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Theft and flight in the Arts

Inaugural lecture
10 November 2006

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‘Too heavy to fly, surprised by the rain. We fished them from the mud and blew the sticky edges of their wings apart until we saw a spot to hold them by. Cautiously, cautiously we divided the wings, like wet tissue paper, so they would not cling to each other’.

Marlene van Niekerk, *Agaat* (2006: 540)

Dear Rector, dear audience,

Today I am going to take up the office of Professor of Art, Culture and Diversity at the Faculty of Humanities, subfaculty of Arts, at Utrecht University.

Assuming such an office is a significant event in the life of an academic and I am glad and grateful that you are here to take part in this rite of passage. An inaugural lecture presents an orator with the opportunity to elaborate at length on her own field, in this case the Humanities, before a large audience. That is what I would like to do this afternoon. In outlining my position as a Humanities scholar, I will let two South African novels guide me. Both novels have engendered moral and political debates in the Humanities and have raised a number of questions that I would like to address this afternoon and in the future. They are prototypical of my contribution to the practice and theory of the Humanities. The first novel I am referring to is *Disgrace* (1999) by J.M. Coetzee and the second is *Agaat* (2006) by Marlene van Niekerk. I have written about *Disgrace* before. However, *Agaat* was published in Afrikaans last year and the Dutch translation was only released a few months ago. For the past six years I have occupied myself with the worlds evoked by Coetzee's novel. *Agaat*, on the other hand, is relatively new to my work. The international reception of this novel is barely underway, but it is already apparent to me that *Agaat* will have me in its sway in the years to come. Today I will argue that both novels testify to an impressive imagination that is characteristic of all prominent artistic expression. If we decide to use concepts like high and low culture, or distinguish between art and amusement, and that is something I certainly wish to do as will become clear later, those works that continue to feed our thoughts, conversations and emotions belong to great art, as defined by Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison (Morrison 1992). Great literary works open up worlds that resist time. As opposed to amusement, these works do not only reveal something about the

time and place in which they are functioning, but their singularity also has the potential to appeal over and over again to successive generations.

I am not claiming too much when I argue that both *Disgrace* and *Agaat* will turn out to aspire to such greatness. Both novels raise problems that foreground the limits of our judgment and imaginative powers. *Disgrace* does so through the story of the white South African literary scholar David Lurie who makes the mistake of starting an affair with a coloured female student. He is subsequently dismissed and when he seeks peace and quiet on the farm of his daughter Lucy, both of them fall victim to violence by blacks. In *Agaat* the reader witnesses the complex interaction between the dying white farmer's wife Milla and her black carer Agaat. Milla is paralysed and unable to talk. Throughout the novel she tries to communicate with Agaat by moving her eyes. The two women, who are condemned to each other as patient and carer in the narrative present, share a heartrending and complex past. This past slowly unravels bit by bit when Agaat reads fragments of Milla's dairy to Milla on her deathbed.

Both novels embody a search, not so much for the right answers as for a state of susceptibility to the right questions, and have become the subject of intense national and international debate about the exact relationship between literature and national building. The nature of this debate is exemplary of the type of interpretation prevalent within the Humanities at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The cultural field surrounding *Disgrace* and *Agaat* gives me all the more reason for a further reformulation of my ideas about the discipline of the Humanities. I will propose coalitions between various forms of the Humanities in order to delve deeper into the connections between art, culture and diversity.

J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* appeared in 1999, exactly a year after the publication of the massive five-volume *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of*

South Africa Report. Nearly every critic noticed that the story of the downfall of Professor David Lurie in *Disgrace* could be read as a description of the upheaval of a country in transition. As I mentioned earlier, the representation of this upheaval drew considerable national and international attention and sparked a continuous debate about Coetzee's pitch-black vision about the near future of South Africa, according to his readers. The fact that there were clear-cut differences between black, white and gender-specific interpretations of the novel was a striking feature of this heated debate. Black readers and critics characterised the penetrating images of black violence as unproductive and stereotypical, while white readers saw the way in which the white Lucy takes her historical colonial guilt upon her shoulders as far too fatalistic (see also Krog 2005). Finally, feminist readings criticised the affirmation of the connection between passivity and femininity. For instance the literary scholar Elleke Boehmer, who grew up in South Africa, wondered whether reconciliation in the context of a violent history is possible if women, in this case the white Lucy or the wife of the black Petrus, are still expected to bear gender-specific inequality and suffer in silence (Boehmer 2002).

