise of virtue".

When Agaat rearranges Milla's dressing-table so that Milla can see the garden, Milla soon hopes that as the mirror *reflects* the outside world, she can make Agaat understand that she wants to see another *kind* of pictorial representation of the outside: the maps of

the farm. It is worth noting that the mirror through which Milla sees the garden is the central panel of her dressing-table, which breaks early in her and Jak's marriage during a particularly vicious battering by Jak. As a result, the quality of light reflected in this mirror is slightly different to that reflected by the side-panel mirrors. Consequently, in these reflections, Milla's history is also always reflected. This is expressed much more artfully in Milla's own words (in a description which also echoes her and the young Agaat's careful bringing to life of near-drowned butterflies):

> Does a mirror sometimes preserve everything that has been reflected in it? Is there a record of light, thin membranes compressed layer upon layer that one has to ease apart with the finger-tips so that the colours don't dissipate, so that the moments don't blotch and the hours don't run together into inconsequential splotches? So that a song of preserved years lies in your palm, a miniature of your life and times, with every detail meticulous in clear, chanting angel-fine enamel, as on the old manuscripts, at which you can peer through a magnifying glass and marvel at so much effort? (163) [42]

Milla accuses Agaat of understanding her desire all along to see the maps of the farm, and of playing deliberate games with her. Agaat claims not to understand what is distressing Milla, but says to Doctor Leroux: "I thought she felt trapped in here, she wanted out, outside, so I turned the mirror so that she could see the reflection of the garden. It's better than nothing. But it's something else. She wants to see something, something *that's outside and inside. Outside and inside at the same time*" (209, my emphasis). Agaat has brought the garden inside for Milla, brought the outside inside. The garden is the first instance Agaat recreates for Milla on her deathbed in her sickroom, and it will take the novel's 600-odd pages for her whole lifetime to be recreated there.

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[42] For a comprehensive and fascinating discussion of the meaning of the mirrors in *Agaat*, from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, see Willie Burger's "Deur 'n spiel in 'n raaisel: kennis van die self en die ander in *Agaat* deur Marlene van Niekerk", and Marlene van Niekerk's own discussion of the mirrors in the novel, though she admits that "some of the mirrors stuff I didn't understand myself […] but for me it was important because of the narcissism that I wanted to emphasise. So I give everybody a mirror…" (qtd. in De Kock "Intimate Enemies" 149).

I commenced this analysis by examining the manner through which Milla expresses herself in metaphors of landscape and geography, as well as the importance of ritual for the characters of Grootmoedersdrift to anchor themselves in place. Milla still feels that she planned the garden and that it is now exactly as she imagined it could be. Her perception of the garden as an extension of herself is similar to her internal tracking or following of Agaat through the house and the garden. Milla understands and expresses herself in language through evocations of the beyond, sometimes with the sense that her body is a treacherous landscape within which she lies suspended. But in her experience of the garden she can also (still) order and measure the outside, and see this harmony reflected back into her room, and back to her. There is a clear irony here. It is in fact Agaat who reflects this garden back to Milla, and Agaat who has planted and tended the garden herself. It is *her* perfect end-result Milla sees, not Milla's own, and the reflection is "a way in which Agaat … can have herself present in the room" (Van Niekerk qtd. in De Kock *Intimate Enemies* 149).

VI

The novel opens with Milla's desire to see the maps of her farm. The idea consumes her. Much of her monologue is her (silent) imploration that Agaat will understand her and details her attempts to 'point' (through glances alone) towards the sideboard on the other side of the house where the maps are kept. Milla thinks "How many syllables can you speak without saying an "m"? Utter how many sentences without using the word 'map'? Think how many thoughts before you stumble upon the idea of a schematic representation of the world?" (58). She accuses Agaat of "acting stupid" and holding on to the maps for her own purposes (in this latter respect, it would seem she is partly right). What Milla imagines is at stake becomes clear in the following description:

> There, behind the little blue books, lie the maps that I want to see.
> And you may have dominion over my hours that you count off there and apportion with your devious little snake-hand and your white casque in front of the clock face, Agaat. But there is also space, cartographed, stippled, inalienable, the mountains, the valleys, the distance from A to B, laid down

> in place names for a century or two or three, Susverlore or Sogevonden, farms Foundlikethis and Lostlikethat. (65)

It seems there is an epistemology in question here, a system of knowing oneself on in relation to the land. We return to the sense that Milla understands herself *through* the farm around her, and as her last hour draws closer (in the hours she accuses Agaat of "counting off" and "apportioning"), this insistence that land has meaning *beyond* time is more and more emphatic. In one scene (where Agaat is trying to encourage her to urinate), this obsession becomes quite comic:

> I think of the water map. I think of the underground water-chambers in the mountain, of the veins branching from them, of the springs in the kloofs, of the fountains of Grootmoedersdrift, the waterfalls in the crevices. I think of the drift when it's in flood, the foaming mass of water, the drift in the rain, when the drops drip silver ringlets on the dark water …. Memories in me and I awash between heaven and earth. What is fixed and where? What real? If only I could once again see the places marked on the map …. Sheep, cattle, lorries, wire cars, mud and time. Slippery, supple, subtle, silvery time. Maps attend lifetimes. What is an age without maps? I see it, chambers full of idle melancholy cartographers in the timeless hereafter. Hills there surely will have to be in heaven, but eternal, Eternal Humpbacked Hills, and Eternal Fairweather. Idle melancholy meteorologists. What is a real human being? A run-off. A chute of minutes for God the sluicer. He who paves his guttering with people. (80-81)

Milla clearly – and not surprisingly, for a woman who has spent her lifetime wringing meaning out of the parcel of ground she farms – privileges the eternally physical (the land around her) over the ephemeral human body ("a chute of minutes for God the sluicer"). In one of her strangest recitations Milla imagines being carried outside for one last time, on a stretcher, and overseeing the farm for one last time (see 103 onwards), so she can "assess the swing of the wagon on the drawbar, and count the bales as they are

carried into the shed, and count the stalks on the back of the bearer" and "feel once more in my palms the chirp and throb of the body of a chick" (104). Then her helpers must "unroll" the map "in the dust" and "place stones on its corners so that it doesn't roll shut". She imagines someone holding up and guiding her head (which in her paralysis she cannot), "lift[ing] it up and lower[ing] it as the rod points on the map and the hand points over my world, so that I can see the map of Grootmoedersdrift and its boundlessness." A list of the rivers and towns of the region follows, including a detailed sketch of Grootmoedersdrift itself, reminiscent of Jakkie's scene-setting in the Prologue. And then:

> they must roll [the map] up in a tube and put on my neckbrace again like the mouth of a quiver. And I will close my eyes and prepare myself so that they can unscrew my head and allow the map to slip into my lacunae.
> So that I can be filled and braced from the inside and fortified for the voyage.
> Because without my world inside me I will contract and congeal, more even than I am now, without speech and without actions and without any purchase upon time. (105)

Her farm is "her world" around which she, otherwise a "lacuna", takes shape, and this world is captured in the maps.[43] This trust in the maps, which is a form of pictorial representation, capturing reality (or attempting to) on a two-dimensional plane, has, firstly, quite clear connotations within the colonial (and the 'post-colonial'). Colonisers have always taken great store in cartography and in the ability to *capture* the previously unknown on paper. But in a novel so fundamentally concerned with competing ways of telling, the idea of the map must surely also be aligned with the diaries, Milla's other great project of inscription. Milla shows doubt in the project of her diaries from quite early on, and the novel's very structure serves to undermine their veracity. In Agaat's

[43] Another possible intertextual echo is heard here, this time reminiscent of various pronouncements by the narrator Magda in J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* who "speaks on several occasions of herself as a void that needs to be filled, 'a being with a hole inside me' … 'a hole crying to be whole' … and this void she realizes can and must only be filled with story, her story; …. The image of the hole and its filling becomes a central motif…" (Van Wyk Smith "Boereplaas to Vlakplaas" 32). Milla's conception of being filled with the maps, and all that they portend, "her world", seems to me similar to Van Wyk Smith's conclusion, that Magda "can and must only be filled with story".

reply to Milla's desires for her maps something quite different emerges, an insistence of a different ilk.

