

# Intimate Enemies: A Discussion with Marlene van Niekerk and Michiel Heyns about *Agaat* and its Translation into English

## Leon de Kock

**Leon de Kock:** Michiel, every translation has a feel about it. How did this one feel for you?

**Michiel Heyns:** Much of the time I was stimulated, and occasionally I had to ask Marlene what she meant. As you know, Marlene's Afrikaans is not just a matter of redoing the old thing, and that was sometimes strenuous, but by and large – I'm generalising now from the experience of seven months – it was stimulating, exciting, and very seldom boring. I found it a great experience, and I think I had a very good working relationship with Marlene. I felt I could always ask her things when really in doubt. We lived about 20 km apart, and we'd meet once a week, or once a fortnight, to have an afternoon session, followed by a meal, perhaps.

**LdK:** How would you characterise this translation? The level of co-authorship, the co-translation here seems to be quite marked, as it was with *Triomf*. In such a case, I sometimes wonder whether one is beginning to talk about something more than just translation.

**MH:** Yes, it's a collaboration; I suppose you did the same in *Triomf* – we attributed copyright for the translation to both of us, because Marlene had a huge share in the translation. Yes, it's not a matter of me sitting alone translating, and then presenting it to Marlene; there was an interaction all the time. I'm looking for a word for this ...

**Marlene van Niekerk:** Co-creativity ...

**MH:** Yes. It gave me perhaps an inkling of something you said yesterday, Leon [at Boekhuis in Johannesburg] – that sense of freedom, that I could sometimes exceed the limit because I'd checked with Marlene, which I wouldn't have been able to do if I'd simply been working on my own.

**LdK:** Yes, that's the other side of my notion that you should "never translate anyone but a dead author";<sup>1</sup> you have more freedom this way, whereas if you were translating a dead author, you wouldn't dare.

**MH:** No, you would not if you honoured his memory. This is where your word "licence" comes in, in a sense, because the author can give you licence; of course the author can also deny you licence, but in this case usually the "licentiousness" that you also talked about yesterday, was indeed licensed by Marlene, so that gives one a kind of freedom.

**MvN:** I felt that Michiel brought a whole lot of his structures and machinery of erudition to the text, took it into his structures and machinery, and, ja, I felt it was entirely *gerymd*. It was at some points quite explorative in its sentences and quite improvisational in its development of certain thoughts, and I thought, well, fine. If you put it into another machinery of erudition, and creativity, you'll get something that works, and I was comfortable with it because I felt it was *gerymd*. What is the word I'm looking for?

**LdK:** Congruent?

**MvN:** Congruence. Concomitant.

**LdK:** I felt that congruence. [To MH:] You got me reading T.S. Eliot this morning, the "Four Quartets", and I felt the congruence, knowing *Agaat*, in the strains of "time future" and "time present".

**MH:** Yes, and "in my beginning is my ending and in my ending is my beginning", which is an accurate description of the structure of the novel. ...

**LdK:** ... so, in a sense, it was similar to what happened in *Triomf*; the English version is slightly different and it's slightly, an extended version, almost ...

**MH:** I think something potentialised. It was there to be brought out. So it's not as if you're imposing something on the original; you take a hint from the original and expand it; and because you're working in a different language and it has a different cultural tradition, you can draw on that. As I said yesterday, I hope I'm not violating the work, but I'm pleased to hear

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1. A reference to Leon de Kock, 2003: Translating *Triomf*: The Shifting Limits of "Ownership" in Literary Translation, or: Never Translate Anyone but a Dead Author. *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir literatuurwetenskap* 19(3/4): 345-359.

you say you also found it, reading the “Four Quartets”; it resonates for me with this novel.

**LdK:** I love that phrase “machinery of erudition”, because that’s what writing is about, and it’s quite unique to see this level of cooperation between two living South African writers, writing out of different languages and creating this one work, which is now ... I don’t know ... what is it now? Which is one of my questions: How do you, Michiel Heyns, rate this novel? And another question is: every act of literature of this nature is done with a certain intention of its scope and its range and its audience, and its place, so that’s my other question: what’s its scope and its range and its audience and its place? Is it a South African book? Is it a *big* South African book? Do you have thoughts about this?

