



Reopening *Agaat*: Afrikaans, Encyclopedic Narrative, World Literature

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a meditation on Marlene van Niekerk's 2004 novel *Agaat* as an encyclopedic (or, more exactly, a counter-encyclopedic) narrative, as defined – controversially – by Edward Mendelson in an influential 1976 polemic. It emphasizes *Agaat*'s historic specificity as a postapartheid novel par excellence: as one that does not instigate, but rather annuls an ethnic-national culture. In other words it considers the ways in which *Agaat* both fits and inverts Mendelson's specifications and the ways in which these specifications have been challenged by recent critics. In doing so, the essay tests out the idea that the novel at its limits is paradoxical, not only in its simultaneously curatorial and destructive aspects, but also in the ways it both resists and invites translation. It reads Van Niekerk's literary accomplishment in light of her understanding of the position of minority languages in a desperately unequal world and her attraction to (and recoil from) an out-moded, but also utopian notion of the shamanic possibilities of the mother tongue. It also reflects, from personal experience, on the ways in which the novel encourages, but also works against what Rebecca Walkowitz has termed "collective possessiveness" and "native reading."

Agaat laat my goed onthou, maak my oë oop vir dinge wat verlore gaan, goed wat ek verwaarloos het.

[Agaat makes me remember things, opens my eyes to things that are perishing, things I have neglected.]

–Marlene van Niekerk, *Agaat* (544)

“Hoe doen 'n mens dit?”

“Maklik, jy gaan sit en jy maak 'n aar oop.”

[“How do you do it?”

Easy, you sit down and you open a vein.”]

– Marlene van Niekerk, Johannesburg Prize Address

This essay is a meditation on the local and the global, translation and untranslatability, preservation and destruction, beginnings and endings. I hope to test out the idea that the novel at its limits is paradoxical and that chiasmus is its essential form. To do so, I will focus on what is one of my life books – one of those books that transform, that mark a before and after. Its impact was so profound in part because the author, a friend from my student days, is exactly my age and we were shaped by identical cultural curricula and ideologies. I have tried to put finished shape to my thoughts and feelings about this book for over a decade now and I am not sure that, even when end-noted, published, and read, this essay will suffice.

The challenging novel in question is Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*: a dense and excessive text, repetitive to the point of a mode of desperate tautology.¹ It tells and retells the same story – a story of language, learning, and betrayal – in myriad versions, from oral poetry, to diary, to telegraphese, to the iconic language of objects. The bulky tome ambitiously incorporates knowledges and arcane crafts; it offers metaphor after metaphor, especially in its ekphrastic passages, of totality or at least exhaustive inclusivity. The eponymous *Agaat* at one point describes herself as “volleerd” (244) [“fully educated” or swotted up] (197), as the diligent reader must become too. But it is also a work that also undoes itself, that refuses closure, a refusal that is one of the most cherished principles of Van Niekerk's *ars poetica*.² It undermines its own oppressive encodings from within and offers readers the gift of many metaphors of opening: breath, fire, and, the most gorgeous of all, an unfolding butterfly, the iris apertura, marked with dark spots like eyes on its lower wings. No wonder then that Michiel Heyns, the novel's first brave translator, chose to give the English version an epigraph from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. The quote addresses the “rending pain of reenactment,” but it is the poem's most famous – chiasmic, paradoxical – lines that enable us to understand the novel's overall form:

What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from. (207)³

Encyclopedic Narrative and Loss

At the end of “Crocodile Lodge,” the final story in Ivan Vladislavic's *The Exploded View*, the focal character's creeping apocalyptic fears are explicitly tied to the problem of knowledge in the contemporary world – the problem that animates this ingeniously dismantled puzzle of an urban novel. Duffy, as he is named, recalls a magazine article that speculates on the fragility of all human accomplishments. I quote at some length to convey the combined effect of accumulation and dissolution:

This was the millennial premise: what if the man-made world, along with its books and records, every repository of knowledge, were destroyed by some catastrophe, and only one hundred people could be saved as the bearers of all we know. How would we choose the survivors to seed a new civilization on the other side of the deluge? Which combination of talents and proficiencies would ensure that humankind was not hurled back into the Dark Ages, or beyond them, into an even more brutal state of savagery? What could be saved of our high-tech world? How many people knew what went into the manufacture of a fibre-optic cable, a compact disk, a silicon chip, a printing press, a sheet of paper? How was information coded digitally? People were always bandying about the notion of the “binary system” – but how was such a thing put to a useful purpose? How was electricity generated? How was a human being placed under anaesthetic? Where did aspirin come from? PVA? Glass? What were the most important inventions of the past ten millennia? Everyone would start with the wheel. And then? If one could arrive at a list of the ten most significant inventions, would it be sufficient to nominate one expert, representing each invention, to make the voyage into the future? Were gadgets enough? There was a bias towards technology in the entire game. The invention of writing was surely more important than the wheel – as the premise of the game itself demonstrated. One would want artists in one's ark too, and a person who could read music and play an instrument or two, a multi-instrumentalist. But would it make sense to take a pianist without a piano tuner, a piano builder, a timberman? One would want a linguist, a polyglot, to preserve as many languages as possible. But would it make sense to take a speaker of Finnish, Polish, Zulu if he or she had no one else to speak to? Noah's principle, two by two, made sense. (190-92)

Now: apocalyptic imaginings have long been part of South African life and literature and they may be increasing and intensifying in our present times, as the coherence of nationhood, democratic possibility – let alone the consoling “rainbow” of the early transition – seems to be unraveling.⁴ But such imaginings have a broader resonance, too. The passage evokes the mode of thinking that Paul Saint-Amour, in his discussion of “Encyclopedic Modernism,” attributes to the makers of the two Westinghouse Time Capsules, buried at the site of the 1938 and again the 1968 World's Fairs (significantly, at the moment right before World War II and at the height of the Cold War). At

stake for the Westinghouse executives was a desire to create for posterity a reliquarium that would preserve a culture in danger of being lost. The irony, as Saint-Amour points out, is that the time capsule, the vehicle of preservation, looked much like a nuclear missile, the vehicle of annihilation. And something of this paradox, he goes on to argue, always underlies the effort to contain knowledge (178–182). After all, Diderot himself saw his *Encyclopédie* as a sanctuary, where the knowledge of man could be protected from time and revolutions. “The most glorious moment for a work of this sort,” he declared, “would come in the wake of some catastrophe so great as to suspend the progress of science, interrupt the labors of craftsmen, and plunge a portion of our hemisphere into darkness once again” (Saint-Amour 182).

What seems to me distinctively South African or postcolonial in Vladislavic’s passage, however, is the emphasis on the loss of language: something that marks his location in a country of several minority languages. As Saint-Amour notes, the eighteenth-century encyclopedists, animated though they were by imaginings of endings, did not go so far as to represent the effacement of their project’s very conditions of legibility (189). But for a South African, and specifically an Afrikaans writer like Marlene van Niekerk, such effacement seems entirely imaginable, and it comes, in her case, with an acute questioning of her authorial *raison d’être* and audience. In her passionate response to the 2016 Afrikaans-Must-Fall student protests at the University of Stellenbosch, she writes:

In another hundred years no one will be able to read one word of what my writing peers and I have written in Afrikaans. Not that such a fate would be exceptional – it has befallen many Khoi and San languages in our country and they could be swept away more easily because of their orality. (Venda and Xhosa and other indigenous languages might also be lost if young black linguists who scoff at the missionaries’ grammars do not make haste to restandardise the African languages by integrating contemporary vernaculars into updated written forms.) (Van Niekerk, “Language Debates.”)

That translation (a term often associated with survival) cannot suffice as the way out is suggested in her remarkable evocation of the kinds of explorative knowledge production – indeed, of *jouissance* – that is only possible within one’s mother tongue. “The champions of English monolingualism in South Africa,” she declares, “lack something that we call in old Afrikaans ‘fynsinigheid,’ ‘vindingrykheid,’ ‘geesrykheid’ (culturedness, resourcefulness, spiritedness):”

They lack a certain opulent, silky, saline, genuinely civil, well-watered soulfulness. One could also call it “grace.” I imagine this quality as a spiritual membrane that ought to line one’s heart on the inside and that ought to become pleasantly distended when one finds oneself in the presence of someone who is able, consciously and expertly, to express him- or herself in his or her home language, someone who has the facility of using words with a gentle but also adventurously probing explorative care, a speaker who is expecting to be totally surprised by what can emerge from the tongue if purposefully and playfully left to its own devices. And yes, all of that closely resembles erotic activity. (“Language Debates.”)