The novel *Agaat* was published five years later, in 2004. Its author is that other giant of South African literature, Marlene van Niekerk. This novel has also fallen prey to a debate about the kind of things Van Niekerk tries to say about the future of South Africa. Since Van Niekerk speaks Afrikaans and also writes in that language, the South African reception of her novel concentrates specifically on the place of the endangered Afrikaner minority culture in her imagination of post-apartheid South Africa. The politically conservative wing in particular blames her for squandering the Afrikaner heritage. In the *Vrije Afrikaan* the cultural philosopher Johann Rossouw accuses Van Niekerk of pleading for the 'selfopheffing' (voluntary elimination) of Afrikaner culture in favour of an opportunistic association with a globalising English-speaking South African cultural elite (Rossouw 2005). The Africanist and scholar of Dutch

Andries Visagie challenged Rossouw in an essay titled 'Agaat as cultural archive for the future' in the digital South African journal *Litnet* (Visagie 2005). Visagie agrees with the view that *Agaat* is a comment on the position of Afrikaner culture, but he is slightly more sensitive to the novel's complexity. He is at a loss to understand how Rossouw can argue that Van Niekerk treats Afrikaner culture as a lost cause in *Agaat*. The novel informs the reader at length about the richness of Afrikaner folksongs, proverbs, children's rhymes, crafts, agricultural methods, sound farmer's wisdom and other traditions still available to the Afrikaans-speaking South African. This is no 'selfpuffing', but the acknowledgment of a subcultural canon. What *Agaat* does undermine, according to Visagie, is the self-evident legitimacy and status of this cultural heritage in the Afrikaner ideology. This status needs to be reformulated and that is why the novel may function as an archive of the future.

In the Netherlands the academic reception of this recently translated novel has not been documented yet, but the journalistic reception of *Agaat* sees the novel's allegorical meaning as the most significant one. In an admiring review in *de Volkskrant* (12 May 2006) Fred de Vries writes for instance: 'The strong psychological plot makes *Agaat* suitable for readers who do not know that much about South Africa. But the story goes far beyond that level. *Agaat* is an allegory of Afrikaner history of the past fifty years', whereupon he carefully connects the dates of the family story to historical facts. The birth of Agaat coincides with the institutionalisation of apartheid in 1948, and the birth date of another central character recalls the Sharpeville protest instigated by schoolchildren in 1960. De Vries sees the refined symbiotic power play between the white Milla and the black Agaat as a metaphor of racial and political relations in South Africa. Milla's progressive muscular disease is symbolical of the exhaustion of farmland and the decline of Afrikaner hegemony. And so on.

Art and community building

The cultural and literary critics mentioned above are aware that in these specific novels art and political and historical reality have entered into a cogent relationship. It is of course true that works of art made in a period of political transition have a self-evident urgency and significance that other art cannot claim. But even though this theme of political transition will play an important role in my research, it is not my main concern this afternoon. In less pressing political circumstances, cultural artefacts also present opportunities for identification by building communities and excluding and including groups in the process. In the past decades, various strands in the Humanities have emphasized the identity constituting effects of art and its concomitant inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms. More generally, art and culture are seen as important producers of cultural memory in any context (see for instance Bal and others 1999). The underlying idea is that cultural artefacts come about in a power play of global and local developments and that, as a sign system and a text, the work of art has an openness and mobility that Bakhtin and Kristeva have termed 'intertextuality' (Bakhtin 1982, Kristeva 1974). Their concept of intertextuality does not limit itself exclusively to literary examples. Every sign system is a transposition of other sign systems. That is to say that every text consists of echoes of dialogues with other texts which make the attribution of meaning a never-ending project. A reader performs a text like a musician performs a score (see also van Heusden 2001). The performance determines the attribution of meaning and reinforces some strands and ignores others. Thus, in order to do justice to the intertextual character of the artefact, texts can only be studied adequately from an interdisciplinary perspective. It is in the nature of things that interdisciplinarity is not a frivolous type of academic research, as critics of the Humanities frequently claim, but a necessary approach to an artefact or cultural phenomenon in all its complexity, an approach compelled by the research object itself. I do not wish to imply that every artistic discipline has

been influenced by these developments within the Humanities, but it is certainly the case that the study of texts and images from an intertextual and interdisciplinary approach has become dominant within literary studies and film studies in particular. A work-immanent approach is also losing ground in musicology and art history. This is an important general change in the Humanities. Aesthetic experience is no longer studied in an exclusively text-internal context, but is also connected to material, political and historical circumstances.