It is in response to Milla's attempts to signal for the maps that Agaat creates the strange tableau in her sickroom that Jakkie will discover after Milla's death, and which can perhaps be read as a catalyst for *his* creative process. He calls it "Ali Baba's cave", but immediately corrects himself: "Not quite an accurate simile. The murky realm of mothers, rather. Monstrous specimens everywhere. Samples of some weird mnemonic" (679). Agaat, in the last few days and weeks, carries "everything she could think of" into Milla's room:

> Everything that I said we should throw away and burn and give away. Everything that we set aside for her to keep.
> Like a stage-prop store it looks in here. Beach hat, fish gaff, old black bathing costume from the year dot. From day to day the exhibition is changed. She makes me smell everything, presses it under my hand to feel …. I went to sleep intermittently with all the activity. Sometimes I thought I was dreaming. When I woke up there was a clattering in the passage and then yet another object was dragged in from the shed. A bag of guano, a bag of chicken feed, a can of dipping fluid, a can of vaccine … (334 onwards)

Milla also detects a rising anger in Agaat, which is only finally unleashed on the day that Agaat finally brings the maps of the farm into her room. When she unrolls the maps, there is no doubt that this is a punishment. Milla has her wish granted, but she is in terrible cramps as Agaat's laxatives – spinach, prunes and "Pink Lady" medicine – take effect. Agaat marches up and down Milla's room while she unrolls the maps and "reads the names in four-square march-time, taps the duster on the map like a metronome" (405). This is no idyllic recreation of the region, like either Jakkie's (even if his tone is sometimes sardonic) or Milla's:

> We stayed over hére (she on sacks with smelly servant in the hovel), visited thére (tea and cake for her in the shade of a great old bluegum what more could one wish for) ….
> All along the old battle positions.
> Everything that you forgot and never even mentioned in your little books, says Agaat ….
> Sonderkos and Grootbaklei, Droëbek and Natteschoot. Out of Food but Full of Fight, Dry of Mouth and Wet of Loin: Agaat's inventions. (405 – 406)

Agaat's performance becomes wilder and wilder and ends with the closest that she will ever come to an outright confrontation with Milla:

> Mailslot! Lowroof! Candle-end!
> Lockupchild! Without pot!
> Shatinthecorner!
> Shatupon!
> Dusterstick on Agaatsarse.
> Au-Au-Au!
> Ai-Ai-Ai!
> Neversaysorry!
> Sevenyearschild.
> And then?
> Can-you-believe-it?
> Báckyard!
> Skívvy-room!
> Highbed!
> Brownsuitcase!
> Whitecap! Heartburied!
> Nevertold! Unlamented!
> Good-my-Arse!
> Now-my-Arse! Now's-the-Time! (407)

Here is Agaat's list of "everything" that Milla "forgot" and never wrote down (though Agaat's origin still remains unspoken). Agaat's anger at the maps is in direct correlation with her anger at Milla's diary-writing, and is directed at exactly that which isn't there. Mapping and writing both aim to capture reality, but can leave out as much as they contain.

Agaat's response is instead to bring in things. She brings in the farm. This re-creation accounts for much of the *claustrophobia* of the novel, a relentless insistence on the ability of things to conjure up the past. The whole novel, whoever the implied writer is thought to be, is told with Milla's emphases. Agaat's side of the story – *her* "other story", like Jak has his – is only glimpsed at. But in this recreation in Milla's room is a philosophy to rival Milla's, which is simultaneously also of Milla. Milla's insistence on representation in the two-dimensional plane and on paper is a refutation of the life she has lived on the farm with Agaat. It is in fact a refutation of the value she herself places in the solidly material. *Agaat* is a novel which in the course of its near-700 pages convinces the reader of nothing as much as the *weight* of the physical world upon the living, and the impossibility of getting it quite right in words.

To anyone with the most cursory of knowledge of the South African present, never mind anyone who lives in this country, the history of land-ownership in South Africa is deeply troublesome. Land-ownership was at the very heart of first the colonial project, and later the minority-led dispensation (since 1910 and the forming of the Union through 1948 and the subsequent declaration of the Republic in 1961). Land-rights and –claims remain in focus (and in dispute) fifteen years into democracy. The *plaasroman* and the farm-novel, or the "rewritten" *plaasroman* and farm novel, all illustrate the centrality of land in the psychic narrative of the country. We cannot escape its pull. Milla's attitudes in *Agaat* – her relentless self-examination, yet skirting of truth(s), in her diaries and her monologue(s), could well illustrate J.M. Coetzee's reverberating phrase "talk, talk, their excessive talk", with which he criticises 'white' South Africans soundly because

> their love is not enough today and has not been enough since they arrived on the continent; furthermore, their talk, their excessive talk, about how they love South Africa has consistently been directed towards the land, that is, toward what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers. ("Jerusalem Prize Speech" 97)

Social communion ("fraternity" in Coetzee's terms) is not possible. Yet what does one turn to then if not the "mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers"? In a land so blighted in how we approach one another, one can at least live with the land. One can feel with or through the land, if social conditions and conditioning make feeling for (an)other so problematic, if not near-impossible. For both Milla and Agaat, one might argue that their primary relationship is in fact *not* with one another, but with the farm – both its production and its *space*. This relationship is a reaction to the social relationships of the time, which is conversely also exemplified by the deeply twisted relationship they have with one-another, a parasitical intertwining. Coetzee goes on to (in)famously claim:

> South African literature is a literature in bondage, as it reveals in even its highest moments, shot through as they are with feelings of homelessness and yearnings for a nameless liberation … It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison …. Yet even the literature of vastness, examined closely, reflects feelings of entrapment, entrapment in infinitudes. (*ibid.*)

Nearly twenty years later South African literature has in this novel by Marlene van Niekerk undoubtedly grown capable of more. Hers is no homeless literature.

In the second-last chapter of the novel, Milla listens while Agaat prepares her "last meal":

> The smell was green and sweet and raw, traces of beans, lazy housewife, of peas, sugarsnow, of cabbage, of carrots, of turnips and radishes, of freshly-

> pulled fennel bulbs, the whole vegetable garden below the drift, the irrigation water, the loam darkened with barrow-loads of compost ….
> I was supposed to be able to hear the kitchen. In full concert. Pull out all the stops …. It was supposed to console me. It was supposed to reassure me. I was in the knives, I was in the peels, in the drawers, in the enamel bowls, I was the rich black compost, I was the soil, and nothing would ever grow without me. Nothing, to the end of time, without my having farmed here, and none of the people remaining here and living off the land. (580 – 81)

Agaat will show Milla the shroud she has embroidered for her after eating this "last meal" on her behalf. Her embroidery is as much her ordering of truth as the diary-writing was once Milla's: to contain on the sheets of linen a story, a life. Yet the reassurance here is "in the peels, in the drawers, in the enamel bowls" and "the rich black compost". Reassurance must be in the *quality* of sound, if meaning leaks out, and the brushing of breath against skin, bare feet on earth, the immediately tangible which makes up a life, and here, a novel. And yet, the tangible catches words, is Jakkie's "weird mnemonic", is that from which the story spins, as Milla wonders: "the light comes and announces itself in my room like an unfamiliar word. Like a word that you recognise as a word but of which the meaning just evades you" (153).

CHAPTER THREE

"I'm over the hill, Agaat, translate me, I'm sick with remorse"[44]

Translating *Agaat*, Milla translated

"You can choose your philosophy of translation just as you choose how to live: the free adaptation that sacrifices detail to meaning, the strict crib that sacrifices meaning to exactitude. The poet moves from life to language, the translator moves from language to life; both, like the immigrant, try to identify the invisible, what's between the lines, the mysterious implications." (Anne Michaels 109)

"translation is a licensed trespass upon a rich but relatively unknown territory, upon which the translator has to report back to people to whom the territory is not only unknown but foreign." (Michiel Heyns 125)

If we accept that language is a system of symbols, an arbitrary system, but the system from which we both generate and derive meaning, then language is always a translation, and we are all translators. Perhaps so, but people who have lived in more than one language know all too well the ditches between languages into which meaning can drain away, the untranslatable from the one system to another. There is the terror of falling between languages, slipping into the ditch, and the feeling that neither or none of the tongues with which you speak are adequate to the task, dexterous enough to pick out the right words. The central conceit of language depends on our ignoring its artifice. Its usefulness would fall apart if we were *always* aware of the inherent limitations to the very task it *must* set out to achieve. And so, there is right at the heart of language itself (as any good post-structuralist could tell you), and in any consideration of translation, the *impossibility* of the task at hand.

Yet we are caught in this web of the impossible. It is lodged in the very essence of our selves. The slide between languages, away from what we call 'meaning', is a metaphor

[44] See *Agaat* (190)

for all language, and all meaning. Translation theorists teach us to look at this problem anew – indeed, to reconceptualise it not as problem, or challenge, but as creative opportunity. To know more than one language is to know more than one way of saying the unsayable, and, as *angst* and *weltschmerz*, *apartheid* and *ubuntu* teach us, in a country where *skaam* and *naar* seem to more easily slip over people's lips than squirmy 'shame' and stomach-turning 'nausea', there are words and phrases which seem to fit physical reality more snugly in one language than in another. Here is the hinge upon which my fascination with translation fixes. The act of translation makes the mechanics of utterance discernible. Walter Benjamin wrote:

> Translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation, how close can it be brought by the knowledge of their remoteness?...This…is to admit that all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages. (18-19)

Or perhaps, as Eve Bannet conjectures about the importance of the practice of translation:

> if subjects are indeed "spoken" by language and culture and if (as Fredric Jameson and Milton between them might put it) the prison house of language is the cause of all our woe, then subjects who speak/are spoken by at least two different languages are subjects who are "never enclosed in the column of one single tongue" [citing Derrida] …The translator is a subject who "speaks both" the different languages, different cultures, different historical moments, different texts, and different technes of translation spoken by others, and, in speaking, add-joins them to each other. (9)

In translation lies the opportunity to understand something about language itself, which is very hard to discern when we use only one language, usually our mother-tongue, freely, without examination. This creative potential can be discerned in the carrying over of meaning from one text to another, whether one chooses "the free adaptation that

sacrifices detail to meaning" or "the strict crib that sacrifices meaning to exactitude" (Michaels 109). Furthermore, investigating translation opens up creative reimagining of subjectivity, if we follow the more radical 'postcolonial' writers, like Homi Bhabha, who enthusiastically (and somewhat notoriously) claims:

> we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and renegotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national anti-nationalist histories of the 'people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. (38 – 39)

It is with these understandings of the potential of translation that I start this chapter, holding steady to the notion that while something may be lost in translation, something can also be gained, both in the work itself, as new shades of meaning come into the text from the target-language, and in the target-language, as "foreignising" translations (those in which the structures and idioms of the source-language are still audible) shift the limits of what is possible. In other words I start with the conviction that translation is, in Benjamin's terms again, "charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original [source] language and the birth pangs of the new" (18). However, before looking in detail at the translation of *Agaat*, it is useful to consider the context of its publication.