The vulnerability of this utterance is evident in some of the brutal responses with which her polemic was met and perhaps even more crucially in the fact that she writes about this loss in English. Yet it is important to allow these lines to resonate as a plea for a kind of resistant singularity – an opposition to what Van Niekerk calls “Globish” (“Language Debates”).⁵ It is a stance with which I have much sympathy and that makes me inclined to take issue with the notion that world literature today is best approached by understanding it as “born-translated”: a matter I will return to, in more nuanced fashion, at the end of this essay.⁶

But for now, let us note that Van Niekerk’s premonition of loss comes along with a rejection of any simple curatorial attitude or nostalgia: the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Afrikaans novelist is too profoundly compromised to cherish *tout court*. To do so, as Van Niekerk asserts in a fascinating critical analysis of her own novels, would require a kind of re-enchantment in a thoroughly disenchanting world; it would revive a mode of romantic nationhood at a moment when that is thoroughly spent.⁷ (And, since Van Niekerk often puts forward the idea of the author as shaman, we might here bring to mind the recent appearance of the purportedly patriotic QAnon shaman in the halls of Congress – an untimely, laughable, and destructive figure from whom we can only recoil.) Even so, it is clearly the case that *Agaat* is readily grasped as an encyclopedic (or, more exactly, counter-encyclopedic) intervention in national culture in the

terms I have begun to sketch out. Indeed, it is a novel that can productively be read through the framework of Edward Mendelson's seminal 1976 essay on the genre in an almost point-by-point fashion. And, though it inverts many of Mendelson's presumptions, his sense that the encyclopedic impulse has something to do with romantic nationalism is clearly pertinent.

I first put forward such a reading in a 2010 Mellon lecture in Johannesburg and since then the critical field I gestured toward has inevitably been occupied and shifted in ways that are worth noting. There have been several useful commentaries on Van Niekerk's encyclopedism by Afrikaans critics, including Gerrit Olivier, Henning Pieterse, and Sonja Loots, the latter with deeper research into the scholarship on the form than I propose to engage with here.⁸ Broader studies of the encyclopedic novel, notably Saint-Amour's, have found fault with Mendelson's definition of the genre, seeing it as too exclusive, too tied to the singularities of national literature, and too enclosed in a temporality of pseudo-prophecy. Saint-Amour proffers instead an alternative account of modernist encyclopedic novels – and Van Niekerk is clearly a late modernist – as, precisely, limit texts.⁹ They are, Saint-Amour insists, paradoxical in the way they mimic, in their vast scope and ambition, the modalities of totality; but they do so in opposition to the enormous political fact of their day: the expectation of total war.¹⁰ It is a sophisticated critique, which, as should already be evident, I absorbed with great interest. Yet it still seems to me that Mendelson's framework remains a productive template: his conception of the genre raises exactly the issues I would like to emphasize in *Agaat*. I do wish to ascribe to it a certain singularity and I want precisely to consider the novel in light of the nationalistic emphasis that bothers Saint-Amour in Mendelson. After all, *Agaat* engages – critically, to be sure – with such foundational ethno-nationalist projects as Grimm's Fairy Tales and Achim von Arnim and Clement Brentano's eighteenth-century collection of German songs in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn (The Boy's Magic Horn)*. It is clearly no accident, furthermore, that *Agaat* is framed by a prologue and an epilogue written from the point of view of an ethnomusicologist, Jakkie de Wet, who has in his possession a magic horn, or at least a symbolically resonant one, and one that calls forth very different cultural possibilities than those of the nationalist "Wunderhorn": ones that can only be understood as their counterfoil.¹¹

Agaat among the Elephants

But let us return to the specifics of Mendelson's essay. For him the category of encyclopedic narrative is a highly restrictive one. Indeed, it includes only seven works (though he admits there may be others of similar importance in national contexts with which he is unfamiliar). They are Dante's *Divina Comedia*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Rabelais's five books of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Goethe's *Faust*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1267). These are obviously works of the highest quality and historical importance. Among the qualities they share are the following: they all offer a comprehensive account of at least one science and at least one art other than that of writing; they engage with what Mendelson calls "statecraft" (1271) (in other words, they have a political dimension and often present the reader with large chunks of national and world history); they grow out of the epic and therefore tend to give marginal roles to women and to intimate relationships. But they exceed even this ample narrative form: indeed, they cannot be confined to a single genre, but rather contain all literary forms available in a given culture; similarly, they run the full gamut of occupations and dialects, and end up being the defining text of a given nation (or a new international order in Pynchon's case) and its language. They share, finally, a peculiar ambiguously forward-looking temporality: set a few years earlier than the time of writing, they have both satiric and prophetic effects, and it is in this that their political implications often lie (1269–1270). But they also elicit a kind of critical backformation in that they come to assume a foundational importance: Mendelson diagnoses a kind of nationalist desire for such a bard, an ancestor, a shaper of an imagined cultural community (1275). This is the case even though Mendelson's essay is, in a sense, occasional, an effort to argue for the importance of *Gravity's Rainbow* as inaugurating a new international order. The encyclopedic narratives he lists, huge as they are, seem designed to echo in the "nation-sized room" that has historically been the space of the novel: a room in which they are, one might say, the literary elephants.¹²

Now: to place Van Niekerk's novel in Mendelson's lineup is outrageous. (Van Niekerk has been shortlisted for the International Booker and recommended by Oprah but she is far from a household name). I make this move not only to offer a considered tribute to the literary quality of the work (*Agaat* is as virtuosic a novel as one can hope to read), but also to suggest that there is also something outrageous about the exclusively male and Euro-American lineup that Mendelson offers. By experimentally placing *Agaat* in this context, we are able to adjust and relocate the entire category from a feminist and postcolonial vantage and raise interesting questions about it. I'll suggest two for starters: does the encyclopedic narrative have to marginalize the women characters and intimate relationships, as Mendelson declares? And do encyclopedic narratives have to emerge out of the epic? Could they not, in certain historical situations, like that of South Africa, emerge from the pastoral?¹³

The fact that *Agaat* does not in its details resemble the seven great works I have mentioned does not nullify the heuristic comparative gesture: encyclopedic narratives are *sui generis*. More problematic, but also crucial to what interests me about the novel, is Mendelson's specification that the encyclopedic narrative cannot be defined by intrinsic and formal criteria alone. It must also be defined extrinsically, in terms of its unique historical intervention and its subsequent reception (1267–8).¹⁴ Encyclopedic narratives are not only great works. They are unique in their impact and reception – and this is why, in my view, South African critics who discuss Van Niekerk's oeuvre at large as “encyclopedic” rob Mendelson's definition of its most pertinent specification: the insistence that this limited category include a particular kind of major work in a particular and pivotal historical situation. No writer, he asserts, can set out to produce an encyclopedic narrative, no matter how ample its contents; that status can only be conferred in retrospect and it is also determined by its historical conjuncture, as the fulcrum (or so Mendelson would have it) between the prenatal and the national. The point of including *Agaat* in this limited canon is that it inverts or updates Mendelson: its historical singularity has to do with the decisive demise of Afrikaans and Afrikanerdom as a nationalist project – perhaps the demise globally of all nationalist projects and the advent of new conditions of reception, especially as they pertain to minor languages.

Let me recast the first part of this assertion slightly differently. *Agaat* is, for my money, the post-apartheid book: no other has been clearer about the fact that the ethno-national power once defined by Afrikaans is over, and that the expressive beauty of the language is undermined by the great betrayal that was apartheid or colonial education, an education for servitude, in which the language is ineradicably complicit. Far from instituting a national culture, then, *Agaat* annuls one. Admiring critics, who celebrate it as a contribution to Afrikaans literature in the old ways do not take the novel as seriously as it demands. They fail to accept the extent to which the work is, as Van Niekerk notes, a profound work of mourning: “[D]it is 'n roman oor verlies, 'n soort treurlied, 'n werk van oorgang en 'n afskeid van 'n verbygaande orde” [It is a novel about loss, a kind of elegy, a work of transition and a farewell to an order that is passing”] (Loots, Interview).¹⁵ I am suggesting, in other words, that *Agaat* is not only, as the late Ampie Coetzee would have it, the last *plaasroman* [farm novel], but (in a sense I am working to define here) the last Afrikaans novel.¹⁶ In making this claim, I am only reiterating, more provocatively, a point that Van Niekerk herself has made to what she calls reactive critics and philosophers: that they are refusing to mourn in a mature way for what has passed. This is a crucial point, for, as we have seen, it is precisely the work of (proleptic) mourning that generates the encyclopedia's documentary excess (in Diderot's case the threat of a censorious church and state, and a brewing revolution.)