Work done from this perspective has resulted in valuable research and changed many a classic literary work's meaning forever. Who could fail to recognise the inextricable relation between the construction of freedom and humanity in Mark Twain's great American novel *Huckleberry Finn* and the slavery of nigger Jim after Toni Morrison's lectures in American literature at Harvard University (see Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, 1992)? Who is still willing to present Jane Eyre as an unproblematic feminist heroine since Gayatri Spivak showed us that Jane's striving for economic independence, so applauded by the second feminist wave, was enabled by the unrestrained imperialism and the slavery of nineteenth-century Britain? (Spivak 1985).

In the past decades, teaching and research in feminist cultural criticism in general and the research of the Department of Gender Studies Utrecht in particular have been strongly anchored in this tradition of critical interpretations of culture. Our intertextual approaches proved to be fruitful both to research into popular culture and to investigations into art. However, a specific practice has crept into the enthusiasm of committed Humanities scholars that primarily use the concept of intertextuality as ideological criticism. Many a committed research project in the Humanities is in danger of reducing popular culture and artistic expressions to a message about the construction of gender, ethnicity, nationality and/or sexuality, thereby paying too little attention to the specific nature of the medium and its formal effects. Anyone approaching the artistic

domain with a clear-cut political agenda immediately risks losing sight of what constitutes the specificity of art and literature if a first reading does not lead to the political effect desired by the reader. A few years ago, Jonathan Culler, a worthy advocate of intertextual interpretations of art and culture, concluded that, as a literary scholar, he had been so busy conceptualising gender, race, identity and subjectivity that he forgot to mention literariness in his prominent introductions to literary theory (Culler 2000). Somehow this practice mirrors the white, black and gendered readings of Coetzee quoted at the beginning of my story and the anxiety about the loss of the Afrikaner cultural heritage as a result of Van Niekerk's latest novel. I would like to attempt to redress this imbalance, which was also registered by other scholars of culture such as Gayatri Spivak (2003), Jonathan Culler (2000), Judith Butler (2000) and Derek Attridge (2004). I believe that what ought to be part of the Diversity in Art and Culture research programme is a synthesis of the work-immanent approach, so deservedly criticised in the past, and the contextual approach to art and culture, so rightly taken on board. In other words, I would like to reassess the fruitfulness of the work-immanent approach in order to change and enrich the intertextual approach and avoid the risks inherent to identity politics in the interpretation of art. Form is what defines a work of art; form constitutes its singularity par excellence, which is why it will always escape being appropriated by identity politics. I have no wish to deny that issues of identity politics may be understood through and illustrated by a work of art. However, the fictive and imaginary character of art does imply that the way in which it represents political and historical themes deserves explicit methodological attention.

Literature as the representation of diversity and difference

Let's return to the two contentious South African novels. Apart from the vehement discussion about national identity caused by these two novels, the most conspicuous similarity in the reception of both *Disgrace* and *Agaat* is that

they inevitably seize their reader by the throat. I have read and listened to academic and journalistic commentaries about the novels and none of them remained indifferent.

That is a significant literary phenomenon in itself because a good plot does not automatically generate a good story. Experienced travellers have many stories to tell. But sometimes less experienced travellers have better stories to tell simply because they are better storytellers. Therefore, this ought to be the primary focus of literary and cultural criticism. We are living in a multimedial world increasingly dominated by a digital visual culture. How is it possible, then, that in this kind of world a written text can seize you, touch you, become part of your consciousness? Critics like Susan Sontag and Walter Benjamin would have said perhaps that this is possible because literature is a work of art. Every work of art has a unique aura that leads to concentration and contemplation (Benjamin 1935, Sontag 1964). Roland Barthes calls a similar effect in photography the *punctum*, which refers to what touches the art critic but withdraws from the medium itself, from its immediate meaning (Barthes 1980). Asking this kind of question changes the focus from the meaning to the signifier, to the materiality of the work. In the case of literature, such materiality is the specific literariness of the work.

