

# Irreparable Loss and Exorbitant Gain: On Translating *Agaat*

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## **Summary**

This essay attempts an after-the-fact reflection on the process of translating a complex literary text, Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*. Central to the essay is the question of whether a translation should "foreignise" or "domesticate" the text, or as Umberto Eco puts it: "should a translation lead the reader to understand the linguistic and cultural universe of the source text, or transform the original by adapting it to the reader's cultural and linguistic universe?" Although it is impossible to opt for either of these positions exclusively, this essay inclines towards the former, and attempts to demonstrate from the translation of *Agaat* both the difficulties of negotiating a transition between two cultures, and its rewards. If much of the original culture is inevitably lost, especially where the language is itself strongly culture-specific, the translation may also gain something by its immersion in the receiving culture, establishing revitalising links with a whole new context.

## **Opsomming**

Hierdie essay poog om ex post facto te bespiegel oor die vertaal van 'n komplekse literêre teks, Marlene van Niekerk se *Agaat*. 'n Sentrale vraag in die essay is of 'n vertaling moet poog om die teks getrou te hou aan die oorspronklike kulturele konteks of om dit toeganklik te maak in terme van die gasheerkultuur. Alhoewel dit onmoontlik is om uitsluitlik die een of ander van hierdie benaderings te aanvaar, neig hierdie essay na die eersgenoemde opsie, en poog om uit die vertaling van *Agaat* beide die probleme en die belonings van hierdie soort interkulturele onderhandeling te demonstreer. Terwyl veel van die oorspronklike kultuur onafwendbaar verlore raak, veral waar die taal 'n sterk weerspieëling van kulturele norme is, is daar tog ook baat te vind, deurdat die vertaling deur die omgang met die gasheerkultuur vrugbaar kan skakel met 'n heel nuwe konteks.

I came to the business of translating *Agaat* somewhat naively, as a relative newcomer: I had translated a children's book years ago and, more recently, two of Marlene van Niekerk's short stories, but never anything approaching the scope and complexity of *Agaat*. It was probably a case of fools rushing in; more experienced translators had been approached, and had declined – I have no idea for what reason, but conceivably through being daunted by the sheer magnitude of the task.

*JLS/TLW* 25(3), Sept. 2009  
ISSN 0256-4717/Online 1573-5387  
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Part of my naivety, some might say arrogance, in approaching the translation was my almost total innocence of any preconceptions about translation: in other words, I'd read hardly any of the many volumes of theoretical writings on the subject of translation. Having recently emerged, not to say escaped, from an academic career, I was aware of the perils of the "undertheorised" paper, which is conference speak for a submission relying on native wit rather than the recitation of the current shibboleths. Thus, in deciding to approach *Agaat* without any particular theory in place, I was not proceeding in ignorance as much as in obstinacy.

Of course, we all know that pleading no theory is itself implicitly a theory, and if I had to make explicit my crypto-theory here, it would run something like this: a translation is a licensed trespass upon a rich but relatively unknown territory, upon which the translator has to report back to people to whom the territory is not only unknown but foreign. The translator, to continue this somewhat ad hoc analogy, may not have explored this particular tract of land, but he is intimately acquainted with the territory, its flora and fauna, its inhabitants and their habits and peculiarities. He must give as accurate an account of this territory as he can, to enable his audience to understand something of this territory in their own terms but *without losing the sense of foreignness*. If all countries looked the same, nobody would travel.

Even this theory, such as it is, was not a preconception or an abstract notion: it evolved itself from almost the first day I engaged with *Agaat*. If at first it was a somewhat inarticulate theory, it was helped to declare itself through my discussions with Marlene van Niekerk about certain fundamental practical issues regarding the translation – discussions that often quite naturally moved from the particular instance to the general principle.