**MH:** Yes, it is a big SA book. I think what makes it also not unique, but exceptional, is that it’s not just a South African book in the sense that, if you go back to T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, you get the idea that every work draws on tradition, changes the tradition, while it is also added on to it. And while I think this novel is very much *uit eie bodem*, it’s also a fiction that subsumes good European tradition, links into that, and that is where I think the connection appears. It becomes almost a natural one. So I think it has the best of the novel that is from this country and yet it also recognises that it’s not just an African tradition that we’re working in, and I think that’s enormously enriching, and that’s why I think *Agaat* should have a worldwide appeal. There are certainly things here that I think, say, an American reader might find strange, but I think interesting. Someone I know who’s just spent seven years in America claims that Americans will just love it because it’s their kind of feel, the largeness of it; *Agaat* is land, it’s blood, it’s family ... so I can’t see why American publishers would think they can’t bring it to the public.

**LdK:** And as a South African book?

**MH:** It really takes the *plaasroman* by storm, doesn’t it? And in some ways it deconstructs all those things that are sacred to the *plaasroman* ...

**LdK:** C.M. van den Heever ...

**MH:** C.M. van den Heever and all that ... and pushes it in a direction, rethinks it entirely.

**LdK:** And it does it very consciously by setting up the bookshelf containing all those farm novels ... the bookshelf was like a reading list ... as if to say, “Here are the books I’m rewriting ...”.

**MvN:** *Dit was baie aspris, ja.* [To MH:] Don’t you have criticisms? The length, at some points?

**MH:** When I first read the manuscript I did think ... one arrogantly thinks there’re certain things that could be cut ... Now I’ve lived with it for so long that I feel if you cut out one bit then it’s going to bleed to death. I suppose it can be shorter than it is; I said to Isobel Dixon [agent] that I might be able to cut it if the publisher overseas wanted it cut ... but I’m not going to cut it, I wouldn’t know how to, so no, I don’t have a criticism.

**MvN:** Isobel said that “Marlene was quite willing to cut when Leon translated *Triomf*”, and we did change ... we shortened some bits, and Isobel said, so there is a precedent, but then I told her *Agaat* is not a toenail, because she said to me, “pare it down a bit”.

**LdK:** Yes, I remember, you said to me, it’s like pulling loose one thread ... what happens then? And that’s the point: if the novel is written in a threaded kind of way ... and here we’re also talking about embroidery and lace-work. I suppose I’m asking also in the sense of an evaluative assessment. How do you rate *Agaat*, rank it, in terms of South African letters?

**MH:** You’re pushing for something and I don’t quite know what it is you’re pushing for, in the sense that I think it is a great SA novel. I think it’s more comprehensive than most novels that have been written here, in that it is in touch with so much of South Africa ... it’s not an urban novel, but I think through Jakkie one has access, one has a sense of things happening elsewhere, it’s not just these people on the farm, stuck here. If you ask me to compare it with J.M. Coetzee ... I couldn’t, I think it’s a very, very different kind of writing. I’m an admirer of Coetzee’s work, although not as fanatical as Marlene is, for instance, but anyway, that’s just an aside ...

**LdK:** I think what I’m pushing for is ...

**MH:** You want to say it’s the greatest SA novel ...

**LdK:** No, I don’t want to say that ...

**MH:** I couldn’t think of anything that’s better. I mean, *The Story of an African Farm*, in a way, was I suppose a miracle of a novel, ahead of its time, it still is a miracle ... Perhaps we’ll look back at *Agaat* and see it as

having that something similar, that is having pushed forward; it pushed the limits of the SA novel.

**LdK:** I think what I'm also pushing at is the fact that we come out of separate language traditions, and that specifically the translation is creating a book that straddles the language traditions, and that it can more properly call itself "South African"; also because its range of allusiveness – talking English/Afrikaans now – is bigger and something that I'm not sure other novels have achieved. I don't know whether, for example, Gordimer has been able to achieve that, speaking from both traditions.