But what is literariness? Literary Studies has frequently asked this question and has tried to answer it from various perspectives but has not found a satisfactory answer yet. If I were to attempt describing it here, I would say that literariness generally manifests itself where language creates an awareness or consciousness of 'the real'. This term, the real, originates from linguistics, as inspired by French psychoanalysis, and, like aura and *punctum*, it refers to that which has an effect, but which is not embedded in the symbolic system. In other words, in this context 'the real' refers both to the deficit and the surplus, i.e. excess, of the medium. From this perspective, literariness is language that considers its own performance. I have to admit that this sounds rather vague at

first, but in the past decades semioticians of culture have managed to find a connection between consciousness of the real and the attribution of meaning (Culler 1981, 1983). Awareness of the real develops through difference and divergence. People experience the real at the moment the world appears to them in unexpected ways. I would like to argue that the literary or artistic moment is the imitation of that process. Thus, it is the mimesis of the unexpected instead of the imitation of a familiar reality which creates awareness. Paradoxically, deviant linguistic forms make us aware of our conventionally coded ways of dealing with the world. The nature and effects of literature are different from other social and cultural practices because of this specific form of semiosis. The mimesis of the divergent is also responsible for the fact that literature, but also art in general, can focus on absolutely everything. But whatever it deals with, its most important effect is always the production of consciousness. The consciousness of difference. Literature is a performance of the consciousness of alterity, of the other, that which is new, of difference. Literariness comprehends the revelation of the world in language. The potential to create new realities, not by giving us what we want, but by unraveling and deconstructing our expectations. Literature does not present us with solutions for problems related to identity politics or other questions, but considers the questions themselves by telling stories, by situating characters in diverse places and times.

Disgrace

How does this process take place in *Disgrace* and *Agaat*? Which questions do Coetzee and Van Niekerk raise by foregrounding certain characters, places and times? How does the academic analysis of culture that I am advocating raise these texts above reductive readings that are exclusively based on identity politics and/or on allegory? Let's start with Coetzee: in his description of the rebellious attitude of David Lurie, a man who refuses to confess in order to

receive redemption, Coetzee seems to be asking questions about the specific characteristics of language.

Which languages are available to us? What are the effects of language on the relation of the subject to itself and on the regulation of human interaction? The investigation into the possibilities and limits of language motivates every plot development in David Lurie's story. The most prominent example of this is Lurie's rather thoughtless seduction of a student. He does so just because he feels like it. This is of course an unacceptable act and he is summoned before a committee of enquiry, consisting of his nearest colleagues. If he is willing to tell the committee that he sees the error of his ways, that he has transgressed academic conventions, the problem will blow over and order will be restored. You tell us your story and we will offer you redemption. That is the function of language as an exchange, as a trade. Lurie is aware of the reductive effects of the communicative function of language and this unsettles the self-evident nature of it in this specific context.

An exchange or trade presupposes an abstract equality based on the exchange of similar or equal objects. An exchange leaves no room for difference. Lurie knows very well that his deed has been transgressive, that its consequences are incalculable and cannot be rectified. He wishes to view the incident in terms of irreconcilable positions and interests and refuses to cooperate in proceedings in which he is summoned by people who, for reasons of power politics, have a stake in his atonement. The committee wants Lurie to show self-awareness and regret, while they are not the ones who can alleviate him of his guilt. If Lurie himself does not know exactly what drove his actions ('I was a servant of Eros') how can his colleagues pass judgement on his behaviour and motives? Lurie seems to be saying that language as a means of communication and, thus, as an exchange allows him to confess guilt and to accept the consequences of his deeds. However, he does not feel it allows him to reveal his deepest motives unambiguously and express remorse. I will accept my

fall from grace, but I cannot rectify it with the help of purposeful language. And, thus, he accepts his dismissal.