I

Translation studies has become imbued with a certain political urgency as postcolonial studies emerged as a force-field in the social sciences in general, and literature studies in particular. Many writers and intellectuals from the 'postcolonial' world straddle at least two languages and express themselves in more than one tongue. Immigrants and emigrants have in large part characterised the 'postcolonial' condition, and, as Anne Michaels reminds us, an immigrant's task is like the translator's, "try[ing] to identify the

invisible, what's between the lines, the mysterious implications".[45] The theory that has emerged from this 'postcolonial' orientation powerfully reveals some of the intrinsic ambivalences of translation.[46] Being outside the 'nest' of power – removed from the metropolitan centre (whether that be London and Paris or increasingly New York and Los Angeles, or even Johannesburg and Mumbai) – has meant that the ideological underpinnings of language can be revealed, often because the 'imperial' language butts heads with indigenous languages. As such, there has been a revival of interest in the work of theorists such as Walter Benjamin on the subject of translation.

However, these debates don't fully answer to the unique language politics of a 'postcolonial' South Africa (once again pointing to the limited value of broadly 'postcolonial' debates – South Africa can hardly serve as a typical example of African post-independence, if any African country can claim to). Translation between Afrikaans and English is not the same as other African language texts being translated into English. In South Africa, 'white' English and Afrikaans-speaking writers cannot easily or uncontroversially claim status as 'postcolonial' writers, writing as they do from a particularly privileged position within a 'postcolonial' (and/or 'post-fascist') society. Sue Kossew, while noting that according to some there is "'active hostility' to the 'inclusion of Australian, Canadian, South African and New Zealand colonial settlements in the framework of the postcolonial'", goes on to say it is a "crucial project of post-colonial theory to examine the ways in which such 'unsettled settlers' … inscribe, through their literary practices, their shifting and ambivalent identities and subjectivities" (1). Here, "shifting" and "ambivalent" are the crux. It has become common within South African cultural life for Afrikaans-speakers (usually 'white') to claim 'minority rights' for the

[45] One problematic implication of this comparison though is the (quite common if unstated) idea that the 'ideal' 'postcolonial' writer or artist has to have emigrated *from* the 'periphery' *to* the 'centre': "…the translated hybridity of the 'unhomed' migrant now inhabits a 'Third Space' …- which presumably *becomes accessible only after one has left the Third World*" (Basnett and Trivedi, 1999:12, my emphasis).

[46] I use the term 'postcolonial' in inverted commas as a term that warrants contestation, often ceasing to have much value beyond pointing at particular but widely divergent geographic locations. As Anne McClintock (1995) persuasively argues: "the term postcolonial…is haunted by the very figure of linear development that it sets out to dismantle" (10) and "…orientating theory around the temporal axis colonial-post-colonial makes it easier not to see and therefore harder to theorize, the continuities in international imbalances in power" (13).

status of Afrikaans, when the numbers clearly show other 'minority languages' on a *very* unequal footing. While I am not disputing the need to encourage the growth and preservation of all our national languages, Afrikaans included, I am disputing claims that Afrikaans is under similar or equal threat as the rest.

The development of Afrikaans into a fully recognisable language, rather than a Dutch dialect or a Cape pidgin, is indivisible from the struggle of what became the 'Afrikaner' people[47] to gain political control in opposition to both the English in South Africa (where the English language was still tied to a notion of Britishness and Empire), and also to the Dutch-speaking land-owning upper-class. Lewis, in his analysis of Breyten Breytenbach's movements within Afrikaans and between Afrikaans and English, writes that "Afrikaans was deployed rhetorically as defining the spirit of the Afrikaners, and appeals to this *Sprachgeist* worked remarkably successfully to unify this small group of people" (181). He furthermore asserts that "[b]uilding the nation from words in the first few decades of the [twentieth] century involved a 'translation' of Afrikaans from the kitchen to the salon, the purification of a 'low', bastardised language into a high literary language" (182).

In a consideration of *Agaat*, it is particularly pertinent to note the contribution that constructions of femininity made to the development of Afrikaans as a language and 'Afrikanerdom' as an ideology. McClintock, in her discussion of "nationalism, gender and race" in South Africa, which focuses particularly on the "invention of the 'Volksmoeder'", writes:

> All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented and all are dangerous … in the sense that they represent relations to political power and to the technologies of violence … nations are contested systems of cultural representation that limit and legitimize peoples' access to the resources of the nation-state. (352-3)

[47] Used here in the sense that the Afrikaner '*volk*' was envisaged as an ideological construct – that is, '*white*' Afrikaans-speakers.

One might append Hofmeyr's view to this, who in her thorough cataloguing of the role of the media (amongst other factors) during the early establishment of Afrikaans, says that:

> [Afrikaner w]omen were after all the ones who were going to socialise children as Afrikaners, and it was not for nothing that Afrikaans was so frequently called 'the mother tongue' … Language itself is personal enough, but Afrikaans was associated with the intimate terrain of the household. (113-114)

Considering the place of Afrikaans in South Africa post-1994, Antjie Krog, the South African poet, writer and journalist who writes in both her mother-tongue Afrikaans (predominantly in poetry) and in English (predominantly non-fiction), has commented that "[if] power shifts turn English into the language where people meet, then writers in the smaller languages should demand the right not only to write in their own language, but to be translated in order to form part of all the voices of their country", but notes simultaneously that Afrikaans is a language which is under *less* or *different* threat in South Africa than other 'indigenous' African languages (even those spoken by a majority like Zulu and Xhosa) (Krog *A Change of Tongue* 270). In turn De Kock writes that:

> the institutions of Afrikaans power inside South Africa ensured that a robust culture of publication, criticism, dissemination, and teaching at all levels was promoted and maintained. The same cannot be said for literature in the indigenous African languages of South Africa. (*Introduction* 4)

Although De Kock is writing about the past, the effects of such practices still linger. Afrikaans is still *not* as marginalised as other 'non-English' South African languages are, as is evidenced by a vibrant press and publishing culture. It is still a language of more privilege and power, even if this privilege is often now contested and by different forces to those before 1994.

This ‘privilege and power’ in part asserts itself in a (by local standards) thriving publishing industry. This is multi-faceted, and somewhat difficult to quantify. According to the “Annual Book Publishing Industry Survey Report 2007”[48], released in January 2009, and the most recent figures available, Afrikaans book sales accounted for 15,25 % of the net turnover of *all* local book-sales, while English took 75,25% of the pie. (These net figures include educational book sales, by far the majority of books sold in South Africa. It is also vital to point out that the figures which follow are for the sale of *local* books. American and British titles – in English – account for by far the majority of books sold in total in South Africa). Books in other African languages (predominantly isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sepedi and Setswana) were a mere 9,5% of all net turnover, with the Report claiming that these sales are mostly of Bibles. However, within the “Trade Industry Sub-Sector” (Fiction and Non-fiction) the numbers already start to slide in favour of Afrikaans (if not of other indigenous African languages), with English sales accounting for 60.51% and Afrikaans sales for 34,45%. Once one comes to Fiction, the figures swing dramatically. The sale of Afrikaans titles account for 72,13% of fiction turnover in South Africa (English follows at 27,31% and other African language literature at a sad 0,55%). Put in different terms, of the 576 new (and revised edition) fiction titles published in the country in 2007 (according to the Report’s data), an impressive 444 were in Afrikaans – 77,08%. Only 84 were in English (14,58%). Twelve Xhosa fiction titles were published, a further seven each in isiZulu, Sesotho, Setswana and Siswati, and another two each in Sepedi, Ndebele, Xitsonga and Tsivenda. Clearly, Afrikaans readers are supporting Afrikaans fiction in a manner that leaves the other African language readers completely behind, and is also a staggering challenge to local English fiction.

At a debate at the 2009 *Woordfees* festival, Frederik de Jager of Umuzi Publishers furthermore claimed that the Afrikaans *media* support Afrikaans books better than the English-language media support English books. De Jager contended that because the English market is dominated by international titles, it is “easier” to have a profile in South Africa as an Afrikaans writer, than as a South African English writer, as there is

[48] All figures which follow are sourced from this report. See Galloway, Venter and Struik.

more of an industry to support one.[49] Alida Potgieter, of NB Publishers, claimed that in their stable, books translated from Afrikaans into English are likely to only sell between 13 and 33 percent as many copies as the original in Afrikaans (which corresponds to the number of English and Afrikaans fiction titles sold across the board).