**MH:** I don't think Gordimer really has the insight into Afrikanerdom; I mean, *Burger's Daughter* was interesting, but I don't think she has the range. I really think *Agaat* is exceptional and comprehensive in a way that no other novel I can think of is.

**LdK:** What was your notion of audience when you were translating?

**MH:** I must admit I had problems because I didn't know what audience I was writing for. You could be writing for a South African English-speaking audience, you could be writing for a British audience, and I think in the end I decided I was writing mainly for a South African audience, and if there is to be a British edition ... then perhaps that is the time to start worrying about the word "*vlei*". But ja, I think I opted for a sense of a South African English-speaking audience.

**LdK:** And that would be an inclusive South African audience?

**MH:** Ja, one would hope so.

**LdK:** [To MvN:] Would you care to talk?

**MvN:** About what?

**LdK:** About what you're doing in the novel, in terms of the revisionism of it.

**MvN:** You want me to interpret the novel?

**LdK:** Well, no, I'm interested in what you were doing ... those books on the bookshelf in *Agaat*; it seems to me it's quite a conscious act of revisionism, particularly of the *plaasroman*.

**MvN:** No, it was definitely that as well. But I think my main motive, and main interest, and main thrust and main obsession in this entire thing was the workings of power in intimate relationships, and I'm quite firm about that. That is what drove the energy of this thing. It really was. As the patterning sort of started developing, I saw, oh, OK, fine, there are certain dates that seem to be exploitable; I did read the old *plaasromans* again; I read Ampie Coetzee's book again, *'n Hele os vir 'n ou broodmes*, and I did deliberately quote at some points, stuff from C.M. van den Heever, soos, "*ons voorgeslagte het klipmure gestapel*", "*dis nie 'n soetsappigheid nie*", that comes straight out of C.M. van den Heever. So there was a bit of a conscious retake on that; I wanted especially to undermine the *plaasroman*, and the idyll of C.M. van den Heever. I wanted to show, look, things are much, *much* more complicated, usually. But that's the reaction one generally has, not only with respect to the *plaasroman* ...

**LdK:** The workings of power in intimate relations ...

**MvN:** Ja, that was what obsessed me, that is what I wanted to kind of push hard, to show how people can, you know, abuse each other. And how they can abuse each other while they love each other. Another idea which drove the whole thing ... these are ideas I think I work with all the time ... is how someone who is subjected to a form of power, can take aspects of that power, and mime them back, and make themselves stronger in the process; not entirely free, for instance the embroidery story: how Agaat can take the embroidery and make it into a *borswering*, a *skild*, you know, and a sign of her own power, which is in any case doubtful, because the power is a compromised one. But it is a place where she, with the master's tools, erects for herself a little bit of autonomy, a kind of sovereignty, and it is important that this sovereignty is a form of art. Those two things I think were for me the main powers in what I tried to do.

**LdK:** The idea of compromised power comes through very strongly, in all the relationships – Milla's relationship with Jak, and Agaat's relationship with Milla; all deeply compromised.

**MvN:** Of Afrikanerdom I just wanted to say that I think there is a genetic and blueprinted narcissism at work ...

**MH:** [Laughs ruefully] So Jak, to you, becomes the embodiment of that?

**MvN:** Milla weighs in on the scale of evil much heavier than Jak.

**MH:** Interesting ... this is a disagreement I've had with Marlene throughout ... she's very, very hard on Milla. I don't think that is one's sense of her in reading the novel ...

**LdK:** Well, it surprises me, too ...

**MvN:** It's interesting. If you say that, then in one way I'm pleased, because I hid how bad she is. I hid it very well. But she's *infinitely* more manipulative ...

**LdK:** ... oh yes, I mean, that early scene in the car, with the watermelons ...

**MvN:** Oooh! I mean, she has everybody by the short and curlies, and ... ja, well, this is now interpreting my interpretation ... She's a vampire. She doesn't have a life of her own; she sucks the blood off that poor child ... when she breathes in her name, that night, it feels as though she's sucking someone, you know, that scene, and there're a lot of vampire motifs right through the entire thing. So, if people don't experience her as so bad, they will one day, I dare say!