It is of course tempting to read this lengthy reflection on the scope of language in relation to perpetrators and victims as a comment on the truth and reconciliation process that had finished just before the publication of *Disgrace*. It is in fact very difficult to read it any other way. Reports on the truth and reconciliation process not only focused on the stories of the victims of the apartheid regime but also, and especially, on the stories of the perpetrators. Perpetrators could tell their story to a special amnesty committee and receive amnesty providing they could demonstrate that their crimes were the result of political instead of racial motives, a distinction that in itself led to vehement debates (see, for example, Coetzee et al 1998). The Amnesty Committee was established after the installation of the general Truth Committees and focused exclusively on the interrogation of the perpetrators. The decisions of the Amnesty Committee were binding for both the TRC and the government. This aspect became a target of much criticism because of the relative ease with which the perpetrators could clear their conscience by simply telling a story (Mamdani 2001, Minow 1998).

However, there is a good reason to go beyond this broad contextual reading. The latter reduces the specific nature of *Disgrace* as a literary artefact and when we place Coetzee's novel in the more narrow context of his oeuvre another important thing becomes clear. His occupation with the performative effects of language is a theme that has played an important role in his novels and essays from his debut *Dusklands* (1974) onwards, preceding the work of the Truth Committee in South Africa by twenty years (see also Attridge 2005). Coetzee's impressive essay 'Confession and double thoughts' (1985) is the result of this interest in the performative effects of language. In this piece Coetzee is quite critical of any attempt to find the truth by means of a written or spoken confession and/or self-examination. In the essay he concludes that every

confession involves ‘double thoughts’, ulterior motives. He argues that the confessional process can never imply an unequivocal pursuit of truth and self-awareness because every revelation of a hidden truth also simultaneously serves another aim. In other words, the genre of confession leads to a paradoxical situation: the truth is not revealed, but rather disguised. Confessions are not infrequently meant to command sympathy and acceptance on the part of the listener/reader. The greater the offence, the greater and more deserving the sympathy. The significance of the confession does not lie in its historical referentiality, but in its pursuit of consistency in the act of speaking itself. The act of speaking *is* the truth of the confessor. Of course veracity may emerge in the process, but this contact with veracity is immediately undermined if the confession is aimed at convincing an audience. In his analysis of Dostoyevsky’s fictional confessions, Coetzee subsequently argues that truthfulness can only appear in the light of death or before God, i.e. at the moment the confession is no longer driven by self-preservation. A conscious pursuit of such a moment of truth automatically produces ulterior motives, ‘double thoughts’. And these double thoughts are irreconcilable with the univocity the truth is supposed to deliver. The conscious pursuit of truth is an impossibility. It is a matter of grace. Incidentally, it is only a small step to apply this criticism of the pursuit of veracity to the popular genre of reality television which reveals the profound motives and emotions of people struggling with a crisis or moral dilemma.

In the context of the pursuit of truth and the truthfulness of regretful perpetrators, the use of language as an unequivocal exchange - you tell your story and I will seal your fate - begs the question how justice can be done, what justice should look like. That question resurfaces even more prominently in the second half of Coetzee’s novel. The second half mirrors the plot of the first half. Lurie leaves Cape Town and moves in with his daughter Lucy who shares a farm in Salem, a small town on the Eastern Cape, with coloured employees. The apotheosis of this second part is the violence inflicted on father and daughter by

acquaintances of Lucy's black employee Petrus. Lurie wants to solve the injustice against his daughter in the same way he solved his own faux pas; through the law. He is not interested in regret or understanding the motives of the perpetrators but seeks the economy of the law. Offenders are punished with dismissal, a fine or detention. Again such an exchange makes it impossible to acknowledge that the histories and motives of the people concerned differ fundamentally and cannot be weighed equally. Petrus refuses to report his friends, because when it comes to settling bills a white person still owes a black person.

Lurie's daughter Lucy knows that this point of view is the reality she has to live with. She refuses to report the crime and even accepts the child born from the rape as a metaphor of her symbolic guilt to the country that her ancestors took from her rapists. She accepts Petrus' protection in exchange for a larger share of the farm. The white Lucy is generous and forgiving, similar to the TRC's request to the black population to give and forgive. Not an equal exchange, not a right, but a non-refundable offer. An offer implies a fundamental acknowledgment of difference, even irreconcilable difference.