The most fundamental issue, and one that has remained controversial, is the question of the novel's name and that of the title character. "English people can't pronounce *Agaat*" is a comment I heard (and still hear) more often than I care to recall. We glanced briefly at the possibility of translating this (*Agate?* *Agatha?*), but Marlene felt strongly, and I agreed, that the sound of the name is such an important part of the meaning that one did not want to lose it, even where its presence could only signal, to a foreign audience, that this was indeed a foreign sound:

Maar dis eintlik A-g-g-g-g-g-gaat wat g-g-g-g-g-g soos 'n huisslang agter die vloerlys. Gaat Gaat Gat sê Jakkie groot gat gapende afgrond daar gaat sy o gaats gotta gits geit g-g-g-g-g dis 'n naam van niks.

(Van Niekerk 2004: 379)

Needless to say, this passage proved untranslatable, in relying heavily on a sound that does not exist in English. The best I could do was to try to describe the sound:

But it's actually A-g-g-g-g-gaat that goes g-g-g-g like a house snake behind the skirting board. Gaat Gaat Gaat says Jakkie, **sounding the g in his throat as if he's gargling**, it's a name of nothing.

(van Niekerk 2006: 365)

There is no question that there is a loss here, even with the added attempt at describing the guttural sound. It was a matter of judging whether that loss was greater than it would have been had we decided to Anglicise the name. We decided that this was the lesser of the losses, and *Agaat* it remained. (It is interesting that the British publishers of the translation declined to use the Afrikaans title, opting instead for the more market-friendly *The Way of the Women*; they also stripped the text of the stress marks which I'd retained from the Afrikaans to punctuate the rhythmical patterning of the original.)

Once that decision had been made, it established a precedent, a principle, and possibly even a theory. Given that *Agaat* remained *Agaat*, what about Grootmoedersdrift? The fact is that the novel deals with a culturally very specific place and time: the name of the farm signals the matriarchal line of succession that is so important in the novel, but it also locates that line in a world of drifts, rather than of crossings or even fords. It also of course, punningly incorporates the sense of *drif* as passion.

Marlene cannily anticipated this issue, and made things easier for her translator, by having Jakkie reflect, in his prelude to the novel, on the name of the farm: "Vertaal Grootmoedersdrift. Probeer dit. Granny's Ford? Wat sê dit?" (2004: 6).

In my translation, I added a phrase to none-too-subtly bring out the pun: "Translate Grootmoedersdrift. Try it. Granny's Ford? **Granny's Passion?** What does that say?" (2006: 6).

And a little later, Jakkie provides one more crutch for the translator: "Vertalings vir wolfneusgewels, rûens, droëland, drif. Dink dit uit" (2004: 8).

Taking up Jakkie's injunction, I thought it out, but allowing something of my own dilemma to enter into his efforts, and using the opportunity to provide a foreign reader with both the literal meaning and the more imaginative version:

Translations for *wolfneusgewels*, *rûens*, *droëland*, *drif*: jerkin-head gables, ridges, dry farming-land, crossing. **Prosaic**. Devise something: **wolfnosed gables, humpbacked hills, dryland, drift**.

(van Niekerk 2006: 8)

One of the beauties of *Agaat* is the pleasure van Niekerk takes in place names, farm names: emblems and sediment of a whole history of human habitation and cultivation. Here is Jakkie again:

Die riviere van my kindertyd! Hulle was anders, hulle name kan nie sê hoe mooi hulle was nie: Botrivier, Riviersonderend, Kleinkruisrivier, Duivenhoks, Maandagsoutrivier, Slangrivier, Buffeljagsrivier, Karringmelksrivier, Korenlandrivier.