One of the aspects which makes the translation of *Agaat* from Afrikaans into English interesting, and complicated, is precisely the difference between the English and Afrikaans literary 'scenes' in South Africa, in part evidenced by the previously cited statistics. A novel published in Afrikaans can expect a much more loyal readership, and in turn, also a more actively critical literary 'industry' of academics and reviewers. It is also fair to say that *Agaat* was aimed at a particular section of the Afrikaans market – a well-educated reading 'elite' (as all novels are consciously or otherwise positioned, especially in South Africa which has a very small reading public compared to population figures). *Triomf*, Marlene van Niekerk's debut novel, was widely lauded, and Van Niekerk's new novel was hugely anticipated, as is confirmed by Nicole Devarenne:

> The publication of Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* in 1994 signalled the emergence of a major presence in postapartheid South African writing, whose importance has been confirmed by a masterful second novel, *Agaat* …. *Triomf* received several literary awards at home and has been the subject of numerous articles published in South Africa and internationally. (105)

Reviews reprinted on the dust-jacket claim *Triomf* as "the outstanding Afrikaans novel of the 1990s" and "a milestone for South African literature". Based on the literary standing she had established through her debut novel (and various other shorter work, as well as an active academic career), Van Niekerk could reasonably expect her new novel to be

[49] This does of course raise the question, not least because it was entirely elided during the debate, of the difficulty of being a writer in any of the other South African vernacular languages. All four panel members at *Woordfees* were 'white', and the only languages in and out of translation discussed were English and Afrikaans. While this can in part be explained by *Woordfees* being a festival which celebrates the arts in Afrikaans, it does not answer why translations from other languages into Afrikaans or vice versa did not come up for discussion. There is however a simple answer to these questions: money. If it is hard in South Africa to make money from books period, it is near-impossible if one ventures away from English and Afrikaans (and does not print Bibles or school text-books).

widely reviewed, and discussed, and it was, glowingly, and controversially. A novel unquestionably about the Afrikaans present, about the Afrikaans language, about Afrikaner identity, soaked in a heady stew of Afrikaans literary and folk-allusions was, upon publication, catapulted right into the very centre of Afrikaans cultural or at least literary life, upon publication in 2004[50]. This reception wasn't however entirely rapturous. Michiel Heyns highlights some of the "controversy" upon explaining the "critical reaction" to *Agaat* in South Africa:

> In the beginning, there were some very powerful reviews, in Afrikaans, of course. Very appreciative. People saying that this has changed the face of Afrikaans writing. But then also a certain timidity … Marlene is a controversial figure in Afrikaans circles. She's not part of the people who see themselves as warriors for a revitalization of Afrikaans …. I think Marlene feels that in South Africa people haven't taken the kind of care in reading the novel as, for instance, in Holland …. Some of the Afrikaans reviews were very tepid. (qtd. in Felman 9-10)

However, this is not to say that Heyns's translation was not lauded upon publication two years later. Reviews followed anew, and the English edition of *Agaat* was the first ever translated work to win the Sunday Times Literary Award, arguably South Africa's most prestigious literary award, in 2007 (in the first year the prize was open to translations). The prize was awarded to both Marlene van Niekerk and to Michiel Heyns, adding to the awards Van Niekerk won for the Afrikaans edition, which included the Hertzog Prize and the University of Johannesburg Prize.

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[50] Of course, *Triomf* is also all of these things, if within a vastly different context. It tells the story of a family of 'poor whites', stuck in an incestuous hell in a dormitory town outside Johannesburg, built over the ruins of Sophiatown – compared to the 'landed gentry' of the De Wets of Grootmoedersdrift. Van Niekerk has, somewhat "tongue in cheek", claimed that *Agaat* was born out of her penchant for symmetry to write a counterpart to *Triomf*, and that this symmetry will only be complete once she has written "*Ritselrivier*", a parody about Stellenbosch, which will complete the "city-farm-village" model (own translation, qtd. in Smith 2).

II

Agaat, as a novel, on many levels presupposes such a centrality within Afrikaans. It is, as should already be clear, a novel intimately and crucially concerned with the "foreignness" of language and the incongruence in speaking and being spoken for, even before it is rendered from Afrikaans into English. This central concern of the novel is introduced already in the Prologue of the novel, with its density of literary and musical allusions, and Jakkie's explicit questioning of translation as an enterprise. Jakkie asks "Translate Grootmoedersdrift. Try it. Granny's Ford? Granny's Passion? What does that say?" (6), and a few pages later:

> Translations for *wolfneusgewels, rûens, droëland, drif*: jerkin-head gables, ridges, dry farming-land, crossing. Prosaic. Devise something: wolfnosed gables, humpbacked hills, dryland, drift. Always the laughter at the office, good-natured, collegial, at my attempts: grove of whispering poplars. I romanticise, they say. Quite a fan of the homely hymn, that's true. Homesick for the melody and so on. But that's only half of it. The rest is granular precision, unsingable intervals. (8, italics in the original)[51]

Jakkie is expressing his conviction in the *accuracy* of Afrikaans to describe the landscape of his childhood, a "granular precision" which cannot be captured in English without sounding "romanticise[d]". Here it seems to me that what is being foreshadowed through Jakkie's musings around literal translation is precisely translation on a much broader metaphorical plane (from one person to another; from happening into memory, and into self history; from happening into writing, and into self fashioning). As previously discussed, Jakkie not only muses over translation, but is himself a translator, of quite

[51] A comparison to the original Afrikaans is worthwhile: "Vertalings vir wolfneusgewels, rûens, droëland, drif. Dink dit uit. Altyd 'n gelag by die werk, gemoedelik, kollegiaal, oor my pogings: grove of whispering poplars. Ek romantiseer, sê hulle. Quite a fan of the homely hymn, dis waar. Heimwee na die melodie en so. Maar dis net die helfte. Die res is granular precision, onsingbare intervalle" (Van Niekerk *Agaat* 8). One of the unavoidable losses in the English is Jakkie's switching between English and Afrikaans here, as he in turn addresses himself in Afrikaans ("Dink dit uit" - "Devise something"), then reports what he says to his Canadian colleagues ("grove of whispering poplars") and their reply in return ("Quite a fan of the homely hymn") in English.

what the reader never knows for certain. If he is read as the implied writer of the whole novel, then this is an ever-complex if quite primary translation of a life – or two! – into text.

In the course of the novel, Milla writes in her diaries obsessively through three decades, attempting to capture, and simultaneously order, the "truths" of Grootmoedersdrift and the people who live there, yet the *silence* in her diaries as to the how and why of Agaat's "adoption" eclipses her life's project. Milla teaches the young Agaat to speak, and in her learning Afrikaans, learning to name the fauna and the flora of the farm, and the songs and poems of Milla's childhood, there is the promise that Agaat is "becoming human", just like the young girl, a decade later, thinks baby Jakkie will "grow human" if Milla and Agaat sing to him (204). Milla writes that "I want Agaat to understand that if you call things by their names, you have power over them" (527). Yet ironically enough, the reader never hears Agaat's voice not mediated first through Milla's consciousness. Agaat's bedtime story to Jakkie is the only section of the novel ostensibly completely her own creation. We have read previously (in Milla's diary) that Jakkie insisted on being told the story word-for-word, as he corroborates: "Every word. If she left out óne, I knew. If she told anything differently, I protested. Or I said, start all over, you're not telling it right. Emphases, rhythms, repetitions, questions …. Her voice, incantatory" (683). In Jakkie's description is revealed how far from any thing like a human voice this almost-fairytale gives Agaat – it is instead a story, *ritualistic* before it is expressive, with no space for error or for Agaat to change the story as she tells it. The only *physical* articulation throughout the length of the novel, just shy of 700 pages, that is unarguably Agaat's own, is the guttural "g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g", repeated in Agaat's version of her story of origin, the sound that was carried from "Asgat" to "Agaat", a sound that is *sound*, not word, nor meaning. [52]

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[52] See also Heyns on the centrality of the guttural sound to the novel and hence the choice to retain *Agaat* as the English title (Heyns 125-126).