Coetzee has been greatly criticised for this transition in the plot. However, an allegorical interpretation which takes as its only guide the mirror plot of *Disgrace* and is too eager to accept the referentiality of a post-apartheid South Africa screaming for a revelation of its future, ignores an important not to mention essential plot line. I am referring to the reversal that Lucy's rape generates in David Lurie's consciousness. This brings us to the merits of a work-immanent reading in the context of the intertextual attribution of meaning. In innumerable places following the dramatic events in *Salme*, the vocabulary of confession, guilt and awareness seeps into the text. Lurie realizes that he is able to embody the consciousness of the rapists, but not that of his daughter Lucy. He already knows that he is able to become a perpetrator, but he is unable to use his imagination to identify with the other sex. The irretrievable difference for Lurie

is not black versus white but man versus woman. This puts the white, black and gender-specific criticism of *Disgrace* in a wholly different perspective.

The estrangement between Lurie and his daughter Lucy increases because of Lurie's fruitless attempts to understand Lucy and convince her that she should move to a safer place. When Lucy informs him that she entirely accepts the consequences of the situation, refuses an abortion and renounces any claim of retribution, Lurie concludes that she is acting like a dog. She admits that this is true. However, acting like a dog does not offer Lucy passive resignation as Elleke Boehmer fears. Neither is it a programmatic solution to a problem, an end point, as some white critics inferred from the text. It is an opportunity to remain open to an experience of the present and maintain focus on the future. Lucy abandons her possessions and rights and prepares herself for a new beginning with unforeseen opportunities. In the end, her choice seems to emphasise that justice can only be expected from a symbolic system that refuses the economy of exchange and legal procedure.

In this context, it is indeed significant that the only way in which Lurie can be receptive to other positions than that of the offender of the law, i.e. the perpetrator, or the enforcer of the law, i.e. the father, is by putting himself in the service of animals: the absolute other, the non-human without language. Lurie is only able to find out that he does not understand his daughter Lucy - the other - not through veiled confessional language, or the exchange of the law and justice, but by entering the twilight zone, appropriately using staccato sentences, between language and non-language, between human and animal, white and black, man and woman. Lucy withdraws from his story just like Lurie withdrew earlier from the story of his colleagues who were pushing for his amnesty. He wants to take political and moral responsibility and is confronted with an irreconcilable difference. This awareness is a political effect of *Disgrace's* literariness, an effect, which in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, does not obscure the road to reconciliation so much as show the as yet irreconcilable

differences between political and historical pasts, thereby providing an insight into human interaction that may not be self-evident but is, indeed, 'real'. That is the connection between art, culture and diversity. The divergent story makes us aware of our conventional and coded ways of dealing with the world. It liberates the signifier from entrenched correlations of meaning, provides the work with wings and the attribution of meaning with new and potential coalition partners.

Agaat

The task I am accepting today is to focus attention on the relation between art, culture and diversity in the teaching and research programme of the Department of Gender Studies. Thus far I have argued for a very specific interpretation of the concept of diversity. In my own research and in the research of MA and PhD students under my supervision, diversity is not so much a politically correct concept that pays lip service to the experiences of women, migrant, blacks and other politically, socially and culturally marginalised people as the consequence of the fundamental singularity of visual and discursive works of art (see also Braidotti 2006). This singularity does not reside in an inviolable meaning hidden in the deep structure of the work, as a work-immanent approach would assume. Singularity resides in the complex of intertextual and contextual machinations. So in the case of the literary work its singular effect is created by the interplay of language, genre and literary tradition, as well as the cultural and geopolitical context of the work. I began my story with a brief sketch of the cultural and geopolitical context in which both *Disgrace* and *Agaat* have become part of a comparable cultural policy debate. I have shown that as a literary event *Disgrace* does more than participate in a political debate. In conclusion I would like to sketch briefly how *Agaat* differs from *Disgrace* as a literary event. Apart from imagining a country in transition, *Agaat* also foregrounds a whole other world. Thematically it is as grand and ambitious as *Disgrace*. It also enters into a dialogue with the concepts of language, justice and the law, the representation

of the intrinsically separate other and difference and its style and use of words is amazingly suggestive. While Coetzee is economic with language – his sentences are terse, rugged, disembodied, almost mathematical, leaving aside their lyrical textual effect - Marlene van Niekerk's novel *Agaat* is a fist-sized linguistic orgy, a blazing volcano of words, an excessive mix of styles and genres.