(Van Niekerk 2004: 5)

Of course, to a non-Afrikaans reader these names mean nothing at all, and yet one can't simply "domesticate" them, render them into a clumsy approximation. So I retained the Afrikaans names, while trying also to reproduce something of their haunting resonance:

The rivers of my childhood! They were different, their names cannot tell how beautiful they were: Botrivier, Riviersonderend, Kleinkruisrivier, Duivenhoks, Maandagsoutrivier, Slangrivier, Buffeljagsrivier, Karringmelksrivier, Korenlandrivier: **rivers burgeoning, rivers without end, small rivers crossing; rivers redolent of dove cotes, of salt-on-Mondays, of snakes; rivers of the hunting of the buffalo, rivers like buttermilk, rivers running through fields of wheat.**

(van Niekerk 2006: 5)

I have said that I approached my translation without the benefit of theory. I have, however, since had to read a certain amount of theory, even if only because I have been expected to articulate in respectable form something of the principles underlying the translation. It has been heartening but of course not surprising to find that the kind of problem I was struggling with is not unique, is indeed of the nature of translation. Broadly speaking, the question which obtruded itself from the very start is whether or not to "foreignise" or "domesticate" the text, or as Umberto Eco puts it: "[S]hould a translation lead the reader to understand the linguistic and cultural universe of the source text, or transform the original by adapting it to the reader's cultural and linguistic universe?" (2003: 89).

It should be clear from my account thus far that I opted for the first of these approaches. There seemed little point in trying to situate *Agaat* in some international no-place, even if it had been possible to do so: the novel has its being and its meaning inextricably in the Overberg, and though its cultural frame of reference is very wide, it is in the first place founded on an Afrikaans culture. Eco's generalisation about translation seems highly apposite here: "[T]ranslation is always a shift, not between two languages but between two cultures – or two encyclopaedias. A translator must take into account rules that are not strictly linguistic but, broadly speaking, cultural" (2003: 82).

Two cultures, two encyclopaedias: of no novel could this be more true than of *Agaat*, with its wealth of cultural allusions and its encyclopaedic breadth of reference. In this respect it differed instructively from *Memorandum*, Marlene van Niekerk's fictionalised reflection on the paintings of Adriaan van Zyl, which I translated shortly after *Agaat* (van Niekerk & van

Zyl 2006). *Memorandum* is amongst other things a report of a conversation between two knowledgeable and cultivated white men lying in hospital exchanging allusions, mainly to Western cultural practices and possessions. The translation was hardly straightforward, but it did not present the problem of bridging a cultural gap: the frame of reference was by and large the same in source language and target language. *Agaat*, on the other hand, was drawing on a cultural tradition that was to a large extent unique to Afrikaans and grounded in a South African context.

The encyclopaedic aspect of *Agaat* – the farming lore, names of plants, of insects, of breeds of cattle, of cultivars of wheat, of diseases affecting plants and animals, not to mention the minutiae of motor neuron disease – all these proved less troublesome than I'd anticipated. Encyclopaedias exist in all languages, and it was usually possible to find an English equivalent for even the most abstruse plant disease, albeit even here with a certain amount of improvisation on the part of the translator:

domsiekte krimpsiekte predikantluisellende omlê stinkbrand stamroes  
vaalblaar wurms kewers slakke motte kleinkommandoruspers ... vrotpootjie  
slaphakskeentjie klakous nasellapol ramenias.

(Van Niekerk 2004: 38)

loco-disease nenta preacher-tick-affliction smut-ball bunt black-rust glume-  
blotch grubs beetles snails moths army caterpillars ... foot-rot **will-wilt**  
**green-sick** nasella-clump charlock.

(van Niekerk 2006: 35)

The greatest difficulty here, in fact, came where Marlene surreptitiously modulated from the farmyard to the sickbed: *slaphakskeentjie*, literally little-limp-ankle, technically a sweet-sour onion salad, here links with Milla's degenerative disease, and *klakous*, not as far as I know a plant disease, is literally a grumbler, but *kous* (stocking) links with the *hakskeen* (ankle) of the previous word. This was not an effect I could render in just this way, so I had to opt for two words that also combine a vegetable reference with a human relevance, *will-wilt* and *green-sick*.