In a section which penetrates to the heart of the linguistic conundrum in the novel, Milla speculates to herself (in the second voice) about Agaat, as Agaat dishes up supper for Jak and Milla:

> You watched her, her gestures, her phrases, her gaze. She was a whole compilation of you, she contained you within her, she was the arena in which the two of you wrestled with yourselves.
> That was all she could be, from the beginning.
> Your archive.
> Without her you and Jak would have known nothing of yourselves. She was your parliament, your hall of mirrors.
> What must it feel like to be Agaat? How could you ever find that out? Would you be able to figure out what she was saying if she could explain it? She would have to explicate it in a language other than the tongue you had taught her.
> How would you understand her then? Who would interpret for her? (554)

But Agaat has no such language, and so she never can "explicate" what it "must feel like to be Agaat". As discussed previously, this sense that Agaat is the unknowable 'other', who is at the same time made up of everything she has been taught by Milla (and Jak, if that teaching is less direct, a teaching made up of direct cruelty and indirect nullifying), must be read as a complex commentary on 'Afrikaner' (and other 'white', 'colonialist') discourses of self. Marlene van Niekerk makes this explicit elsewhere:

> Agaat remains the Other, the secret, and I couldn't let her focalise. She is the source of self-understanding for others who see her and try to interpret her. She remains a projection, a spectre of all the characters' desires and fears. She remains the Other, as domesticated as she is … we don't know what Agaat really thinks and feels. Because we can't know. [53]

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[53] "Sy [Agaat] bly die Ander, die geheim, en ek kon haar nie laat fokaliseer nie. Sy is die bron van selfverstaan van ander wat háár sien en probeer interpreteer. Sy bly 'n projeksie, 'n spook van al die

The force and use of the second-person voice is also important here. It is a complex narrative device where Milla addresses herself about the past. But it "invites the reader in", too, and as suggested earlier, this invitation was, at least originally by virtue of Van Niekerk writing the novel in Afrikaans, intended towards an Afrikaans readership. What happens then in the English translation? An English-speaking reader becomes implicated in this discourse. The translation of the novel into English refuses to let this reader off the hook and rdightly so. This is surely a *South African* novel, in as much as it is an Afrikaans one, in as much as one can – or should – characterise literature as such. Leon de Kock expresses a similar sentiment:

> we come out of separate language traditions, and … the translation is creating a book that straddles the language traditions … it can more properly call itself "South African"; also because its range of allusiveness … is bigger and something that I'm not sure other novels have achieved. ("Intimate Enemies" 140)

Yet the translation at times seems to presuppose an English reader who still recognises the Afrikaans and who understands Afrikaans well enough to read the novel as one written *in* Afrikaans, within Afrikaans, even when on the textual level it *is* English. As such a reader myself, I revelled in the novel, in the apparently impossible: to read a novel written in two languages at once.

III

It is somewhat misleading, in the case of this novel, to speak of the English "translation" of the "original" Afrikaans *Agaat* (though I have done so interchangeably here). On the one hand it seems to favour the source-text over the translation, and old and irreconcilable criticism, to counter which I am reminded of Gabriel Garcia Marquez famous claim that Edith Grossman's English translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* "read better than the original Spanish" (Janes 499). On the other hand, it is

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karakters se verlange en vrees. Selfs so domesticated soos sy is, bly sy die Ander … ons weet nie wat Agaat regtig dink en voel nie. Want ons kan nie" (own translation, qtd. in Smith 2)

inaccurate because of the practical way this text was translated, in close collaboration with the author. (Tellingly, while the cover reads “English Translation by Michiel Heyns” and the title-page “Translated from the Afrikaans by Michiel Heyns”, the imprint page states “English translation © Michiel Heyns and Marlene van Niekerk”). Both Van Niekerk and Heyns have spoken at length about the translation process, noting that the English edition has deliberate changes made to it. As is made clear in Heyns’s “Translator’s Note”, new textual allusions have been inserted into the English edition:

> I have as far as possible made my own translations of these [traces of Afrikaans cultural goods], in an attempt to retain something of the sound, rhythm, register and cultural specificity of the original. Where, however, the author has quoted from mainstream Afrikaans poetry, I have tried to find equivalents from English poetry.

Van Niekerk has said publicly that she “collaborated with the re-engineering of reference in her own novel”. Furthermore, she claims:

> Michiel [Heyns] brought a whole lot of erudition to the text, and took it into his structures and machinery. I felt it entirely *gerymd* [in keeping] … the book is at some points quite explorative in its sentences and quite improvisational in its developments of certain thoughts and I … was comfortable with it because it was congruent. (qtd. in De Kock “Found in Translation” 18)

The English edition of the novel is, hence, explicitly, according to its author and its translator, a ‘new’ work. “Edition” might then be the more accurate term for it rather than “translation”, as it implies a text which can unquestionably stand on its own.

It is interesting to compare this to Van Niekerk’s *Triomf,* initially published in Afrikaans in 1994, and in English translation by Leon de Kock in 1999. Here (see 2009 reprint) there is no mention of Leon de Kock on the cover, though “English Edition” is stated in

black capitals above the title. The title page says "Translated by Leon de Kock", though on the imprint page only De Kock is declared copyright holder of the translation, compared to *Agaat*, where Van Niekerk and Heyns are joint copyright holders. In *Triomf,* there is no "translator's note", and the "Thank you" is obviously to be read as Van Niekerk's, as the first person thanked is De Kock: "Thank you to Leon de Kock for accepting and persevering with the mammoth task of translating this book; and for the ingenuity, sensitivity and thoroughness with which he did it". Accordingly, this seems more of a 'traditional' work of translation, with less collaboration between the writer of the original work and the translator, and more a sense that the translation is the work of the translator. Paradoxically, though, it seems as if it should be read as a more direct 'copy' of the original text, than a collaborative effort such as *Agaat*, which is stamped as the 'original' writer's work too. A novel translated in collaboration with its author becomes a *new* work. One translated in isolation by a translator becomes a *copy*.[54]

Critics have discussed at length Heyns inserting his own poetic and literary references into the translated text (with Van Niekerk's blessing), but the inclusion of a few of the high priests of the English cannon, notably T.S. Eliot, Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Donne and WH Auden, doesn't *domesticate* the novel into English, to call upon Lawrence Venuti's much-cited distinction between foreignising and domesticating translations. If anything, the field of references has been broadened, and in reading the English edition, the reader is still at times overwhelmed by the evidence of Afrikaans-literary allusion. The reader never quite knows whether a phrase is extraordinarily clever word-play original to Van Niekerk, or whether s/he ought to recognise it from somewhere else.

[54] De Kock's 'isolation' is relative though. It is clear, from the many interviews and expositions by all three on the subject, that De Kock also worked closely together with Van Niekerk when translating *Triomf*, if not quite as closely as Heyns and Van Niekerk on *Agaat*. Both endeavours seem infinitely more intimate and communicative than traditional – and one imagines, still regrettably widespread – translation-practices where translators are near-anonymous appointments by publishing houses and have little if any direct contact with the original authors. This must also predictably be the case when a work is translated into a language the original author doesn't understand: an alienating and/or detached experience (confirmed by Ingrid Winterbach at *Woordfees*-debate)

Marius Swart has suggested that this is determined by the "function" of the original (inter-textual) phrase. He suggests that where the "idea around the rhyme (fragment)" is more important than "*which*" rhyme it is from, then an existing English equivalent is used. However, when the "*meaning*" of the Afrikaans element, like the title, is more important than the "fact that it is a song's title", then that meaning is translated literally.[55] Swart seems to be working from the assumption that a 'true' and 'complete' translation is possible, which problematically hinges on the idea that language (in the Afrikaans source-text) can be some kind of 'direct transmission' of the author's original intention.[56] However, Swart provides a very useful in-depth discussion of three of the most noticeable techniques of translation (or problems facing the translator) in *Agaat*. He outlines three ways in which Van Niekerk creates the "sensory experience" of the text, through 1) unique Afrikaans words and phrases, 2) accented words and syllables and 3) intertextual references (65). Especially useful is his discussion of the use of accents in the original and the translation. In Afrikaans the use of accents is standard practice, but Van Niekerk uses accents particularly to show unusual stress-patterns, which emphasise character (through their particularly idiosyncratic expressions or phrasings). Swart finds a similarity in Gerald Manley Hopkins (whom Heyns has also incorporated into the English *Agaat*) and quotes Hopkins's dictum: "I must only mark where the reader is likely to mistake" (qtd. in Swart 74). Leon de Kock has likewise focused on this technical choice in Heyns' translation:

> he uses stresses on individual letters, following Van Niekerk's own jauntily, vociferously stressed vowels and consonants, in a way that is largely strange to English …. If you try reading the accented letters out, they don't always work so well, because English doesn't have the same clipped finality of

[55] "Dit gaan oenskynlik om die funksie van die betrokke uitdrukking. Waar die idee rondom die gebruik van 'n rympie belangriker as *watter* rympie gebruik word, word 'n bestaande Engelse ekwivalent gebruik. Waar die *betekenis* van die Afrikaanse element, soos die titels, belangriker is as die feit dat dit 'n liedjie se titel is, word daardie betekenis letterlik vertaal", own translation, Swart 79, emphasis in original.

[56] See for example his assertion that "the reader of a text must understand what a writer *means* with a given word, expression or image. And the translator must understand it *precisely so*, in order to make it accessible for the 'source-text' reader" ("…die leser van 'n teks moet verstaan wat die skrywer *bedoel* met 'n gegewe word, uitdrukking of beeld. *Net so* moet die vertaler dit verstaan, om dit ook vir die doelteksleser toeganglik te kan maak", own translation, Swart, 65, own emphasis).