**LdK:** So what does she stand for?

**MvN:** She stands for a certain type of ... I suppose stuff that I have with females. She stands for a certain type of female; a sort of wily female that dominates, not obviously, but through manipulation, and ...

**LdK:** ... and this takes place in a cultural context ...

**MvN:** Exactly, it's placed in a cultural context ...

**MH:** Matriarchal, ja ... *Grootmoedersdrift* ...

**MvN:** Ja ...

**MH:** And not necessarily consciously; I don't think Milla realises to what extent ...

**MvN:** [Concurring] Not necessarily consciously ...

**MH:** In that quote from the "Four Quartets", it says "which once you took for virtue", she thinks she's been very good ...

**MvN:** But she knows ... for instance that night when Agaat disappears, when she puts her into the back room, she knows that something is awfully, awfully wrong in all of this, but she can't get to the place where she can acknowledge it, or find it, so strongly has she integrated notions of order, notions of subservience, notions of power ... and she knows, physically, she knows how bad it is, what happened here, and I wanted to make the reader very uncomfortable, knowing something is bad and not being able to grasp what is bad, because you're under a rule of rhetoric and a rule of order that doesn't allow you to see how bad it is. That was very important for me.

**MH:** In fact your technique also makes it difficult for the reader to take a simple reading because on the one hand you have Milla the manipulator; on the other hand, at the same time, you have Milla totally helpless, being manipulated quite literally by Agaat, so you can't just settle on a single version ...

**MvN:** No ...

**LdK:** I was very struck by the use of the second person in the course of the narrative ...

**MvN:** It's a court ... a court of conscience ...

**LdK:** ... not narrating as in a first-person account, reflecting upon yourself, but in fact addressing yourself, it creates a lot of interesting gaps of self-ironising; and talking about compromising, it compromises her rescue of Agaat, because what is that, is it an act of charity, and yet in the act of charity it's also an act of quite subsuming domination ...

**MvN:** I think it is an act of bloodlust ...

**MH:** She's playing God; she's now going to make this difference to this child ...

**MvN:** Ja, ja. She's going to salvage something and make it so that she can use it.

**MH:** I think, somewhat inappropriately perhaps, of Emma, in Jane Austen's *Emma*, taking young Harriet Smith; she's now going to make her into something, completely disregarding what Harriet might want and what might be best for Harriet. It is a form of power ...

**LdK:** And yet Milla does rescue this child ...



**MvN:** Ja, if Agaat stayed there she would have been rubbished for the rest of her life, but now she's being rubbished in the most *subtle* of ways, in the most *pointed* of ways that you can ever think up ...

**MH:** I found myself thinking when at times you make Milla feel, "Why did I do that?", well, there was a good reason to do it, it may not be as admirable as you thought it was at the time, but you know, there was a child who was suffering.

**MvN:** She wanted to get back at her mother as well. I think the whole thing can also be read as a kind of projection. The mother never thought Milla was good enough, and the mother also only had an idea of producing a child that is exactly like she is, and if she couldn't be exactly like she is, then it's nothing, and so Milla went and somehow did the same thing, and made this child into an image of herself, in order to abuse her. But now these interpretations of mine, of course, are ...

**MH:** We all know the author never understands the book ...

**MvN:** I don't ... thank God; I think that if I understood it, it would've been a very bad book; I don't understand what's actually going on.

**LdK:** Some translation questions: what was the hardest part of translating the novel?

**MH:** It was the vernacular. Vernacular both in terms of certain terminology, and then in certain cadences, such as "*wat dan*", "*nee toemaar*", things like that are very difficult, as you would've discovered, to render naturally, and yet retain a sense of the ... when you transpose it into seamless English, you're not going to have a sense of them speaking Afrikaans, that's why I mentioned Pauline Smith [on previous day during Boekehuis discussion] ...