Altogether more tricky, then, than the encyclopaedic were those cultural aspects that are embedded, as it were, in the language, where the language itself is performative, that is, where an utterance has a power in excess of its dictionary meaning. Predictably, in South Africa, the performative function of Afrikaans is most potent in racial allusions. We all know that in racial slurs connotation overwhelms denotation. But dictionaries deal in denotation, not connotation, except sometimes in inserting an exclamation mark or a bracketed [*taboo*] to warn the unwary non-native speaker. Where racial discrimination is itself an intrinsic part of a culture, the language will reflect shades of meaning and tone that translation into a foreign culture can render only approximately if at all.

At one stage I considered appending a short essay on the word *meid* to my translation to explain its shifting register. Originally a neutral Dutch term for a young woman (compare *maid* in English) it came to mean, in South Africa, female servant (again like *maid* in English). From here the process of what semioticians call pejoration degraded the word further, as it came to constitute a disrespectful reference to a black or coloured woman, and in schoolboy slang, to a cowardly person.

One of the realities reflected in *Agaat* is the whole range of registers still surviving in a single word. When Jak, for instance, uses the word, it is almost always with its full force of offensive intent:

Hy sê sy't alles wat 'n meid kan wens & dis beter dat sy vir hr apart hou hy wil tog nie moelikheid hê met 'n gesaamloperij nie dan kom daar vanself jong hotnos by & dan raak sy met die lyf & dan is ons hr kwyt.

(Van Niekerk 2004: 325)

In instances like this I was reduced to finding a word that could somehow embody in itself Jak's desire to wound:

He says she's got everything a **woolly** could wish for & it's better that she keeps herself apart he really doesn't want hassles with a hobnobbing then next thing you have young **goffels** climbing in & then she gets that way & then she's lost to us.

(van Niekerk 2006: 312-313)

Needless to say, this is a pale version of the original. *Woolly* was the best I could do in an effort to convey something of the insulting charge of Jak's usage; there were complaints, justified I'm sure, that the term is hardly a current South African one. Just so Jak's use of *hotnos* called for something insultingly vernacular; *goffels*, though hardly Queen's English, does occur in the *Oxford Dictionary of South African English*, which I adopted as my benchmark.

When Milla uses terms like *meid* and its cognates, on the other hand, she does so more neutrally: the term is still offensive, of course, in its very unawareness, but the offence is not deliberate, as in Jak's case. When Milla says "Die meide kyk my of ek mal is" (2004: 543), she is using the term more referentially than emotively; my translation, though it cannot encompass the full range of register of the original, can approximately render its sense: "The kitchen maids look at me as if I'm mad" (2006: 524).

When the farm workers themselves use the term, it is closer to being purely referential, though here, too, it requires an intimate knowledge of a specific language community to pick up the register. A passage like the following, a translator's nightmare, captures a whole hierarchy of social and racial values in its modulated use of racial terms. Milla is teaching *Agaat* to cut up a sheep:

[D]aar sing die meide: Oi oi oi die mou van die aap verhoog die meid of laat sak die skaap. Hou julle bekke sê ek maar hulle dans met die boude in die lug al om A. die lip bewe & ek sê dis net kombuismeide moet jou nie aan hulle steur nie hulle kry net kop & derms & vanaand kry jy tjops .... Goedso my meidjie nou ken jy jou vleis.

(Van Niekerk 2004: 103-104)

The shifts in register from *die meide* (relatively referential) to *die meid* (referential, but tinged with malicious mockery) to *net kombuismeide* (deliberately pejorative) to *my meidjie* (patronisingly affectionate) were impossible to render using a single word, as in the Afrikaans. Thus I had, somewhat lamely, to resort to a variety of terms:

... so then the **kitchen-girls** start singing oi oi oi five pigs in a heap, raise **the girl** or lower the sheep. Shut your traps I say but they dance buttocks in the air all around A. her lip trembles & I say it's just **kitchen-skivvies** don't take any notice of them they're getting only head & guts & tonight you're having chops. Well done **my little girl** now you know your meat.