A brief description of *Agaat*'s structure and plot is necessary at this stage. Though an excessive and deliberately tautological novel, *Agaat* is beautifully patterned. Each of its twenty chapters contains four distinct modes: the present-day stream-of-consciousness narration of the dying farm owner, Milla de Wet; a revealing series of her diary entries complete with eccentric abbreviations; a prose poem, often catalog-like, plumbing the dying woman's unconscious; and a series of roughly chronological flashbacks, dating back to 1948 (the date when the National Party won the election with “Apartheid” as its slogan). Written in the second person, these flashbacks partake of the quality of a confession (one of the dominant genres in post-apartheid South Africa): a confession that is at first quite devious but modulates in the final chapter into a more truthful, or at least more emotional revelation of the origin of the saga we have read. This origin lies in the narrator's compassionate, but also egocentric impulse to adopt the abused child of laborers on her

mother's farm: a girl that Milla first treats as a daughter, but, after Milla falls pregnant, demotes to the status of a kind of super-servant. The girl becomes the formidable Agaat: variously described as "Apartheid Cyborg" (703 [563]), subversive mimic, mirror, archive, and artist extraordinaire.

Now: it should already be evident, given its poetic components, that *Agaat* exceeds the bounds of the conventional novel and is certainly not confinable to the *plaasroman*. A dizzying *mise-en-abyme* occurs in the very first chapter, when it turns out that Agaat has read the entire South African *plaasroman* tradition aloud to Milla, from *Laat Vrugte* by C. M. van den Heever, to *Foxtrot van die Vleisetters* by Eben Venter, to Charles van Onselen's monumental oral history of a sharecropper's life, *The Seed is Mine*, and, for good measure, the two major South African novels on the relationship between mistress and servant as well: *Poppie Nongena* by Elsa Joubert and *July's People* by Nadine Gordimer. Indeed, in the course of its 700 or so pages, *Agaat* offers an extensive catalog of the possible forms in which its materials might be cast: tragedy, chronicle, fairy tale, radio drama, airport romance, "wolhaarstorie" (tall tale) (565 [455]), Hollywood romance, and even "Leon Schuster farce" (130).¹⁷ This generic indeterminacy is, as I have noted, characteristic of encyclopedic narratives: they all contain characters who wish to live in one genre or another – but totally fail to shape the protean works they inhabit according to this delimiting desire. Don Quixote, most famously, would like to be in a romance; *Moby-Dick's* Stubb would do better in a farce, and so forth (1270). The cataloging of genres in *Agaat* is entirely to be expected from the point of view I am adopting. For the encyclopedic narrative, as Mendelson puts it, "attempts to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets that knowledge" (1269).

This is, of course, a staggering ambition, unachievable even in the hefty tomes of which we are speaking. But they all achieve the effect of inclusiveness by way of synecdoche: which is to say, by an excessively detailed account of at least one domain of scientific or technical knowledge: thus, per Mendelson, Dante offers a full account of medieval astronomy, Rabelais of Renaissance medicine, *Faust* of geological theories, *Moby Dick* of cetology; *Gravity's Rainbow*, of ballistics and mathematics. *Agaat* follows suit. In fact, it announces one of its domains of scientific knowledge on its very first page in the novel's third epigraph, taken from the introduction to the 1927 compendium *Hulpboek vir Boere in Suid-Afrika* [*Handbook for Farmers in South Africa*]. The passage in question compares the mission of the farmer's handbook to that of the Bible. It claims to be a complete and fail-safe guide to excellence and prosperity in agriculture, just as the holy writ is the sole and comprehensive guide to spiritual perfection. Readers of *Agaat* duly become familiar with much technical detail. We learn of soil types and soil conservation, techniques of plowing and sowing, the treatment of various diseases afflicting cattle, the correct methods of slaughtering and butchering livestock, the operation of harrows and plows and creamers, drainage and irrigation, tanning hides and making thongs, types of preserves: the list goes on. Indeed, a goodly proportion of the very fabric of the novel consists of long quotations from the farming compendium, replete not only with skills and knowledge at risk of disappearing, but with archaic words like "gekreuk," "treurnis," "altevol," and "algar" (for which I am at a loss to find English equivalents of similar quaintness). Like the catalog of farm novels mentioned earlier, these quotations are seldom innocent. Agaat, who has memorized the entire handbook, recites from it at length when she wishes to avoid the dying Milla's most urgent questions, and seldom without satirical intent: for instance, she torments her mistress/mother with a passage about when it is proper to separate lambs from their ewes, or with a passage about how to cook meaty bones for the "kombuis-meid of kaffer" (465) ["kitchen maid or kaffir"(375)]. She even reads out a long and mournful passage about the decline of wetlands as part of Milla's last rites, perhaps as a final mockery of the work's prefatory comparison of its usefulness to that of the Bible.

What is fascinating – and here *Agaat* clearly exceeds the bounds of the *plaasroman* – is that this highly technical agricultural knowledge is not the novel's sole scientific domain. It is fully matched by the detailed and distinctly unpleasant knowledge the reader accrues in the course of the novel about the symptoms, medication, and treatment of Lou Gehrig's disease, the degenerative neuro-muscular

condition with which Milla is afflicted.¹⁸ The reader is duly subjected to extremely physical descriptions of how Agaat, with cruel and showy efficiency, helps Milla to eat, cough, scratch, bathe, pee, and shit – the last in nine astonishing and hilarious pages that Ampie Coetzee rather weakly describes as “gruwelik” [gruesome] (8). But such passages are par for the course in encyclopedic narratives: like Rabelais, Melville, Joyce, and Pynchon before her, Van Niekerk does not hesitate to be wildly indecorous, to include what Bakhtin in his wonderful Rabelais book calls “the material bodily lower stratum” in their works’ ambit.¹⁹ Midway through *Agaat*, we are even provided with a comprehensive table, reproduced in all its intricacy, for the management of the disease, complete with the names of appropriate drugs: a “sadistiese taal” (348) [“sadistic language” (280)] that Agaat relishes: “baclofen,” “tisandien,” “dekstromorfaan” (440) [“baclofen,” “tizanadine,” “dextrometorphane” (354).] In despair, Milla thinks at one point that Agaat has mapped out a veritable periodic table of her suffering and has mastered the atomic masses of its elements: saliva, tears, and so forth (348, 280).

It is important to note that the novel’s two technical domains are paralleled or even superimposed in a way that enhances their effect of totality or tautology, or – and this is the counter-encyclopedic possibility – sets up their destructive symbolic tension. The impedimenta of farming, comprehensively listed, down to the last outmoded ones are matched by the equally numerous impedimenta of nursing: various models of wheelchairs, neck braces, sponges, steel trays, etc. The same goes for the terminologies of the two sciences (Van Niekerk’s work is always about languages, signs, and codes). The various bovine diseases that Agaat is forced to study as a girl – “os-teo-fa-gie . . . allo-trio-fa-gie . . . bo-tu-li-nus” (261) [“os-teo-pha-gia . . . allo-tri-opha-gia . . . bo-tu-li-nus” (210)] – are echoed by her mistress’s symptoms: “dis-fag-ia . . . dis-ar-tria . . . sia-lor-ree . . . spas-ti-sit-teit” (250) [“dis-pha-gia . . . dys-art-thria . . . si-lor-rhea . . . spas-ti-city” (201)].

One is tempted to say that the creative labors of farming are symbolically undone by the decay of the erstwhile farmer’s body: an effect that enhances what I would describe as the chiasmic effect of the novel’s structure.²⁰ (To briefly adumbrate this effect: the novel’s fulcrum occurs around Chapter 10, and incidents before and after echo each other in chronologically inverted fashion. Thus, Agaat’s brisk ministrations of an enema to the paralyzed Milla mirrors Milla’s harsh toilet training of Agaat; and Agaat’s recourse to a language of blinking eyes to communicate with her mother/patient matches Milla’s earlier invention of such a language to lure the mute child out of silence. The ruling idea, in other words, is the repetition of the same elements in reverse; and the effect, at least in the main narrative of twenty chapters, is one of battling curricula: one constructing a world, the other dismantling it, one oppressively pedagogical, the other a subversive vengeance on the earlier program.)

Another distinctive feature shared by all the texts on Mendelson’s list is the obsessive attention each text pays to an art form outside the realm of written fiction: the carved bas-reliefs in the *Purgatorio*, Greek tragedy in *Faust*, the whale paintings in *Moby-Dick*, the musical echoes in *Ulysses’* Sirens section, film in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1270). In other words, encyclopedic novels tend to include ekphrastic (or more generally metatextual) elements that mirror or comment on their own grand artistic purposes. In *Agaat*, two arts are key: song and embroidery. Their importance is flagged by the novel’s first and second epigraphs, the former from the 1937 edition of the *FAK-Volksangbundel* (the well-known songbook of the Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Organizations) and the latter from the book *Borduur So (Embroider Like This)*. There is much to say about these passages, which brilliantly capture what Mendelson calls “the ideological perspectives from which a given culture shapes and interprets knowledge” – in this case, an ethno-nationalist culture, with stark distinctions between the masculine and the feminine and the cultured and the uncivilized (“kulturbewuste” and “onbeskaafde”). At the risk of belaboring the obvious, I would emphasize again that both the *FAK* and *Borduur So* are compendia. They are works that aspire to fulsome documentation: an aspiration, as I have been suggesting, that Van Niekerk’s text both mimics and undermines.