**LdK:** You did the Pauline Smith thing to some extent?

**MH:** Ja ... if you do it too obviously it seems very artificial, so it's a fine line, but that was a very difficult thing – the racial terms; if one takes the word "*meid*", it's not a simple thing in that ... someone said why didn't you use the word "*meid*" – the reason I didn't is because the word "*meid*" means different things in different contexts; if Milla says, "*die meid in die kombuis*", this might create offence, but she doesn't intend it to be, whereas if Jak says, "*jy en jou meid*", then he's very deliberately being abusive, so I tried to keep something of that perspective ...

**LdK:** And also, that word is in currency in South African English, and it has a slightly different feel about it ...

**MH:** It probably seems trivial, but it's the kind of thing I came up against again and again. I sometimes think you must have had more trouble in *Triomf* ...

**LdK:** Yes, yes, “meidepoes”, you know ...

**MvN:** *Toffee cunt!* [Everyone laughs loudly.] ... “Toffee cunt” and what? ... *Toffee skirt*.

**LdK:** We had a great time ...

**MvN:** He [LdK] was very good at that, because those were meant as expletives, deliberate racial slights ...

**LdK:** I just remember, that time I spent in the cottage in your back yard, we had great fun, we had those afternoon sessions ...

**MvN:** [Laughs] We sat there, mouthing this stuff ...

**MH:** Were you in *Triomf* at the time?

**MvN:** No no, in Westdene, fortunately ... it could be close enough to be overheard ...

**LdK:** I was very interested to see you used accents on individual letters. I did the same for a while in *Triomf* and then I stopped. I went back and I said, “I can't do this”, I'm going to have to construct the sentences in such a way that the emphasis falls on a word, or, in the worst case, use italics, and I was almost jealous when I saw you just went ahead and did it ...

**MH:** Well, if it's any consolation to you, I have been criticised for this; people have said, “This is not English”, but I think English people should be able to understand it, you know, [Gerard Manley] Hopkins used it. Italics posed problems because there were already italicised sections in the novel; it would've also meant a lot of italics. Also, it's an emphasis on a single syllable; if you italicise something you italicise the whole word. I may have overdone it, but Marlene at times makes the rhythms, speech rhythms of particular characters, a bit off; when Beatrice talks, for instance: “*Maar jy's 'n goéié man. Jy wéét ...*” I tried to recreate something of that, and, perhaps I took the easy way out ...

**LdK:** I don't know, I think it works, it foreignises the text, and we know that foreignising a translated text is important now ... [Everyone laughs.] ... I mean I thought that question yesterday [at Boekehuis] was quite silly; it's absolutely obvious to me that you could never translate the name "Agaat" ...

**MH:** We tried for a while, but Marlene was opposed to it from the start, I think ...

**MvN:** There're too many onomatopoeic jokes right throughout the book on that sound, the snake goes "ghh", the geese go "ghh-ghh", so I don't know how you would do that with "Agatha". Would the geese go "ta-atar"?

**LdK:** In *Triomf* I often felt a sense of significant loss, and I felt comfortable in that in some cases there were surprising gains ... there was a gain for the loss, and in other cases I felt I was just doing the best I could. Did you have that experience of surprising gain in the target language?

**MH:** Yes I did ...

**LdK:** ... the T.S. Eliot ...

**MH:** ... well, T.S. Eliot; I want to talk about the ... serendipity, and I can't give you an example ... just somehow the words create the effect that the Afrikaans is aiming for, but slightly better, just because of particular words that are available ... and you think, "ah!".

**MvN:** Ja, it covers the meaning more than it is covered in Afrikaans.  
...

**MH:** You're surprised when it happens, and you're dismayed when it doesn't; in some words it just won't work.

**MvN:** Sometimes Michiel found archaic words for bits of machinery or things like the handles of pails that had a sound and that texture that caught exactly that kind of old farmyard business in a way that I sometimes thought, "Oh yes, well, I wish I could write English, then I could've also used this word, because this is better." ...