(van Niekerk 2006: 99-100)

I cite this as an example of a negotiation that doesn't really satisfy either party: it's not very faithful to the original, and it's not entirely convincing in the English either. Venuti's description of such a process almost dignifies it by making it seem unavoidable:

The translator's hand becomes visible in deviations from the most commonly used forms of the translating language. Social and regional dialects, slang and obscenities, archaisms and neologisms, jargons and foreign borrowings tend to be language-specific, unlikely to travel well, their peculiar force difficult to render into other languages. Thus they show the translator at work, implementing a strategy to bring the foreign text into a different culture.

(Venuti 2004: 3)

I was more successful, I think, in rendering what one might call the more positive cultural aspects of the novel, that is, the rich heritage of folk song, rhyme and hymns that the novel preserves. Here, too, I had to take a decision in principle: in rhymes sound and rhythm generally matter more than strict lexical meaning:

**Aai aai**, begin sy sing, saggies, op 'n ingetrekke asem. Maar die witborskraai kom nie, val weg in die leegte, Agaat se gesig verkrummel, haar kep verlep, haar mond gaan oop, gekwes.

'n Bondeltjie been en vere val sy, af deur die blou en die wit van die lugte, die bruin horison 'n tollende waas, af, af, af, swart en wit, 'n suiseling, voor sy tot haarself kom en haar vlerke oopmaak en die lug haar opbaar en sy weer kan vlieg.

Agaat se voet vind die pedaal, haar hand vind die vleuelmoer. Die bed kom met 'n suisgeluid en 'n ligte skok regop.

Sy sit my arms langs my sye. Vlerke waarmee ek nie kan vlieg nie.

**Hiervandaan na Mosselbaai**, hervat sy op die regte noot, die kraai 'n vanselfsprekendheid, oorgeslaan, uitgelaat uit die teks, maar sonder skade, want 'n liedjie wat ons al twee ken, dié kan dit alte goed verdra.

**Hoog gevlieg en laag gedraai.**

Watse lap sal dit wees wat daar opgerol hang? Agaat se dekor vir die groot asemhalingstoneel? Dit sal die eerste handgemaakte versiering wees wat weer in my kamer hang nadat sy alles hier uitgedra het.

**By die groot see omgedraai.**

(Van Niekerk 2004: 225)

The Afrikaans reader will recognise here a fragmented interpolation of the old song: *Aai aai, die witborskraai, / Hiervandaan na Mosselbaai, / Hoog gevlieg en laag gedraai, / By die groot see omgedraai*. In its context – one of the more affecting scenes of Agaat tending Milla – the song has a melancholy plangency to it, emphasised by the long vowels of the repeated *aai*. I tried to create something of the same effect by using the long vowel *O*, judging that *Mosselbaai* is not an intrinsic part of the meaning of the original:

**Oh, oh**, she starts singing, softly, on an intake of breath. But **the white-throat crow** doesn't follow, plummets into emptiness, Agaat's face crumples, her cap wilts, her mouth gapes, wounded.

A little bundle of bones and feathers she drops, down through the blue and the white of the skies, the brown horizon a whirling haze, down, down, black-and-white, a susurration, before she comes to herself and opens her wings and the air buoys her up and she can fly again.

Agaat's foot finds the pedal, her hand finds the wing-nut. The bed erects itself with a hissing sound and a light shock.

She puts my arms next to my sides. Because these wings are no longer wings to fly.

**Go from here to great Tradouw**, she resumes on the right note, the crow taken for granted, skipped, omitted from the text, but without loss, because a song that we both know, can tolerate that all too well.

**Flying high and turning low.**

What kind of cloth could it be that's hanging there rolled up? Agaat's decor for the great breathing-scene? It would be the first handmade decoration to hang in my room again after she carried everything out of here.