> sound that Afrikaans has, but these unusually accented words do succeed in making the text feel Afrikaans. ("Found in Translation" 18)

This choice *does* "succeed" if the reader has some familiarity with Afrikaans. Otherwise it might remain just "largely strange", alienating … perhaps even off-putting.

To these elements which Swart and De Kock identify which retain an Afrikaans "flavour" in the English I would add an occasionally "foreignising" *sentence-structure*. For example, on the day of Jakkie's birth, Milla says about Jak: "Gone he was suddenly on that morning of the 12th of August with the bakkie to an obstacle course…" (173). To South African readers, who are used to non-standard formations emanating from linguistic multiplicity, the above is no doubt instantly understandable, and perhaps not even outlandish. But it is really quite strange. Why is Jak not "suddenly gone with the bakkie to an obstacle course, on that morning of the 12th of August"? A sentence which could otherwise be quickly read over, dismissed as part of the narrative flow of the novel, is making a subtle point about language.

A fairly small selection of Afrikaans words consistently used throughout the novel are retained in the English edition and are explained in a Glossary. These words are particularly noticeable as forms of address, primarily to the main characters in the novel, and as descriptive nouns for the geography of the Overberg. Agaat calls Milla "même" as a small child, which according to the Glossary is a "vernacular affectionate term for mother". In the novel's present tense Agaat addresses Milla as "Ounooi", a "term of address" to an older "(white) woman". In the course of the novel there are instances where Milla is "Nooi" and her mother, or "Ma", is "Ounooi" or "the Oumies". The term "baas", perhaps South Africa's most loaded term of address, is glossed as "employer, owner, manager, now offensive to many". On Grootmoedersdrift, Jak is officially the "baas", but Agaat as a young girl makes her feelings on this designation known to Milla, or at least Milla imagines she does, when her relegation to "meid" (which remains unglossed) is still fairly recent.[57] There has been a farming accident and Milla asks Agaat

[57] See Heyns (128 – 130) for a lengthy discussion on the translation of "meid".

to “fetch the baas in the office…tell the baas to ask [the doctor] what we must do here…”:

> She stiffened her body, jerked her head around, her mouth trembled with the effort of containing herself. She looked you straight in the eyes.
> She had often had to fetch him for you, but that day something struck bedrock.
> It was the language. The words. She had had to speak too many languages in one day, hear too many kinds.
> Baas! She wanted to say, since when suddenly? Whose ‘baas’? Yóúrs maybe, but not mine. Yóú, yóú are mý baas! (291, accents in the original)

Much later in the novel, the reader’s attention is once more drawn to this mode of address, at Jakkie’s birthday party, an ostentatious and eventually disastrous celebration. Jakkie takes Agaat flying, and when she returns, “a bunch of children cluster[ed] behind her” and ask her what she saw from the air. She answers them “Nothing … it’s night”, to which Milla overhears “a male voice prompting”:

> Báás, Agaat … nothing báás, it’s night, báás.
> It was the white foreman who played chauffeur for one of the Meyers brothers.
> D’you think because you were up there in the air you can now forget all about manners? I’m sure you saw something. Now tell us nicely what you saw.
> The church tower, baas.
> How do you know it was the church tower?
> It’s got lights.
> Báás.
> Yes, baas.
> Yes, baas, what?
> The church tower has lights, baas. (612)

Milla in turn tries to put the man in his place. What is at play here is class, as well as racial difference and dominance. She tells him that “your people” (that is, his employers)

"want to leave" and the man "sl[i]nk[s] off with a mumbled yes, Mrs de Wet, fine, Mrs de Wet" (613).

The other predominant retention of Afrikaans words in the English are geographical features: *drift, kloof, koppie, krantz, sluit* and *vlei* (sometimes in coinages like Twaalfuurkop). Most of these – particularly kloof, koppie and vlei – are so endemic in South African place names to have been absorbed into South African English. However, a number of English-speaking readers has pointed out that the effect is still 'foreignising', even estranging. This is more indicative of the readers than the text, and my retort might be that anyone familiar with South African literature should be familiar with such usages. However, it is regrettably safe to say that by far the majority of English-speaking South African readers read a great deal more American and British literature (or other world-literature in English translation) than South African literature, and so, casual references to kloofs, koppies and krantze *are* strange to the eye when reading, though not to the ear in conversation.

Furthermore, by far the majority of place-names in the Overberg region are etymologically Afrikaans constructions. Abundant examples are again found already in the Prologue, in Jakkie's evocative scene-setting:

> Woods. Deep mysterious woods. Koloniesbos, Duiwelsbos, Grootvadersbos, the woods of the colony, the devil, the grandfather. And mountains. Trappieshoogte, Tradouw, Twaalfuurkop, the height of steps, the way of the women, the peak of noon.
> The rivers of my childhood! They were different, their names cannot tell how beautiful they were: Botrivier, Riviersonderend, Kleinkruisrivier, Duivenhoks, Maandagsoutrivier, Slangrivier, Buffeljagsrivier, Karringmelksrivier, Korenlandrivier: rivers burgeoning, rivers without end, small rivers crossing; rivers redolent of dovecotes, of salt-on-Mondays, of snakes; rivers of the hunting of the buffalo, rivers like buttermilk, rivers running through fields of wheat. Winding, hopeful, stony rivers … (5)

This listing is by necessity much shorter in the Afrikaans, and worth comparing:

> Bosse. Diep geheimsinnige bosse. Koloniesbos, Duiwelsbos, Grootvadersbosch. En berge. Trappieshoogte, Tradouw, Twaalfuurkop.
> Die riviere van my kindertyd! Hulle was anders, hulle name kan nie sê hoe mooi hulle was nie: Botrivier, Riviersonderend, Kleinkruisrivier, Duivenhoks, Maandagsoutrivier, Slangrivier, Buffeljagsrivier, Karringmelksrivier, Korenlandrivier. Kronkelende, hoopvolle, klipperige riviere…" (Van Niekerk *Agaat* 5).

It is only the last phrase in the English ("Winding, hopeful, stony rivers …") that has its equivalent in the Afrikaans original ("Kronkelende, hoopvolle, klipperige riviere"). The rest are lyrical glosses of the Afrikaans place-names, in a similar tone as the tone of "winding, hopeful, stony". Interestingly, "Grootvadersbosch" (translated as the more Afrikaans, less Dutch-inflected "bos" in the English), though Jakkie here mentions it as a "deep mysterious wood", is the actual name of the historical farm at the foot of the Overberg upon which the fictional Grootmoedersdrift is based.

While these few Afrikaans words remain in the English edition of *Agaat*, no Afrikaans *phrases* are retained. This seems to me somewhat unusual within South African literature, where even books written in English often contain Afrikaans (or other vernacular) phrases, often unglossed (as the Afrikaans *Agaat* includes a small number of English phrases that the characters clearly say in English). In Heyns's *Agaat*, a number of very distinct choices have been made to retain an Afrikaans *sound*, but this is an Afrikaans *sound* and *feel* which has *become* English. By comparison, including Afrikaans phrases for colour would perhaps seem like a cheap trick. But it is an interesting and complex decision. The book in some sections forces the reader to practically read English *like* Afrikaans, and hence the reader who knows Afrikaans is privileged, as these syntactic choices then make sense, rather than just being wholly estranging, but at the same time, no *direct* requirement of understanding Afrikaans is made.

I imagine most readers will be familiar with the frustration of reading a novel that abounds in snatches of a foreign language. Ernest Hemingway and Vladimir Nabokov come to mind as oftentimes presupposing a reader who can understand French, and so scatter French phrases into their works. In more diligent moments I might haul out my old pocket French dictionary and try to pierce together the meaning, and sometimes English reveals itself as sufficiently a Romance language for me to be able to cobble together the allusion on my own (the other languages I understand are all too staunchly Germanic for the task). However, I am most often just annoyed and continue reading with the disquieting feeling that I might have missed a delicate but crucial shade of meaning. How much more subtle (and how much more difficult for the translator) to translate the phrase into an English which would still sound foreign enough to be ostensibly 'read' as French. (The reader who knows French would then be able to translate it 'back into' French themselves, but the phrase would be intelligible to the non-French speaker).

There are of course instances where it is *not* possible to convey the subtleties of the Afrikaans in an 'afrikaanised' English. An extract from the Epilogue provides a case in point. Jakkie is on his way back to Canada, "[s]till ten hours of flying to the snow. The cabin in semi-darkness". Most passengers are asleep, except for "a few rugby players" from whom Jakkie hears "[n]ow and again a snatch, Make her say no make her say oh, to the tune of Macarena. Will have to write something about it. Wine, women and balls. Now also at last to rest. Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care" (676). How this "snatch" of a song has been translated into English – "Make her say no make her say oh" – doesn't make *sense* in English. The lines don't scan the Macarena melody. Other than the initial syllable nothing in "Make her say no make her say oh" *sounds like* the Macarena (and even that at a push – the "Mac" in "Macarena" is pronounced more like "muck"). The only thing that is half-way believable in this extract in the English is that young rugby-players would have made the song into something crude. Upon first reading this it rankled me as being incongruent with the rest of the section. It took me a few re-readings before the Afrikaans original became obvious: "Maak haar eina maak haar eina" *sounds* almost exactly like "macarena macarena". It also has a somewhat more ominous tone than "make her say oh make her say no". The English is ribald, but the Afrikaans

could alternatively be translated as "make her sore", "make her hurt", or "make her *say* ow". Here is the Afrikaans original: "Af en toe 'n flard gesang, *Maak haar eina maak haar eina*, op die wysie van die macarena. Sal iets daaroor moet skryf. Die bal, die lied en die vrou. Nou ook uiteindelik tot rus. Wat is die slaap 'n wondersoete ding" (Van Niekerk *Agaat* 702, italics in original). This is one instance where it might have been justified to include the original Afrikaans in the English, or perhaps, to translate it as "make her eina, make her eina", which sounds much closer to "macarena", and to include "eina" in the Glossary. It is a word used in South African English, and occurs in (an earlier edition of) *The Oxford Dictionary of South African English*, which the Glossary references, where it is explained as "[a]n exclamation of pain" which is occasionally used as a noun (Branford 90).