**MH:** Those words aren't part of my active vocabulary, I had the *OED* online, you know I would just scout, and come up and say, "Aha, that's the word that has the right sound and it's the right meaning", if people prefer to take the trouble to look it up. Again I felt I had licence because

Marlene did the same with the Afrikaans, with words that I looked up in the bilingual dictionary and it said “*argaies*” or “*poëties*” ...

**LdK:** It’s clear that you had fun doing this ...

**MH:** Oh ja, great fun. I’d first go to the bilingual dictionary, and then I’d go to the *Oxford Dictionary* and look for related words ... that’s great fun, searching for just the right word ...

**MvN:** I thought a lot of the fun you had was also in those italics pieces. That I think is a huge gain, because you brought it into an English kind of poetry, because it’s just poetry written in prose lines, and what you found there, I was always so pleased by it, because your own poeticising power got rein there, and with remarkable effect, I thought, sometimes really beautiful, more beautiful than the Afrikaans.

**MH:** You know what I really enjoyed – at first I was absolutely bollocksed; I thought there’s absolutely no way I can do this ... but then you start looking at it ... I think I sometimes got the sentence structure wrong, and then Marlene would correct me, but as Marlene was saying, I had a kind of scope to start being poetic. I’m not a poet, but there you can extend your range. That was fun.

**LdK:** Marlene, it strikes me that you’re in quite a unique position in that you get to work in the big flattened-out global language of English. First, you write in a language with a particular specificity of idiom, and you have that resource available to you; you know it because you inhabit it. And then you get translated. It’s like you have two orgasms, you know ...

[Much laughter]

**MvN:** I was waiting for something ... he started going blink-blink before he said it ...

**LdK:** But do you agree ...?

**MvN:** Yes, of course I agree, entirely I agree ...

**LdK:** That’s so *lekker* ...

**MvN:** It is so very *lekker* ... Ja, no, I often ... when Michiel was busy translating he’d bring a piece and we’d have supper with my partner Lou-Marie and then we’d sit at the supper table and Michiel would read to us from what he had found, with a lot of joy, and we sort of sat there crying and getting gooseflesh and enjoying it and so on ... so the *lekkerness* was to

realise that what had happened was from one specificity into another specificity, with aplomb. That felt good ...

**LdK:** What I like about *Agaat* is the ruggedness of it. *Triomf* was rough and gritty, but this novel is rugged ...

**MvN:** Well, I don't know, I don't know. I was very glad to have found it. Some pieces came easily; other pieces didn't come easily ...

**LdK:** Where did it come from?

**MvN:** I had a childhood acquaintance with a *gebreklike armpie*, and she was brought up in a white house, and when I moved down to the Cape again my mother mentioned that this person, who was sort of white, but a housekeeper, Coloured person, would come to her and say, "*Nooi Marie ek moet 'n bietjie by jou kom gesels*", and then she brings her embroidery, and while my mother stands there, ironing, *Agaat* (not her real name) would sit there embroidering and tell her about her life ... ja.

**LdK:** Talk a bit about embroidery?

**MvN:** Talk about embroidery? When I started thinking that this book might also be a cultural critique, you know of Afrikanerdom and whatever, I first started with a knitting manual, but it didn't have enough of the right vocab, because I had to give *Agaat* an attribute, and the knitting didn't have ... I thought of knitting because of the Fates, you know, the Moirae, but it really didn't have the right texture or vocabulary, and then I started looking at crocheting and embroidery, and when I found a book by Betsie Verwoerd about embroidery I thought, bingo! Because the term itself lends itself to allegorisation, *borduur*, and then, you know, the whole idea of improvisation in the figurative meaning of the word "embroidery" and so on also could be used in self-reflecting on the novel, and that piece that Michiel chose for yesterday's reading [page 673 in the Afrikaans, "Jy rek dit en trek dit", p. 649 in the SA English edition, "You fetch it and stretch it"] ... that was about writing, really. So it could be used self-reflexively to indicate stuff about writing, that I needed, and ...