For that reason a description of the plot of this novel is in no way representative of its potential impact as a literary event. I will try nevertheless. More than forty years ago the white Milla inherited the settlement Grootmoedersdrift. She has ambitious plans for the land and the premises and masters traditional agricultural methods. In order to endure her loveless and childless marriage to Jak, Milla takes in the coloured Agaat as a foster child. She treats the neglected child like she treats the South African land: with traditional methods. She regards the child simultaneously as a small animal that can be transformed into a human being through discipline and punishment, as an enigma that needs to be deciphered and as a potential source of love, gratefulness and admiration that needs to be cherished. After twelve years Milla becomes pregnant, contrary to all expectations, and when this happens she demotes Agaat from adopted daughter to servant. Agaat's revenge on Milla is ingenious and has very complex effects. She deploys the stereotypical behaviour of the wet nurse and the *black mama* and 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.

In the tradition of South African literature the setting and themes of *Agaat* typify the novel as a so-called *plaasroman*. This is an essentially conservative nationalistic nineteenth and twentieth-century colonial genre. Its prominent themes are the connection to the land, the countryside, the motif of the lost son, the relationship with preceding generations and especially the distinction between a white 'us' and a black 'them' (Coetzee 1988, Jansen 2005, Postel

2006). However, in Van Niekerk's novel the settlement is far from idyllic. Grootmoedersdrift is a hotbed of unfulfilled desire, failed investments and projects, cold-heartedness, violence, revenge and tyranny. In that sense Van Niekerk renews the traditional genre from a post-apartheid point of view, comparable to the way in which Angela Carter advocated playing a postmodernist feminist and post-colonial game with conventional themes and genres in the eighties: 'I am all for putting new wine in old bottles especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode' (Sage 1994). This would point to the correctness of Rossouw's criticism that Van Niekerk undermines classical Afrikaner values and sentiments. However, that is only part of the story. More than in any other plaasroman the connection with the land and the space of the countryside are apparent in *Agaat* both through its themes and composition as well as the extreme exploration of the linguistic sign. Van Niekerk explores that love into its farthest corners and it is indeed true that here she challenges the boundaries of the traditional plaasroman and its patriarchal, nationalist values. Her method fits Helene Cixous' use of the French verb *voler* in the familiar double meaning of the word. Renewing the literary tradition is like *voler*, a process of theft and flight. In Van Niekerk's novel the flight transforms the stolen form, the signifier, into a nearly tangible object that allows for the celebration and re-appropriation of the colours and fragrances of the African land. Reading about Milla's struggle against the agricultural monoculture becomes not so much a mental as an almost physical experience. In the composition of the novel Milla's dying body is an interactive source, a text, a cultural artefact that bears a history, has a memory, is coded and conditioned but not fixed in time. In the meantime the reader gets inevitably caught in the web of love and revenge, innocence and guilt, justice and injustice, power and impotence.

This shameless imagination and almost tangible embodiment of frustrated and corrupted desire has made Van Niekerk the target of criticism, for instance

by Rossouw who argues that the minute description of Milla's dying body, doomed to silence and at the mercy of the black Agaat, means that Van Niekerk is squandering South Africa's cultural heritage.

Certainly in the case of a work like *Agaat*, such criticism is almost an artistic antagonism, an anti-literary reading of literature and a disregard of the paradoxical dynamics of the power relations between the characters. In order to give an example of one of the many deregulating literary registers deployed by Van Niekerk in the midst of the vortex of disaster and violence, I will quote a random passage in which Milla Redelinghuys is thinking of Agaat while on her deathbed. The passage is an example of the succession of subtle pastel shade miniatures and the fragrance of flowers. As I said before, Milla is paralysed, she is unable to speak and she is at the mercy of Agaat: 'Oh, I wish I could speak! I would ask her whether she remembers. The butterflies that we pulled out of the small pool out of season, after the excessive showers following the first year after I had found her. Too heavy to fly, surprised by the rain. We fished them from the mud and blew the sticky edges of their wings apart until we saw a spot to hold them by. Cautiously, cautiously we divided the wings, like wet tissue paper, so they would not cling to each other' (2006: 540, translation CF).

While the vocabulary of the subjection to the law and its violation, of confession, guilt and awareness carries *Disgrace*, the power of *Agaat* lies in the unprecedented abundance of poetic language, associations and stylistic experiments, in the deployment of new words, images and streams of consciousness. Every little miniature, like the paragraph cited above, shows that this novel does not lend itself to a univocal identity-constituting appropriation. The experimental style and the poetic language simultaneously demonstrate that in a context of racial and patriarchal violence, literariness and politics are not separate domains. Far from reducing *Agaat* to a Humanities programme, this unique and exemplary novel will guide me in further exploring the interaction

between literariness and politics in the years to come. The interaction between art, culture and diversity.