The novel is so rife with allusions to song, that I can scarcely hope to give any full sense here of the way in which they, along with riddles, proverbs, and the like, form the very warp and weft of the work’s textual fabric. The songs range, as does the *FAK*, from hymns to patriotic anthems to children’s songs and Agaat’s knowledge of them is comprehensive. (As, I must say, is my own: the novel, as I will

explain more fully at the end of the essay, had the disconcerting effect of bringing them back to mind, melody, verses, and all.) She has a song to match any possible occasion, from moving ones, as the hymn “Uit dieptes gans verlore,” [“From the depths, utterly lost”] which Agaat and the other farmworkers sing as they collect the bones of dead cattle, down to mocking ones, as when Agaat accompanies Milla’s efforts to shit with “En Hoor jy die Magtige Dreuning” (417) [“can you hear . . . the thunder almighty” (336)] and her efforts to piss with “Strome van Sion” (85) [“Streams of grace abounding” (69)].²¹ The novel is also replete with references to classical music. Milla considers herself refined – kulturbewus” [“culturally aware”] and, like many such Afrikaners, she finds this notion best captured in the tradition of German Romantic music: in Schubert, Schumann, and Mahler, especially the Mahler of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, compositions based on the proto-nationalist collection of German folk songs I referred to earlier. It is crucial, I would point out, that we see this archive of art songs as an indigenized aspect of Afrikaans high culture: it is significant that several of these songs – Schubert’s “Heideröslein” (or “Rosie van die Velde” in Afrikaans translation), for example – are included in the *FAK*.

About the art of embroidery, which is consistently used in the novel in metatextual ways (some of these passages are very compelling and poetic), I will make only a single point here: to wit, that Agaat not only learns every single stitch in the book – “hemstitching, double hemstitching & Italian hemstitching & . . . dice-stitch & step-stitch & Algerian-eye, wave stitch & stain stitch blanket stitch & diagonal ripple stitch” – but that her creations all have a quality of encyclopedic comprehensiveness and even tautology. Her creations, in a sense, stand as synecdoches for the accretive totality of *Agaat*. Her great rainbow embroidery is described in a beautiful passage as a complete color chart of the Overberg (22 [183]); her caps are embroidered and re-embroidered so thickly in layers of white on white that one can see absolutely everything in them, “soos kyk in die wolke” (386) [like looking into clouds” (311)] – including (significantly, given the novel’s ethnomusicological dimension) a carnivalesque orchestra of animals. The shroud that Agaat sews for Milla not only deploys every possible embroidery technique but contains all the information of the other compendia and the whole story of the novel as well. It is, in effect, an encyclopedia that will also contain Milla, in the most literal sense. As she gazes on her shroud, Milla notes that the hem remains undone, but it will be sewn up before too long: she will become a woman in an embroidered dress, on which there is an image of a woman in an embroidered dress, and so forth. Attentive readers might recall here the first lecture Milla gave Agaat about embroidery on the fateful day of the latter’s demotion to servitude. She refers not only to the vast panels that Afrikaans women embroidered to depict the key events in their national history, but also describes the woven cloth in which the mummies of Egypt were wrapped: cloths embroidered in such detail that “die gestorwene heeltemal toegedraai in sy kultuur & geskiedenis & geloof aanland in die hemelryk” (177) [“the deceased . . . would arrive in the kingdom of heaven completely wrapped up in his culture & history & faith” (142)]. This cultural mummy-wrap represents the apex of Agaat’s creative work and also the apex of her revenge. For, while it is possible to argue that Agaat manages to transcend and explode from within the forms that are available to her (and Van Niekerk likewise), this is not the case for the nationalist mother Milla.²²

Against Closure

I could explore further respects in which *Agaat* is legible in relation to the encyclopedic narrative: not least its political dimension, something inseparable from its characteristically indeterminate temporality, simultaneously that of satire and prophecy. The grounds for such a reading are already mapped out in Johann Rossouw’s listing of the way in which key events in the novel seem to coordinate with key events in the history of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid (of which I cite just a sampling): Agaat is born in 1948, the year of the Nationalist Party’s electoral victory; Milla demotes Agaat to the servant’s room and gives birth to her son Jakkie in 1960, the year of Sharpeville and the government’s transformation into a security state; Jakkie leaves the country and his father is killed in 1986, the year of the township revolts and the first state of emergency; and Milla dies and leaves the farm to Agaat in

1996, the year when the constitution for a democratic South Africa is adopted. Even this bare timeline reveals the temptation – indeed, the feasibility – of reading the novel as national allegory, while also identifying the kind of pseudo-prophecy (a future orientation that is in fact already foreclosed) to which Saint-Amour objects in Mendelson’s account of the encyclopedic genre.

It might be more useful, then, to deflect from this approach and return instead to that powerful image of Milla enclosed in her mummy-wrap. Let’s use it as a stimulus to consider some of Van Niekerk’s public comments on the effects of containment and interpretive determinacy: on closure as not only a narrative, but also as a cultural or literary historical phenomenon.²³ Now: several critics of *Agaat* have made a connection between the novel and J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (with which it shares an interest in both landownership and soulmaking) and Van Niekerk has generously expressed her admiration for Coetzee. She has noted, in fact, that *Agaat* finds an ancestor in the tongue-less Friday figure in *Foe* (Smith). However, she has some things to say about the effect of *Disgrace*, along with Coetzee’s subsequent emigration to Australia, which many South Africans – with pretty good reason – have taken as something like the logical culmination of the novel (just as Sylvia Plath’s suicide is inevitably read as the final chapter of *The Bell Jar*). Against what Mark Sanders has seen as Coetzee’s curious avoidance of perfectives in *Disgrace*, its unsettled ethic of melancholia, Van Niekerk sees Coetzee’s work as neatly completed and closed: “Ek dink hy het Suid-Afrika klaar opgeskryf, alles netjies toegevoeg, en die pad gevat” [“I think he finished writing up South Africa, folded everything up neatly, and hit the road”] (Smith).²⁴ Her own narrative aim, by contrast, is to work against any closure: and this is why the novel’s prologue and epilogue are of the greatest importance to the work, as critics like Olivier and Van Vuuren have also noted. “I wanted to say something in these sections about beginnings and endings,” Van Niekerk observes. “To parody the beginning of the novel in a prologue, is to say that the beginning is not really the beginning, and the end is not really the end . . . The moment of closure is complicated and it becomes an aperture” (Smith).²⁵ It is worth noting here that the incessant tautology and repetition I have noted all along is perhaps best understood in light of Derrida’s understanding of the supplement: these are additions, superfluties, excesses that in fact mark a lack. Thus, to give but one beautiful example: the rainbow embroidery mentioned earlier is powerfully affirmed to be complete and comprehensive: “Die oorspong, die volheid, die beginsel van alles” (228) [“The origin, the fullness, the foundation of all” (184)]. And yet it is simultaneously a substitute for loss: “alles wat haar uit die hande geglip het . . . vervang met hierdie volgeborduurde leegte” (228) [“Everything that slipped out of her grasp . . . replaced with this fully embroidered emptiness” (183)].²⁶