**Went there fast and came back slow.**

(van Niekerk 2006: 215-216)

This passage, incidentally but usefully, also demonstrates what one could call the serendipitous aspect of translating. *Because these wings are no longer wings to fly* is a close enough translation of *Vlerke waarmee ek nie kan vlieg nie*; but it is in fact a quotation from T.S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday". I mentioned to Marlene, early in the process of translation, that the novel kept on bringing to my mind lines from Eliot, in particular



from *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*. She confirmed that these poems had in fact been very much present to her in writing *Agaat*, and one can see why: Eliot's locating, in *The Waste Land*, of a condition of spirit in the barrenness of the land has its equivalent in *Agaat*'s diagnosis of spiritual ills through human dealings with the soil; and his search, in *Four Quartets*, for a condition of surrender from the urgencies of human desires, for a merging with a larger order of being, is paralleled by Milla's struggle for release from the pettiness of her existence.

I felt that this licensed me to interpolate from time to time references to Eliot that underlined *Agaat*'s place (and *Agaat*'s place) in a different tradition, of what one might call "formal culture". An example of the kind of accumulation that can occur in such a process is Milla's wheelchair, or throne, as she ironically calls it:

So 'n stoel? Daar staan hy in die middel van die kamer, 'n troon van swart leer en chroom, die borduurwerk op 'n hoop op die sitplek.

(Van Niekerk 2004: 510)

In translating this, I added a line, suggested by the references to *stoel* and *troon*:

Such a chair? There it looms in the middle of the room, a throne of black leather and chrome, the embroidery heaped up on the seat. **The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne.**

(van Niekerk 2006: 439)

This last sentence is a quotation from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* ("A Game of Chess"): "The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,/ Glowed on the marble".

The allusion creates a connection with the neurasthenic woman of Eliot's poem trapped within the artefacts of a highly civilised but decadent society. But Eliot's lines in turn derive ironic force from being an adapted quotation from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*: "The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne/ Burn'd on the water". Thus the splendour of Cleopatra's appearance on the Nile is first ironised by the neurasthenia of Eliot's woman and then further by Milla's helplessness – an irony that is of course already adumbrated in the original reference to the wheelchair as a throne.

Here, then, is an instance of a process well described by Venuti: "The translator's language can also send down deep roots into the receiving culture, establishing suggestive connections to styles, genres, and texts that have already accumulated meaning there" (2004: 3). By almost subliminally citing Eliot (and also, elsewhere, Shakespeare and Donne), I could establish links between *Agaat* and an English cultural context enriching to both.

Venuti, in writing about the losses attendant upon translation, says:

IRREPARABLE LOSS AND EXORBITANT GAIN: ON TRANSLATING AGAAT

The foreign language is the first thing to go, the very sound and order of the words, and along with them all the resonances and allusiveness that they carry for the native reader.

(Venuti 2004: 2)

This is obviously true – up to a point. I would want to argue that the translator nevertheless has a duty to restrict this loss of “the very sound and order of the words” as far as possible. There is, for instance, the moving scene in *Agaat* where Agaat heads a group of labourers picking up the bones of cattle that have died in the veld. They sing a well-known Afrikaans hymn:

Uit dieptes gans verlore,  
van redding ver vandaan,  
waar hoop se laaste spore  
in wanhoop my vergaan;  
uit diep van donker nagte  
roep ek, o Here, hoor,  
en laat my jammerklagte  
tog opklim in u oor!

(Van Niekerk 2004: 242)

There is in fact an “official” English translation of this hymn, but it is a blander affair altogether than the Afrikaans, lacking the quality known (untranslatably!) in Afrikaans as *wroeging* (the dictionary says *worry* or *struggle*, neither of which conveys the near-physical gut-wrenching intensity of the Afrikaans). In particular, Marlene said, she missed the image of the lament climbing up into the ear of the Lord. I thus made my own translation of the Afrikaans:

From depth of dark'st disgrace  
of deliverance bereft  
where hope's forlorn last trace  
in despair my heart has left;  
from depths of desolation  
oh Lord, I b'seech thee, hear,  
and let my lamentation  
ascend, Lord, in thine ear!