This choice not to keep any whole Afrikaans phrases or sentences in the English edition is worth comparing to the English translation of *Triomf*. In contrast to Heyns's translation of *Agaat*, there is no glossary in Leon de Kock's *Triomf*, though there are also a number of Afrikaans words in the English translation, most of them of a particular kind of Afrikaans slang familiar to most South Africans, like "O jirre", "gôts" (sometimes spelt "gits" elsewhere), "wragtag" and "the moer in".[58] Most remarkably, there is an entire section, an "all-important conversation", which is mostly in "semi-untranslated slang Afrikaans" (De Kock "Translating Triomf" 357). For someone who doesn't understand or speak Afrikaans this section is near-impenetrable. However, this translational choice is (somewhat) explained, when it emerges that there were separate English editions published, one for the UK market, and one for the local. Two English versions also exist of *Agaat* – the British version is, as discussed elsewhere, alternatively titled *The Way of the Women*, which is a reference to the Tradouw Pass which plays such an important part in the novel (revealingly, "the way of the women" is in fact once more a *translation*, this time from the Khoisan word "Tradouw"). Michiel Heyns explains:

[58] The first three are all exclamations of surprise, the first two variations on "oh god" or "lordy", and "wragtag" stemming from the Dutch *waarachtig*, to mean "truly" or "indeed" (Branford 386). "The moer in" can be translated as "the hell in", as Leon de Kock decided to in the UK version of *Triomf* (De Kock "Translating Triomf" 357)

> the British publishers of the translation declined to use the Afrikaans title, opting instead for the more market-friendly *The Way of the Women*; they also stripped the text of the stress marks which I'd retained from the Afrikaans to punctuate the rhythmical patterning of the original. (126)

With reference to his translation of *Triomf*, Leon de Kock explains that Marlene van Niekerk and he "immediately realised that we needed a thoroughly Anglicised text to deliver to the international publishers" (353), but later:

> I proposed, and the author agreed, that I create a 'South African' version of the translation … which would retain certain 'Afrikanerisms' and 'transgressions' of the fundamental rule of translation, namely that everything in the source language be translated into the target language. Because we felt the South African audience would be reliably multilingual, we agreed that it would enrich the new text to have "untranslatable" words in the South African English text such as, for example, *the moer in* …. Similarly, in the all-important conversation between Lambert and Sonnyboy … I allowed the characters to "switch" from "English" (in reality, Afrikaans, in the original text), to semi-untranslated slang Afrikaans, since we could rely on the South African audience knowing both English and Afrikaans, as well as the "interlanguage" of English-Afrikaans slang. (De Kock "Translating Triomf" 357)

These are interesting solutions to translation complexities, and they are arguably more successful in the translation of *Triomf* than similar practices might have been in *Agaat*. *Agaat* is for the most part not told in dialogue (compared to *Triomf*, which is dialogue-heavy), or certainly not dialogue in the sense that we are used to it, as has previously been comprehensively catalogued. Another reason that a retention of Afrikaans is more successful in *Triomf* than it might have been in *Agaat* is because of the *kind* of Afrikaans that the characters in *Triomf* speak, compared to the Afrikaans of *Agaat*. When Milla and Agaat are "in conversation" this is an entirely different stylistic game than the 'low'

slang-heavy Afrikaans the Benades of Triomf talk amongst themselves. Furthermore, in *Agaat*, "a farming argot is recovered that no longer exists in common usage, let alone in any kind of equivalent English idiom" (De Kock "Found in Translation" 19). The Afrikaans that Milla speaks, and Agaat in turn speaks too, and the Afrikaans literary and cultural allusions that she refers to, are of a complexity that baffle many a native Afrikaans-speaker, never mind an English-speaking South African. Consequently one is often simply in the thrall of the language, uncertain as to whether it is Van Niekerk's *own* genius, or her genius in finding the phrase somewhere else that precisely matches her (or her characters') purpose.

IV

When reading the "second person passages" closely there were particular points where my interpretation was truly strained. There are a few instances where the consistent "you" in these sections of the novel change to "I" and the effect is instantly destabilising. The first few occasions my initial reaction was to think it a typographical error. An example is when Milla is going into labour, and she and Agaat prepare to drive through the pass to Milla's mother:

> Pull yourself together, Agaat, you said, we don't have time to waste. Pack your suitcase.
> Suitcase, she said, what suitcase, I don't have a suitcase.
> *I shouted at her.*
> Where's your brown suitcase that I gave you? If you can't look after the small things, how can I éver count on you in important matters? Take pillow slips, take an onion-pocket in the store, take an apple box, take anything, just hurry up!
> *You* started writing a letter to Jak …(174, my emphasis)

The scene is a time of great stress and confusion, and this was how I originally interpreted the slippage into "I": it is as though that stress emerges from the narrative of the text to the textual level, and the *narrator* is confused into *admitting* herself as that "I".

By the time that Milla is writing the letter to Jak, she has composed herself enough to become, again, in addressing herself, “you”. Similarly, in the opening chapter, there is another slip, which complicates the “you” somewhat. Milla is describing her and Jak driving away from her parents farm:

> However fond you [i.e. Milla] were of your father, you were irritated with him that weekend with his sentimentality and his reserve, there was a new kind of energy running now, and new priorities.
> You’re not scared of becoming my farmer boy, are you, Jak, *I* [i.e. Milla] said as *you* drove away through the main street of Barrydale in the direction of the pass.
> You were on your way to show him the farm over the mountain for the first time. (25 – 26)

Here, the “you” after the “I” could be either directly addressed to Jak – but in the otherwise logic of the second voice, it means the both of them, or once more, just Milla.

Much later in the novel, in a confrontational dinner scene just before Jakkie’s fateful birthday party, the collective first-person “we” also intrudes into this accusative voice. Jak asks Jakkie what he thinks of the political situation, to which we hear the addressee’s reply:

> Really, is it necessary, you tried to intervene, we’re enjoying our meal so much.
> For Agaat’s sake you said that, to console her where she was standing with a guarded expression over her dishes. *Because we weren’t enjoying our meal*.
> There was silence around the table. (595)
> [as opposed to “Because you (plural) weren’t enjoying your (plural) meal”]

Perhaps in this example it might be plausible that this is Jakkie’s voice, or Jakkie’s recreation of the scene in hindsight – he is also at the dinner-table. But this slip from

"you" to "we" is still strange and defamiliarising (in a voice which is itself alienating), and considering that just prior to the above exchange above, Jak and Jakkie's interaction in the sheep-pen is described in the third person (that is, from the same narrator's point of view, but without reference to the second person "you"), it does not seem to me that the "we" might be Jakkie speaking, rather than Milla.

The first person sections of the novel on one level depend on the reader's expectation of the first-person narrator as having a single identity, which is then complicated by the interweaving of Milla and Agaat's voices. Similarly, the second person passages set up certain assumptions on the part of the reader, which passages like the ones above – into the first person - then disrupt. Narrative authority or at least continuity is established only to be *de*stabilized. However, it is crucial to note that these "slips" from the second person back into the first person *are not in the original Afrikaans edition*. They are an additional stylistic element in the English – or perhaps they *are* simply typographical errors. While I would judge the translation for the most part masterful, this is an unfortunate – and difficult to mediate – inclusion or mistake.

V

Agaat is scattered with textual and musical citations, and every reader's individual experience of the novel will, naturally, be influenced by the extent of their ability to recognise and place these. Milla studied music and particularly loved the German composers of lieder, Schubert and Brahms, and so the novel is scattered with a fair number of German phrases, usually snatches of lieder lyrics. I would contend that these are for the most part on a par with the other undeniably 'high-brow' cultural references within the novel. However, the reference with which the novel closes has had me flummoxed:

> Blaes blaest – blaes blidt – i blinde,
> blaes friskhed til min hyttes baenk
> med myge, svege vinde
> og regn i sagte staenk.