In light of these remarks, it is fascinating to observe that critics who would contain and domesticate *Agaat* (in other words, those who view it as a contribution merely to Afrikaans literature and as an extension of its generic traditions) often work hard to minimize the implications of its framing structures.²⁷ Even Johan Rossouw, whose political response to the novel is of great interest, sees the importance of these sections but rejects their implications as “self-opheffing” [self-transcendence, or in Rossouw’s somewhat idiosyncratic use of the term, self-cancellation]. The very fact that the prologue and epilogue are the only parts of the text not focalized through the dying Milla already gives them great suggestive power, as does the fact that they are set not in South Africa but, as it were, in transit (in translation): on an Air Canada flight, or in meditations that oscillate between Toronto and the Overberg; between departure and return. That the focal consciousness in these pages should be an ethnomusicologist is also suggestive, especially in light of my earlier reference (see endnote 11) to world music as a model for a more generous, cosmopolitan, and collective vision of literary studies. To be sure, Jakkie, Milla’s son – birthed, stolen, and educated by Agaat – is not an entirely appealing character. The professional distance he brings to bear on his heritage is not presented uncritically: “Wie kan ’n etnograaf wees by sy moeder se sterfbed?” (7) [“Who can play the ethnographer at his mother’s deathbed” (5)], he thinks; and yet that does seem, in large measure, to be what he does. But he is, as he puts it, “gered . . . van voltooidheid” (6) [“delivered from completedness” (5)] by the fact that he is “dubbelsinning gebore” [born ambiguous/ambiguously (my translation)]. More importantly, the very linguistic texture of the prologue and epilogue enact a break from the Afrikaans cultural heritage that is archived so comprehensively in the bulk of the novel. I would argue, in fact, that the practice of nationalistic archiving represented by the three Afrikaans compilations cited in the epigraphs and also by their European predecessor texts like *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales (rather

sardonically invoked in the epilogue) is implicitly replaced in these framing sections of the novel by a more open-ended and, if you will, a more postcolonial archive. The prose becomes multilingual (indeed, one has to read these passages as one does a high modernist poem, a Pound canto): it is replete with allusions – no longer solely to Afrikaans texts, as is the main body of the work – but to poets like Louis MacNeice, Philip Larkin, and in the novel’s closing allusion, to the Danish poet, Nis Petersen.²⁸ Moreover, as if to make the implicit point explicit (perhaps – in the manner of the work – redundant, tautological) these allusions address ideas of multiplicity and multivocality: the McNeice quote, for instance, speaks of sonorities that are “incorrigibly plural,” “collateral and incompatible.” Significant, too, is the fact that these framing meditations turn to what we might call subaltern archives. Jakkie’s academic interests, as we learn in the course of the text, include what his mother calls “pigmieëmusiek” (62) [“pigmy music” (52)] and “Indiane gekrys” (20) [“Red Indian croakings” (15)] and the prologue duly circles around the Native American singer Buffy Sainte-Marie, whose documents Jakkie seems to have tracked down in a Toronto archive before his return to South Africa. His meditations in transit turn to histories of colonial violence – patent in Africa, more effectively repressed in North America – but retrievable in both Khoi and Native American place names, like “Bakleirivier” (5) [Fighting River (my translation)] or “Wounded Knee” (3). The prologue, moreover, explicitly raises the problem of translation: how does one speak to Canadian friends, Jakkie muses, about a South African childhood, when even place names like Vermaaklikheid or Riviersonderend cannot be translated without loss.²⁹

In raising the question of translation in the very first moments of the novel, Van Niekerk touches on the circulation and reception of her own work as well – a reception that in South Africa has been quite fascinating. (I am not speaking here so much about Willie Burger’s special issue of *JLS*, which offers more sophisticated and considered academic accounts, but of the responses that occurred in the [web]pages of *Litnet* and *Vrye Afrikaan*, where the literary discussion rapidly retreated into exchanges about the meaning of the “new Afrikaner,” whether this notion was nationalist and bounded, or (in [Johann Rossouw’s](#) idealistic polemical view) could be actually break with nationalism, while advancing the rights of minority languages and subnational identities in an era of globalization. This intense domestic discussion now seems to be joined with a very different transnational reception, as that of [Toni Morrison](#), who views the work’s representation of the servant’s artistry as addressing the double consciousness of slave song, or [Mark Sanders](#), who, in an essay written for an Australian audience, views the novel in terms of a broadly postcolonial and psychoanalytic account of the acculturation of stolen mixed-race children, or Greg Forter, who compares *Agaat* to Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*, as critical explorations of colonial mimicry. Into this ongoing conversation, I will interject the observation that the novel’s deeply nostalgic cultural and linguistic documentation is simultaneously a searing critique of the racist betrayal that infects the Afrikaans cultural encyclopedia, and by extension, the entire project of colonial – servile – education: an education that has historically entrapped, even as it purports to set free. It is precisely because *Agaat* inverts Mendelson and explodes an ethno-national archive from within (and with it all forms of ethno-nationalist reception and validation) that the novel accrues a global resonance far more profound than that of works that are made for transport through the adoption of generic formulae, through pallid, readily translatable prose, and through readily marketable modes of identity and affect (call it, following the [Comaroffs](#), “Ethnicity, Inc.”). By resisting all these, *Agaat* becomes a text that enables us to ponder the fate of national literatures and languages in an age of globalization in a particularly exhilarating way.³⁰

Reading *Agaat* in Philadelphia

Marlene van Niekerk has now left South Africa for the Netherlands and one might well ask, in light of her comments on Coetzee’s departure for Australia, whether this move should be taken as a kind of wrapping up, an ending, a leaving aside of what she once sardonically described as the writer’s “klein skermutseling met sy nasionale erfenis en sy etniese lot, die verganklikheid van sy nalatenskap in ’n steeds verminderende minderheidstaal” [“negligible skirmish with his national heritage and ethnic fate, the transience of his legacy in an ever-shrinking minority language”] (“*Die Kind in die Agterkamer*” 116). As [Janien Linde](#)

has noted, Van Niekerk's work has, even prior to this departure, moved away from what in retrospect can be grasped as a "South African" phase (including the novels *Triomf* and *Agaat*, and the play *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W*) to a more transnational phase, marked by cosmopolitan thematic preoccupations (including environmental ones), a different conception of audience, and different experimental forms – not least a shift to poetry (28–50). In *Gesant van die Mispels (Emissary of the Medlars)*, a recent volume of poems responding to the work of the Dutch painter Adriaen Coorte, we find her pondering which memory objects should be brought along into her new life abroad:

Wat pak
 'n mens nog alles in die kis? 'n Motgevrete
 bybel en oorgeërfde handpistool, 'n nagelate
 sousboot van Delftse porselein, 'n rottang-
 mandjie, verslete stukke messegoed
 [What else
 to pack into the chest? A moth-eaten
 bible and inherited pistol, a left-behind
 gravy boat of Delft porcelain, a wicker
 basket, worn pieces of cutlery] (68)

It is hard not to grasp the emigrant's footlocker as a diminished and reduced version of the time capsule I referred to at the beginning of this essay: a reliquarium, but one that is stripped of compendious encyclopedic ambitions and anything more than personal significance. But the question of what to do with her accumulation of South African knowledges and things – what exactly the *raison d'être* of a writer might be when the national frame comes to seem irrelevant and archaic – is nothing new: it has exercised her imagination from the writing of *Agaat* onward. This is the burden of Van Niekerk's astonishing exegesis of her own novels in an essay entitled "Lambert Benade van Triomf and Agaat Lourier van Grootmoedersdrift: Die Kind in die Agterkamer as die Sjamaan van die Familie" [Lambert Benade of Triomf and Agaat Lourier of Grootmoedersdrift: The Child in the Backroom as the Family Shaman]. Here she interprets the fate of her marginalized and despised artist characters, condemned to their backrooms, as a kind of self-conscious critique of the obsolescent romantic model of national artists today. And even though, in a response to a reader's question about whether she might actually *be* her character Jakkie, she replied, "Ek dink nie ek is so 'n pyn in die gat nie" [I am not such a pain in the ass], it is not a stupid question (Erasmus). Van Niekerk does, after all, hold out the possibility – a possibility implied earlier in my discussion of *Agaat's* more transnational framing sections – that Jakkie might present some sort of alternative: "Hy is 'n *internasionale antropoloog* (van onder andere sjamanisme) in plaas van 'n nawelstaarderige parogiale romanties sjamaan. Jakkie verskyn as 'n ontwortelde, 'n nomaad en 'n internasionaal respekteerde wetenskaplike/deskundige, kurator and kroniekhouer van verdwynende kulture" ("Kind in die Agterkamer," 117). [He is an international anthropologist (of, among other things, shamanism) instead of being a navel-gazing, parochial romantic shaman himself. Jakkie is rootless figure, a world-renowned expert, curator, and chronicler of disappearing cultures.] And, as [Gerrit Olivier](#) deftly phrases it, Jakkie embodies the possibility of a new approach to writing from a journalistic or anthropological or archival point of view, with a globally-oriented consciousness (182).