(van Niekerk 2006: 232-233)

The gutturals, of course, had to be sacrificed; but the Lord's ear was salvaged, as were all those despairing nouns and adjectives, something I hope, of the “resonances and allusiveness of the original”. In the end, what is important is not only literal meaning, but mood, tone, emotional timbre.

*Agaat* is written with and for all five senses, and I would not want to privilege one over the others; but given that Marlene van Niekerk is amongst other things a poet, it is not surprising that *sound* should be of

prime importance in *Agaat* – more particularly, sound as it manifests itself dynamically, in motion, that is, as rhythmical pattern. Van Niekerk's sensitivity to sound and rhythm is evident in every sentence, but at times becomes a deliberate play of virtuoso effect. Here is Milla's attempt at describing to the young Jakkie how *Agaat* does her embroidery, in itself a metaphor for the elaborate artefact that is the novel itself:

Hoe dóén jy dit, Gaat?  
Onthou jy hoe het hy aangehou?  
Jy kon nie sy vraag regtig beantwoord nie.  
Jy rek dit en trek dit en bind dit tesame, het jy gesê, jy boor dit en prik dit, jy vang dit en glip dit, jy gly dit in garingdraadrame, jy hou dit en bou dit, verdik en verdun dit, jy kleur dit en bleik dit en trek dit weer uit, jy ryg op die stippel, jy spook met patroon, jy wikkel en spikkel in rye en range, en strepe en bogies en bruggies en trappies, en kruise en speke van dakke en damme, jy spoor dit en vul dit en span dit in bane en kyk net wat word daar gemaak van die stof, 'n storie, 'n rympie, 'n prent vir die sloop, vir die sprei oor die bed, vir die slag om die mou, vir die doek op die tafel, vir die vierde rok van 'n vrou.

(Van Niekerk 2004: 673)

Possibly because the original depends for its effect on staccato rhythms and words of one or two syllables, it proved possible in translation to approximate its rhymes and rhythms without sacrificing (much of) the sense:

How do you dó it, Gaat?  
Do you remember how he persisted?  
You couldn't really answer his question.  
You fetch it and stretch it and tie it together, you said, you prod it and prick it, you slip it and snip it, you slide it in cotton-thread frames, you hold it and fold it, you pleat it and ply it, you bleach it and dye it and unravel again, you stitch on the stipple, you struggle with pattern, you deck it and speck it in rows and in ranks, in steps and in stripes and arches and bridges, and crosses and jambs of doors and of dams, you trace it and track it and fill it and span it and just see what's come of the cloth, a story, a rhyme, a picture for the pillow, for the spread on the bed, for the band round the cuff, for the cloth on the table, for the fourth dress of woman.

(van Niekerk 2006: 649)

It wasn't always possible to maintain as close a relation as this to the sound and rhythm of the original without sacrificing something of the sense; the relative weight of the different elements had to be renegotiated in each individual instance. It's thus not really possible to opt unambivalently for the primacy of sense over sound or vice versa: the translator has to gauge as best he can the author's own priorities and the demands of the particular

context – and then reconcile these as far as possible with the probable preferences of the reader in the receiving culture.

What I learnt from the task of translating *Agaat* is what an oversimplification it is to talk of the *meaning* of words as if it were bare lexical denotation for which a more or less precise equivalent can be found by consulting a dictionary. Language in action is such a manifold and slippery thing that a one-to-one correspondence is by no means invariable: what Eco calls translation as negotiation entails the correlation of two cultural contexts, each sacrificing something of itself in return for gaining something from the other. As Venuti says of the “practical sense of what a translator does”: “I would describe it as an attempt to compensate for an irreparable loss by controlling an exorbitant gain” (Venuti 2004: 2).

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