Blaes blaest – blaes op – fanfarer
til natten åbenbarer … (692)

Astonishingly, these lines are from a Danish poem. Danish is *my* mother-tongue, and so, if I were to attempt to translate the poem myself, it would go roughly thus:

Blow, wind – blow softly – blow blindly
blow coolness (freshness) to my cottage bench
with soft, swaying winds
and gently splashing rain.
Blow wind – blow louder – fanfare
till the night reveals …

I happen to understand this poem, but I am surely one of a tiny handful of readers of either the Afrikaans or English editions of *Agaat* who do. If one turns to the acknowledgements, one reads "The Danish poem at the end, 'Natteregn', is by Nis Petersen (1897 – 1943), set to music in 1971 by Jørgen Jersild as part of the song cycle 'Tre romantiske korsange'" (see end-page). The title 'Natteregn' means "Night Rain", the Jersild song cycle title "Three romantic choir songs". (This acknowledgement is identical in the Afrikaans *Agaat*, other than being printed on the imprint page). No other clue is given to the (non-Danish speaking!) reader.

In translation the poem makes some sense (though the closing page is not an exercise in any straightforward narrative). The poem is some kind of pastoral folk-song, which fits with Jakkie's field of ethnomusicology. It is an appeal, to the wind, by a nameless speaker who can be guessed to be someone *rural*, perhaps a shepherd. In the Epilogue, which this poem closes, Jakkie is making his way home to Canada, flying through the night, carrying with him the ram's-horn with which he and Agaat used to communicate across the breadth of Grootmoedersdrift, and the bellows which were so significant in teaching Agaat to speak. The appeal to the wind in the poem links with both the bellows and the "ram's-horn". The three lines prior to the poem read: "I'll keep the ram's-horn on

the window sill. Des Knaben Wunderhorn. And the bellows by the firedog next to the JetEagle". *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (or "The Boy's Magic Horn") is in turn, and tellingly, an

> anthology of German folk songs, subtitled *Alte deutsche Lieder* ("Old German Songs"), that established its editors, the poet Clemens Brentano and the antiquarian Achim von Arnim … as leaders of the Romantic movement by reviving enthusiasm for the Volkslied ("folk song," or "peasant song") tradition in German lyric poetry. (author unknown, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*)

Even more tellingly, Brentano and Arnim claimed that *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* were "genuine folk songs dating from the Middle Ages" (*ibid.*), but instead, many were anonymous compositions by latter poets, or rewritten by the editors themselves. On the closing page of the novel *Agaat,* this reference seems the final nail in the coffin of any claims to narrative authority. It is also perhaps a pun on the ram's-horn Jakkie carries with him. Juxtaposed with *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, the Nis Petersen-poem, with its appeal to wind ("blaesten"), carries on this theme. In Afrikaans "bellows" are a "blaasbalk", hence there is an alliterative carry-over to the poem, from "blaas" ("to blow") to the synonymous "blaes".[59]

Crucially however, the *meaning* or otherwise significance of the poem is *lost* to the Afrikaans reader of the original and even more so to the English reader. While *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* is a fairly accessible reference, a Nis Petersen poem would even be

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[59] In verifying my own translation of the Danish I found a *Dutch* translation of the poem, where the stanza in question is translated thus:
"Blaas, wind, - blaas onbezorgd - blind,
Blaas frisheid over de heuvel van mijn hut,
met zachte, meegaande vlagen
en regen zachte druppels.
Blaas, wind - verhef je - blaas sterk!
Tot de nacht […] onthult…"
[<http://home1.worldonline.nl/~sb068187/Kunst/Gedichten/petersen_regen.htm> Accessed 14/9/2009.]
It thus seems plausible that Van Niekerk would have come across the song and its lyrics through its choral setting in a Dutch context.

obscure to a Danish reader (though perhaps an obscurity on par with many of the other Afrikaans – and in translation, English – literary allusions in the text).[60] The only thing that Van Niekerk can undoubtedly hope to effect with the lines of the poem is a quality of *sound*. I cannot but return to Marlene van Niekerk's professorial inaugural speech, an exceedingly difficult to categorise explication of the mysterious circumstances under which a student of hers leaves her a series of "sound poems" to translate. She concludes the story thus: "I scrap the adjectives, I scrap the ideas, I link the words to meaning only in the most cursory sense, because meaning is of secondary importance. What is important, is the materiality of the words" (own translation, Van Niekerk "Die Intreerede" 14). But this is no less problematic to me on the closing page of the novel, as I cannot imagine that a South African reader would do justice to the *materiality* of the Nis Petersen poem. Would the average reader even be able to, or attempt to, sound out the unfamiliar vowel-sounds and -combinations? By necessity then the "materiality of the words" is not in the sense of *spoken* words, or *sound*, but only, simply, the materiality of the black words on the white page, devoid of any other meaning, reduced to incomprehensible symbol.

VI

I have read Marlene van Niekerk primarily in translation. Since studying and writing about her work, I have dipped into her works in their original Afrikaans, usually at specific points while reading them in English. On reflection, this is usually when a particular passage had me reeling with the force of its word-play and its description, and I would, near-gasping, reach for the original, to compare. Of course, I was no 'neutral' reader, whoever such a reader would be. From the start, I have been fascinated by the role of language in the novel, and in turn, how translation affected this role. But what I usually found, when comparing such 'potent' passages in the English edition of *Agaat*, to the original Afrikaans, was that in these passages, the translation was extremely close to the original. Had my literary studies training not taught me to be suspicious of such formulations, I would be tempted to say the English 'mirrored' the Afrikaans. Here an

[60] One example of this is the Louis MacNeice's poem "Snow" also referenced on the final page: "*Soundlessly collateral and incompatible*/ World is suddener than we fancy it./ World is crazier and more of it than we think,/*Incorrigibly plural*." (emphasized lines appear in Jakkie's monologue).

interesting conundrum emerges: this need to see the original, and to compare, seems to have come about when the English text seemed somehow ‘more’ Afrikaans than the rest of the text. Or perhaps particularly potent Afrikaans ‘constructions’ made the English text interesting, exciting, unusual.

A high degree of ‘fidelity’ to the language of the original text draws attention to itself. This certainly resonates with Venuti’s discussion of Benjamin, that translation should “foreignize” the target-language, advocating a practice “wherein the reader of the translated text is brought as close as possible to the foreign one through close renderings that transform the translating language” (qtd. in Venuti 12). Or perhaps these sections, which seemed the most creative, are the ones which are the most in Van Niekerk’s particular idiom, which, to retain her *flavour*, for lack of a more accurate academic term, had to be translated very close to the bone, and could not become too ‘anglicised’.

It is perhaps not because of Afrikaans that the sections stand out, but because of something in Van Niekerk’s voice (which just happens to be in Afrikaans in the original). Of course if just writing in Afrikaans were enough to add a creative layering to an English text, then translations of refrigeration manuals from Afrikaans to English, that retained the Afrikaans grammatical structures, would be likewise ‘novel’ (even if Van Niekerk showed in *Triomf* that a multiplicity of meaning and allusion and verbal gymnastics can be drawn from the topic of refrigerator repairs!). In Afrikaans, Van Niekerk is a writer known and feted for her rich and dense use of language, for drawing on archaic and obscure Afrikaans usages (often heavily inflected by Dutch, which Van Niekerk speaks fluently). She is regarded as a ‘difficult’ or ‘serious’ writer. Heyns’s translation manages, sometimes through discernible technique, and sometimes through sheer creative skill and ingenuity, to make that difficulty – and joy – accessible to the English reader.

Problematically, though, here I am back at the point where the full effect of the English translation presupposes a knowledge of Afrikaans. I can only imagine that for someone who doesn’t understand Afrikaans, what would be striking about these sections would be

their *foreignness* through an unusual, non-standard sentence structure and stress. There is another problematic assumption here: these sections often struck me as aesthetically pleasing and striking *because* of their similarity to the Afrikaans or because they seemed to have successfully carried into English shadows and qualities of Afrikaans that *I* admire. But this is of course a deeply subjective opinion – if one doesn't *know* Afrikaans, or doesn't think it particularly beautiful (and perhaps has little or no familiarity with the country it is spoken in), how would one react to these passages, if at all? If not just in irritation at its *strange* language-use?

Antjie Krog has noted that she would rather see more new Afrikaans novels translated into English (than have her own work translated 'back' from English into Afrikaans), in order that these Afrikaans novels become more 'accessible' to more South Africans, and a 'particularly Afrikaans' articulation of South Africa could become more widely 'experienced' ("Interview"). Though I am wary of this sense of translation (what would a 'particularly Afrikaans' articulation of South Africa *be*?), it is echoed in a number of reviews of *Agaat* (or *The Way of the Women*). In Charlie Hill's review in the *New Statesman* magazine, Hill concludes that the novel "is important, then, because even in translation it is a definitive affirmation of Afrikaans. A language that remains, inescapably, one of the mediums for the truth of South Africa". I am equally uneasy about the notion of "*the truth* of South Africa", but I can perhaps not get closer to the value of this masterful translation myself – through various, at times controversial methods of translation, Heyns makes the Afrikaans of Van Niekerk's original accessible. It is perhaps not *easily* so for a non-South African reader, but it is beautifully, vividly and unforgettably clear to someone who has the *sound* of Afrikaans in their inner ear, but lacks the *soul* of Afrikaans. Heyns's *Agaat* releases that soul into English.

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