The true pain in the ass, then, is more likely to be me: an established émigré academic (in an English department, no less), student of modernism, postcolonialism, and comparative literature, and a nomad of sorts, bereft for years of regular conversation in my mother tongue. Yet it is for this last reason precisely that I was unable to approach *Agaat*, which I slowly read in a Philadelphia coffee shop in the mornings, with dispassionate and distanced expertise. I found the novel's foregrounding of the acquisition and dissolution of language overwhelming. In my (by then already quite lengthy) academic career, my Afrikaans remained more or less dormant, not really part of my creative or intellectual life. Consequently, the experience of reading the novel constituted a kind of relearning of my mother tongue. The novel's myriad allusions, sometimes fragmentary, all triggered buried memories: a line from a hymn would bring up the entire song, the melody, sometimes all the verses. And, of course, poet that she is, Van Niekerk would play with the most beautiful ones: "Daar is geen land" ["There is no land, so remote and

wild”)) and “Soos ’n hert in dorre streke” [“Like a deer in dry land”] – songs that were my own favorites as a child and still have the power to touch the heart. Even the description in the novel’s last and most revealing chapter of the little waterbugs, who seem to Milla to be writing on the surface of the farm pond in some sort of mysterious script – tracing divine messages perhaps – galvanized deeply buried memories. *Volleerd*, as it were, in the codes of the novel, I knew the passage was an echo of a poem, “Het Schrijverke,” by the Flemish writer, Guido Gezelle; the marvelously onomatopoeic opening lines (“O krinklende winklende waterding/met ’t zwarte kabotseken aan . . . ” [“Oh crinkeldy, winkeldy waterthing/in that little black hoodie of yours”]) came back to me verbatim across decades.³¹ The reason for this intimacy is quite evident: when we lived in London from 1959 to 1963, my mother, afraid that I would lose my mother tongue among the English, made me memorize Gezelle when I was about five or six. And the FAK songbook, which Milla forces Agaat to learn, was also my song book: the folksy encyclopedia I committed to memory. Reading *Agaat*, I rediscovered these knowledges in disused parts of my brain, and I don’t think it is wrong to say that I regained my linguistic fluency by the neurological stimulus of reading Van Niekerk’s novel. In sum: I had the sense that I was an ideal reader of this astonishing work – surely not accessible, or so I felt, to a great number of people in this world.

Which is to say that I experienced a particularly intense and personal version of what Rebecca L. Walkowitz, in her book *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* diagnoses as “possessive collectivism” (25–26). I read *Agaat* like a “native reader” par excellence – like one of those benighted old-fashioned souls who “assume that the book they are holding was written for them or that the language they are encountering is, in some proprietary or intrinsic way, theirs” (27). *Agaat* belonged to me, I felt; and my first instinct was to feel (even though Michiel Heyns had already accomplished such a sensitive and thoughtful translation) that its cultural work could only reveal itself in the original. Think, for instance, of the moment, midway through this big book, when the narrator, Milla de Wet, bemoans the fact that her diary entries, of which we have by then read many, would not make much sense to an outsider. “Should I not rather write in English,” Milla wonders: “Maybe these domesticities will sound better to me in a world language” (183) [“Miskien moet ek probeer om in Engels te skryf. Miskien sal huishoudelikhede vir my beter klink in ’n wêreldtaal” (210)]. A moment like this is untranslatable. Indeed, part of me feels, I should have quoted these lines only in Afrikaans. For to achieve its full effect, *Agaat* must be experienced as straining the limits of that minority language: the very medium it so brilliantly deploys.

Yet, as we have seen, *Agaat* is also a novel that works against the very idea of a linguistically defined ethno-nationalism from the inside – and it therefore also insists on being translated. It is as paradoxical as Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream*: a work whose meaning and emotional impact derives precisely from the way it strains against the inevitable silence of oil on canvas. In other words, the novel is, to recall that recurrent phrase “dubbelsinning gebore” (ambiguously born), closer to being “born translated” than my instinctive reaction to reading it would allow. Walkowitz’s argument, after all, shares Van Niekerk’s anti-nationalist project, even if it does so in a blithely academic way that registers nothing of the anguish of Van Niekerk’s position as a creative writer (one for whom the trance-like state that produces literary invention is hardly imaginable without the sensuous agency of the mother tongue). There is surely much to say, in these days of xenophobia and a global revival of, God forbid, white supremacy and Christian nationalism, for a critique of “collective possessiveness”: the belief, in Walkowitz’s formulation, that literature should originate in a native language, and that language and belonging are somehow dialectically entwined (21). Belonging is, after all, a particularly fraught and problematic term in the South African pastoral, as any reader of Coetzee’s *Boyhood* will know.³²

Walkowitz’s redeployment of Bakhtin’s thoughts on the heteroglossia of the novel is, moreover, particularly apt in the South African context. She reminds us, as does Mikhail Bakhtin, that even singular national literatures deploy many variants: the novel often requires a kind of inner translation, of the sort we see in the passages when *Agaat* scolds the other farmworkers in a variety of crude spoken Afrikaans that Milla herself seldom utters.³³ Even more poignant is Walkowitz’s argument, following the translation scholar Naoki Sakai, that the concept of the mother tongue “misconstrues the relationship between

birthplace and fluency, and between fluency and social belonging” (166). There can be something highly prescriptive in such a conception (and racist, as we see in Milla’s harsh execution of her self-imposed educational task) and it can serve to create feelings of alienation in those who speak their first language in nonstandard ways.

Of this possibility – nay, historical fact – no-one is more aware than Van Niekerk. In her lament at the abolition of Afrikaans at Stellenbosch, she writes equally passionately about “the bloody-minded way in which the white Nationalists exalted their ‘Algemeen-Beskaafde Afrikaans’ [‘Generally-Civilized Afrikaans’ – something akin to ‘Received Pronunciation’ in English], not only forcing it down the throats of black school pupils in the seventies, but also excising and alienating, in the name of all kinds of ridiculous purisms, half of their own tongue, i.e., the wider Western, Southern and Northern Cape Afrikaans variants during apartheid” (Van Niekerk). The failure to include these variants is clearly one of the decisive reasons for Van Niekerk’s dim assessment of Afrikaans’s future survival: a standard version of the language became elevated as “whites-only” property, with the result that many of its speakers would not step up to defend it, when push came to shove.

And to this we can even add two further considerations, the first of which also resonates with Walkowitz’s broad argument in *Born Translated*. Van Niekerk’s work has, after all, been translated – and into many languages. The English versions of both novels were the result of a process of intimate exchange and fruitful conversation with both Michiel Heyns and Leon de Kock, the translator of *Triomf*; and these translations, in turn, have yielded very interesting critical discussions, not least on the subject of Heyns’s decision to render something of the intensely allusive quality of Van Niekerk’s novel by weaving in echoes of English poetry, especially the work of T. S. Eliot.³⁴ This strategy is open to criticism, of course, but it certainly amplifies Walkowitz’s point that an emphasis on translation and transnational reception requires us to adjust our conception of world literature as a process – not just a container of important books (think of our seven elephants) that everyone should read. Moreover, there is surely a sense in which *Agaat*’s formal experimentation – in punctuation, in typography, in difficult, often impenetrable stream-of-consciousness passages – can be seen as a very deliberate way of blocking any unreflective native competency. Far from merely adding to the literary prestige of Afrikaans literature – showing, say, that one can be as sophisticated and challenging as James Joyce in beautiful Afrikaans – the novel, as it were, translates and foreignizes itself from start to end.

This, then, is how we may grasp *Agaat* as a limit text: it hovers between the untranslatable and the born-translated, between the Overberg and the world. And this is, I would argue, where its greatness lies: where it marks, perhaps more clearly than any other contemporary novel I know, the fulcrum between the national and the transnational, between an intimate locatedness and free circulation.

As to the dilemma of the author, poised between the two unacceptable options of the romantic ethn-nationalist shaman, who conjures magic in her mother tongue, and the nomad academic: this remains much more fraught. Gerrit Olivier captures this perfectly at the conclusion of his thoughtful essay on *Agaat*. It is true, he says, following Van Niekerk herself, that the shamanic option cannot be revitalized in a thoroughly disenchanted world. But the anthropologist academic, while perhaps more at home in a globalized world, hardly seems appealing, as he sits alone, in front of his cozy fireplace in Canada with his out-of-place South African memento, *Agaat*’s ram’s horn, as little more than a mantelpiece souvenir. And Van Niekerk’s understanding of the marginalized, dangerous, and wildly creative family reject, condemned to the backroom of the master’s house, gives a further reason why: “What kind of artist”, she asks, “can be effective in a world where the rich north (the masters) helps keep up the systematic poverty and violence in the south (the backroom children)?” [“Watter sort kunstenaar kan effektief wees in ’n wereld waarin die ryk noorde (die meesters) die sistematies armoede en geweld in die suide (die agterkamerkinders) help instandhou?” (116)].