Conclusion

I would like to close my argument by expressing my gratitude. The attentive listener will have been able to deduce that according to some people truthful acknowledgments are a matter of grace, but I will try anyway.

Firstly, I thank the students and alumni of the Department of Gender Studies and its associated Graduate Gender Programme. Every year our team of lecturers is blessed with a group of motivated, engaged and intelligent students and PhD candidates. Without you, innovation in the Humanities would be left hanging in the air instead of flying at will. It is my hope and wish that you will keep us on our toes in decades to come.

In teaching the Gender Programme in the Humanities there are no people more capable and loyal than the members of the Department and of the Graduate Gender Programme, namely Sandra Ponzanesi, Cecilia Asberg, Iris van der Tuin, Erna Kotkamp, Babs Boter and Marta Zarzycka. I thank you for your efforts and for the kind of people you are.

Trude, I tell you this often so we do not really need such a public platform but I would like to repeat it here, perhaps unnecessarily: without you the ship would often lose direction. Annabel, you are the best sailor on deck. Mischa, Marlise, Brigitte and Else, when you are at the helm European interaction is flying high. Rest assured that this does not go unnoted.

I want to thank the distinguished professors of the Graduate Gender Programme: Rosi Braidotti, Gloria Wekker and Berteke Waaldijk. After a dinner prepared by Mrs Polman and a few glasses of wine we dreamt of a quiet retired life in a comfortable Tuscan villa with a butler (with a small b), but for the time being it is more inspiring and rewarding to continue our critical academic project here in Utrecht, in Europe and over the oceans, from our own specific

expertise and perspective. Gloria and Berteke, I am to be congratulated with your collegiality and friendliness. Rosi, I want to thank you in particular for the way in which you entrusted me with a substantial part of your life's work. It is true that we are a dream team, as you so often said, but your energy, ambition and unadulterated devotion to feminist scholarship have pushed the team to great heights. Under your guidance we jumped through every academic ring of fire and after twenty years we have acquired an established position within the faculty and the academic community. In the past year some people have asked me where I find the courage to succeed a woman like you, a scholar of international renown. Well, of all the things you have taught me, having nerve is certainly one of the most important!

I would like to thank the former Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Hans Bertens, and our Rector Willem Hendrik Gispen for the unconditional support they gave me by establishing the Graduate Gender Programme, which provided the Dutch Research School of Women's Studies with a continued existence. They expected me to manage this programme as a matter of course and this made me confident that my team and my students could accomplish this task in ways that will continue to matter in the Dutch Humanities and abroad.

Finally, I thank Frank Kessler with whom I have managed the Institute for Media and Representation for the past three years. Frank, I thank you for the friendly and efficient way in which we managed this hefty and responsible job, supported by Silvia, Monique and Daphne. I began as a part-time Associate Professor and emerge as a full-time Professor. So dear IMR colleagues present here, it is difficult to think of a more effective course in academic leadership.

Ik heb gezegd.

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Rosemarie Lilian Buikema (1956) studied Dutch Language and Literature at the University of Groningen (NL) with subsidiary minors in the History of Modern Art and Women's Studies. She became a doctor in Literary Studies at Amsterdam University in 1995. In her dissertation she studied the interaction between fact and fiction in biographies (*De Loden Venus. Biografieën van vijf beroemde vrouwen door hun dochters*. Kampen, 1995). Since 1990 she has been working at the Department of Gender Studies, Institute for Media and Re/presentation (Utrecht University), as an Assistant Professor, Associate Professor and Professor. She is currently programme director of the Graduate Gender Programme and the EU FP6 Marie Curie Early Stage PhD Training Programme. She is also the Utrecht coordinator of the Erasmus Mundus joint degree in Gender and Women's Studies in Europe. She is the Utrecht regional ambassador for South Africa and worked as a visiting professor at the University of the Western Cape, the University of Cape Town and the Karelshoogeschool in Prague. Her publications are on the interface between Literary Studies, Comparative Cultural Studies and Gender Studies.

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