The image is potent in its political implications: to emerge from that backroom of the minority language would involve an implicit capitulation to the unequal structures of the global economy (which, after all, also encompass the business of letters in terms of which translation – even in Walkowitz’s thoughtful reconsideration – becomes something of a rational choice for literary success.) The only way out Van Niekerk can envision is an impossible one, but one that arises insistently in the

most poetic passages of *Agaat* and also in her critical writing. It involves the shamanistic conjuring of a kind of primal translation, one that relays meanings, not, as Umberto Eco would have it, between two encyclopedias,³⁵ but between the word and the world. I close with Van Niekerk's risky, impossible, and moving evocation of this practice:

The shaking loose of language as an independent materiality lies in the practice of the writer which, by way of speaking, can be termed shamanistic. Are shamans not figures who conjure up a "foreign tongue or music" to seduce things and beasts and spirits to step out of themselves and appear more fully? To briefly incarnate the shaman-figure, who finds expression not in his own language, but in *theirs*? In what [Wilma] Stockenström might call "the language of reed and rushes"?³⁶ I mean: from what human insight does the conception of a god like Orpheus originate? The end of the matter, as far as I am concerned, is the irreducible mystery of cloud and stone and white-bellied stonechat; these are the unfathomable such-nesses that chase the tongue from the mouth in search of nomenclature, again and again for time everlasting. It is ultimately the desire to rise above one's own boundedness and facticity and to—shamanistically—commune with these other beings that moves writers and poets to do such strange things with words. (154-155)³⁷

An escape from the writer's dilemma *is*, then, imaginable for Van Niekerk, but not in the cultural knowledges referenced and meticulously curated in the chiasmic form of a simultaneously encyclopedic and counter-encyclopedic novel. There we will find limits, impossible choices; there we eventually run into the banalities of circulation, necessary translation, and the literary marketplace. And yet these pages, as Greg Forster so beautifully phrases it, may also retain a kind of "weak messianic power": utopian forms of expression and knowledge, discoverable precisely, in Van Niekerk's case, in the reluctance to exit from the backroom of the minority language and in the stubborn cultivation "of an untimely relation to contemporary practice" and fashion (224).

Notes

1. I warmly acknowledge the encouragement of friends and colleagues: Derek Attridge, Greg Forster, Michael Fuchs, Lucy Graham, Marius Swart, Hedley Twidle, and the excellent editors of this volume. In this essay I will be referring to both the English and Afrikaans versions of the novel (occasionally also using my own translations, where I disagree with published version) – thereby perhaps adding to the abiding effect of tautology. Longer Afrikaans passages will appear in the notes, to avoid disruption for the journal's mostly anglophone readers; the English page references are to the slightly shorter US edition, which is easier to find and to search.
2. "A novel," she says in a remarkable essay, "can be regarded as a kind of current account, open for deposits and withdrawals, transfers and embezzlement, and of course bankruptcies and refusing any totalizing and closing deposit of meaning that can be imposed on the text" ("Kind in die Agterkamer" 102, my translation). With regard to *Agaat*, she writes that she tried with all her might to accomplish ambiguities and layeredness ["dubbelsinnigheid en gelaagdheid"] – precisely in order to thwart a closing interpretation (103). Elsewhere, in her essay on the language debates at Stellenbosch, she emphasizes the possibility of undermining identity, totality, and closure as one of the aims in her teaching of Afrikaans literature ("Language debate"). See also Burger's "Om kommunikasie aan die gang te kry," which explains this *ars poetica* well.
3. See Heyns, "Irreparable Loss and Exorbitant Gain: On Translating *Agaat*," for commentary on his rationale for using echoes from Eliot (to create a sense of the novel's densely allusive character) and Van Niekerk's own engagement with *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* during the writing of *Agaat* (131-32).
4. See Michael Titlestad's fine account of this affective-temporal structure in "South African End Times."
5. Van Niekerk's position on the dangers that a utilitarian, monolingual, profit-oriented rationality holds for the future of higher education is not that far from that articulated by J. M. Coetzee in his earlier essay "Citizen and Critic." Van Niekerk makes it quite clear that, say, the poetry of Gerald Manley Hopkins is not "Globish": his dynamic, distorted idiosyncratic language is incomprehensible to the speakers of that flattened tongue. At stake, in other words, is not English as such, but English as a banal lingua franca of global capitalism and the business-managed university. See Van Niekerk, "Language debates." Afrikaans too, as she says to Willie Burger, must be taken out of its "bloot funksionele dagpak" [merely functional business suit] if it is to reach new discoveries, (Burger, "So-hede" 153).
6. I am thinking here, of course, of Rebecca Walkowitz's monograph of that title, which I will discuss further in the final section.
7. See here Van Niekerk, "Die Kind in die Agterkamer"; also her interview with Burger, "So-hede," 154. I want to thank Gerrit Olivier for drawing my attention to this essay of Van Niekerk's; he in turn, acknowledges my 2010 lecture as a source for his meditations. In fact, his article, "Die 'einde' van die romantiese kunstenaar?," already

casts *Agaat* as a limit text (although Olivier does not use the term) in which the novel's function as intensely poetic national allegory begins to slide into – or gesture toward – a different, more transnational, more distanced modality. I build on his closing insights in light of subsequent scholarship.

8. Pieterse has even designated Van Niekerk's verbally strenuous and erudite poetry collection, *Kaar*, as encyclopedic.
9. For a discussion of Van Niekerk as a late modernist, see [Barnard](#), 93-97. The idea of the limit text is one that has been put forward in interesting ways by Hedley Twidle in his monograph on South African nonfiction. The works that suggest the term for him are Ronald Suresh Roberts's *No Cold Kitchen: A Biography of Nadine Gordimer*, Mark Gevisser's *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred*, and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. The vast biographies by Roberts and Gevisser mark, in Twidle's reading, a pivotal moment of cross-racial reading: Roberts, the black legal scholar, authoritatively and imaginatively represents Gordimer, the white novelist; Gevisser, the white historian, authoritatively and imaginatively represents Mbeki, the black politician). But this kind of enterprise, no longer possible in the current climate of identitarian politics, finds its apex in their monumental accomplishments. Coetzee's novel, a defining and internationally acclaimed post-apartheid literary work, similarly represents an apex: of sophisticated literary performance, replete with irony, complex free-indirect voicing, and erudite cultural allusions. But it simultaneously marks a moment beyond which that kind of literary work becomes unwelcome socio-politically and culturally outworn (it is no accident that Coetzee's novel includes meditations on the incapacity of the English language to narrate certain kind of South African lives and experiences). As Twidle puts it: "its complex and uneven reception history might be seen as indexing a process by which cultural authority and energy ebbs from a certain 'high' strain of literary fiction toward a new premium placed on 'honesty,' 'true confessions,' and personal affect within the public sphere (all those modes of self-expression that Coetzee was so skeptical of as a critic, but which have now broken through into a new currency and validity)." See [Twidle](#), 139 and 194.
10. See; [Saint-Amour](#), *Tense Future*, 205-209; also [Loots](#), Chapter 2.
11. A very useful framework for understanding the figure of Jakkie de Wet is suggested by Katie Trumpener's contribution to the 2006 collection, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, entitled "World Music, World Literature: A Geopolitical View." Trumpener proposes that (unlike the nationalist ethnomusicological ventures of Brentano and Von Arnim, one can discover in Johann Gottfried Herder's *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* a more transnational, anti-imperial ethnomusicological model for comparative literary studies. She suggests that ethnomusicology as a field (especially in the inclusive modalities fostered by the rise of CDs with explanatory brochures) models a more open, collaborative transnationalism, one that literary criticism, hampered by the finitude of linguistic competence, can only posit as an ideal. [Trumpener's](#) imaginative essay can productively be kept in mind when we turn to the question of translation and the multilingual conclusion of the novel in the final section of this essay.
12. In their delightful polemic, "World Lite," the editors of *N+1* declare: "The sound of modern literature, including almost all modern works later promoted to World Literature, has usually been that of someone speaking, or attempting to be heard, in a nation-size room." Their further comments resonate with writers like J. M. Coetzee and Marlene van Niekerk and their South African reception: "In practice, this was a room intimate enough that the writer could *give offense*." Afrikaans writers absolutely thrived on such national offense, from the Sestigters (the sixties generation) up to and including Van Niekerk herself (but arguably not beyond).
13. In her dissertation, [Loots](#) also makes this point in connection to *Agaat* (33).
14. It is interesting to note that in some survey courses on contemporary Afrikaans literature "pre-Agaat" and "post-Agaat" is an organizing principle. (Personal communication, Marius Swart.)
15. See, e.g., [Visagie](#).
16. A bold provocation, I know, but one that readers might see as productively polemical, along the lines of Neil Lazarus's insistence, by way of explanatory exaggeration, that there is only one author in the postcolonial literary canon: Salman Rushdie (*The Postcolonial Unconscious* 22). Or perhaps I am making the opposite move, because while Lazarus is arguing for radical broadening, I am exaggerating for the sake of a kind of experimental narrowing. I am, of course, not literally claiming that there have been no novels written in Afrikaans since *Agaat*: indeed, it is worth bearing in mind that when [Jan Steyn](#) asked Van Niekerk whether Afrikaans was, as the prolific author Karel Schoeman had predicted, a dying literature, she responded by referring to the innovative work of writers like S. J. Naudé and Willem Anker. Schoeman, she declares, was far off the mark when he called his 2002 autobiography *Die laaste Afrikaanse boek [The Last Afrikaans Book]*: even he continued writing in the language. And yet, I would say the work of Naudé especially is "Afrikaans" in quite a different way, operating, as it does, in a much more transnationalized field of circulation. *Agaat* operates as the tipping point where the national impulse self-destructs, where the walls of the nation-sized room I have spoken about collapse. A similar argument, pitched less riskily, is put forward in Janine Linde's fine dissertation, which argues that a transnational phase of Van Niekerk's career follows her three "South African" works: *Triomf*, *Agaat*, and *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W*. The later writings are not necessarily apolitical, she suggests, but are not longer legible as national allegories. Van Niekerk has explained to me that she started another novel of this kind and could not continue, because the desire to offer some sort of national allegory persisted, but the white writer's

authority to put forward such forms of representation had been eroded in the era of Zuma and the student protests of 2016.

17. Leon Schuster is the maker of a series of popular South African comic movies.
18. Lou Gehrig's disease (also known as ALS or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), a motor neuron disease, is the perfect affliction for the novelist to inflict on Milla: while leaving mental and sensory functioning intact (essential for the artifice of the stream-of-consciousness narration), it affects almost every aspect of physical existence, paralyzing both voluntary and involuntary muscles, and requiring a total plan for its management. The disease offers a perfect excuse for so many of the work's formal qualities: first of all, it is fatal, so that the novel, preoccupied, as I will show, with the idea of closure, containment, and endings, does move toward (and start with) an inevitable ending. The illness is, further, one in which mental and sensory capacities are undiminished, even though the sufferer is increasingly helpless. This activates the novel's postcolonial thematics of voice: who can speak for whom, etc. Milla's "voice" is unavoidable, but inaudible in the moment of diegesis.
19. Bakhtin, Chapter 5. I love Johan Rossouw's description of these pages as an "afkaksessie" – a shitting-out session, both in the absolutely literal sense and also in the sense of a scolding session, a drubbing.
20. We might note here **Leon de Kock's** argument that recent South African literature has largely left behind the modernist impulses (what he calls "underplotting"), in favor of genre fiction and nonfiction. *Agaat* could be taken as marking this limit as well; it is no accident Van Niekerk has at times announced that the country's predicament requires nonfiction and truth-telling rather than imagination. On this see **Twidle**, "In a Country," 5.
21. See here **Heyns's** comments on the discussion with the author around his new and poetic translation of the hymn, in "Irreparable Loos and Exorbitant Gains," 133.
22. **Greg Forster** brilliantly makes the case for *Agaat's* escape: for the way in which the novel's epilogue, about which I will say more shortly, can be read as Van Niekerk's effort to invent a language in which *Agaat* might be properly known and to point out how such a language can never find voice in the dialectic of mistress and servant. *Agaat's* own version of the novel's plot, her story, recalled verbatim in these pages involves a "yet to be realized, utopian future beyond the reversible coersions" – the chiasmus, as I might term it – "of mimicry." See *Critique and Utopia*, 181.
23. In her strange essay on the backroom children in her novels (*Agaat* and *Lambert Benade in Triomf*), Van Niekerk wonders if she has, as it were, imprisoned them at the end of the books, just as a convenient narrative finale, or if there is something more at stake: viz. the demise of the possibilities of a national novel and a national artist ("Kind in die Agerkamer" 116).
24. **Sanders**, "Disgrace," 368-69.
25. "Ek wou daarmee iets sê omtrent begin en einde. Deur die begin in 'n proloog te parodieer sê jy die begin is nie werklik die begin nie, net so is die einde nie werklik die einde nie – jy dink maar net dit eindig daar. Die moment van closure word gekompliseer en dit word 'n aperture" (**Smith**).
26. It is essential to grasp the fundamental logic of the plot in this light: *Agaat* is a substitute, fulfills the lack of a child for Milla until the birth of Jakkie; at which point she is given the three books, the three compendia, to make up for the loss of a mother.
27. See, again, **Visagie**.
28. Helize van Vuuren offers an interesting reading of these closing lines, which presents, in greater detail, a similar interpretation: she points out that the specific Danishness of the Petersen poem, e.g. the closing line "i den danske sommernat" [in the Danish summer night] is not included in Van Niekerk's fragments, suggesting a move from a national toward a more transnational inclination. A fuller quotation of the McNeice poem (especially the lines: "World is crazier and more of it than we think,/Incorrigibly plural") would imply something similar: an exit or opening from the national to the global. **Van Vuuren**, 509.
29. See here **Michiel Heyns's** wonderful insight into the novel's deliberate foregrounding of the (im)possibility of translation and his eventual rendering of these key passages. "Irreparable Loss and Exorbitant Gain," 126-7.
30. **Jackson and De Kock** observe that "Afrikaans literature . . . might find its greatest moments of worldliness not in being seamlessly synchronized with great planetary consciousness, but in its very dislocation, its global isolation." See their online conversation in *LitNet* about Afrikaans and world literature.
31. Or, in the more folksy, Scottish online translation: "O croinklie crowlie watter-thingie,/croont wi beret sae bleck."
32. I am, of course, thinking of the delicate passages in the memoir where the boy, John, feels he can never say that the Karoo farm he loves "belongs" to him; but thinks that it some way he belongs to the farm; at stake is, of course, a child's tenuous, but sensitive understanding of the problem of colonial landownership. See **Coetzee**, *Boyhood*, 96.
33. A sampling in my translation of *Agaat's* colloquial invective: "Sie jy op my skoene pie, hotnotjie? Staan syntoe, hou jou bek en sluk of ek skroef jou pielietjie op soos vliegpapier." (298-299) ["You freaking dare piss on my shoes, little hotnot? Step aside, shut your trap, and swallow, or I roll your little dick up like flypaper."]
34. The difficult art of translating Van Niekerk has generated several fascinating articles, including those by **Heyns**; **De Kock**; **Van Der Vlies**; **Attridge**. These become part of the work, if you will, as it enters the domain of world literature and transnational circulation. Especially apt are **Attridge's** comments on the reader's particular idioculture and the idea that the work's singularity is in fact multiple and includes its translations – as well as "translation" by means of commentary, like the present essay (399, 405).

35. From Eco, *Mouse and Rat: Translation as Negotiation*, cited in Heyns, 127.
36. The phrase from Stockenström, expressing a yearning for a natural, Edenic language, free of relations of domination and submission, is echoed in the novel's climactic and most beautiful passage: "Heimlik het jy gedink, as die nuwe hemel en die nuwe aarde'n leë ligte plek sou wees sonder wanklank of misverstand, dan sou jy ten spyte van alles die lewe met Agaat op Grootmoedersdrift verkies het bo die saligheid, met rondom julle, in plaas van die hemelse leegte, die berge en riviere en heuwelrûe van die Overberg. En julle sou onder mekaar 'n genoegsame taal uitwerk met geharde musikale woorde waarin julle kon argumenteer en mekaar kon vind. Riet-en-ruigtetaal. Want, het jy gedink, wat sal die geluk wees van mekaar vind sonder dat julle vir mekaar verlore was?" (575) I am struck here how these meditations still emphasize the importance of translation. Earlier on Milla thinks: "Wie sou vir julle tolk?" ["Who would translate for you?" (my translation: Heyns opts for the more multivalent for "interpret.")]
37. "Die losjaag van taal as 'n selfstandige materialiteit, lê miskien in die praktyke van die skrywer wat by wyse van spreke sjamanisties genoem kan word. Is sjamaans nie figure wat 'vreemde taal/musiek' losspook ten einde dinge en diere en geeste te verlei om 'uit hulleself te tree' en te 'verskyn' nie? Of kortstondig in die sjamaan te inkarneer sodat hy hom, in plaas van in sy eie taal, in hulle taal kan 'uitdruk' nie? Wat Stockenström sal noem 'riet-en-ruigtetaal'? Ek bedoel: watter menslike gewaarwording is dit dink jy wat aan die oorsprong lê van die idee van 'n god soos Orpheus? Die uiteinde van die saak is dat wat my betref dit die onreduseerbare misterie is van wolk en die klip en die witiesbontrokke; dit is hierdie onpeilbare so-hede wat die tong uit die mond jaag agter benoeming aan, elke keer weer, tot in ewigheid. En dit is uiteindelik die verlange om 'n mens se eie begrensing en faktisiteit te ontstyg en deel te neem (sjamanisties te partisipeer) aan hierdie ander wesens wat myns insiens die skrywers en digters om so raar te doen met woorde" (154-155).

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