**LdK:** ... and stuff about embroidering your life story ...

**MvN:** ... embroidering your life story, and erecting – with the tool of the cultured nation – erecting something for yourself that makes you autonomous and sovereign, for *Agaat*.

**LdK:** And then those Blue Books almost work against Milla. Agaat uses them as a weapon ...

**MvN:** Ja, ja, Agaat uses that in a way that Milla never intended. And she adds stuff to it, and the reader ... I don't know what she added or what she didn't add, but she did add stuff, and she did subtract stuff, ja.

**LdK:** And the mirrors?

**MvN:** Oh ja, the mirrors were very important. Some of the mirrors stuff I didn't understand myself, I just knew it was right on an intuitive/instinctual basis; I mean mostly when one writes one has ideas that you don't understand, but for me it was very important because of the narcissism that I wanted to emphasise. So I give everybody a mirror: I give Agaat a cracked mirror or a broken one; I give Jak a full-wall one; and I give Milla one with wings that can be adjusted by somebody else; and a broken middle pane that had been broken at some point that reflects differently.

**MH:** It's interesting that *that* mirror, which is a mirror of vanity in which she looks when she's dressing, and which Jak breaks ... that Agaat rearranges that mirror so that it reflects the garden. Now is it reflecting something that Milla has created proudly, another form of narcissism, or is it a deflection of narcissism?

**MvN:** Well, it is also a way in which Agaat, who has learnt the art of gardening, which is another embroidery-type metaphor, can have herself present in the room – “This I have created around you”, “This is the paradise you always wanted, see? Nice? I can even arrange for you the perspective you want on it”. She's a devil, Agaat; I mean you can't be educated by a devil without having something of her in you. And then of course the water thing was very important for me, as the reflective surface, and that is why the end, Milla's dying scene, is very important, where she understands that ... where she aims for her soul something of a world that is more harmonious, a world that has been able to break through the hard surface of just reflecting your own ...

**MH:** A permeable world ...

**MvN:** A permeable world, yes ...

**MH:** *Deurlatend* ...

**MvN:** *Deurlatend* ... *die meniskus is deurlatend*, and also it's very important that the little insects run on the reflective surface of the water.

Now, that, Gyrinus Natans, has an eye above the water level, and an eye under the water level. And it means that somehow, only just, some kind of communication has been established, maybe, between Agaat and Milla in those dying moments, and also that writing into that stuff, because ... *die waterhondjies skryf, nè, op die water* ... that the writer might have got beyond describing the reality in an external way only; has put it into operation in the novel ... something like those ideas were operative there ...

**MH:** The image of the meniscus is very important.

**MvN:** Yes, the meniscus ...

**LdK:** Michiel, what would you say to people who no longer read? What would you say to people who only watch Supersport? Why should they get up and read this book?

**MH:** It's an education. It certainly extends one, just the process of reading it, of holding it, makes your biceps stronger [Laughter]; it really expands the mind. It's a puzzle that forms, and it's fascinating to see it all falling into place ...

**LdK:** I love the way the beginning is revealed at the end. It's the oldest trick in the book, but it just comes together so beautifully ...

**MH:** ... and of course it's very funny, it's horrifying, it's gripping, it's all those things. At times it's mystifying, and then you must just wait, all will become clearer, and some of it does, so it's a kind of mystery that reveals itself.

**LdK:** Perhaps, in the act of wiping out the *plaasroman*, it's also a recovery of the pastoral ...

**MH:** Ja, those particular words are brought back into currency ...

**MvN:** I don't know whether "brought back into currency" is not a bit strong. I mean they're now in the book, written down, but Afrikaans is leaking its own texture, it's like a kind of leaching ... it's becoming very *plat* and very pale and very unrobust in the way in which people speak it. I'm sure that an 18-year-old today would find the words and the constructions and the idioms in *Agaat* completely and utterly ununderstandable, so in that sense I think the book does hold or conserve ...

**LdK:** It brings it into a new kind of arrangement. It feels to me like a big portmanteau, a huge *houer*, the compartments have just been changed and shifted around ...

**MH:** The book itself has something of that portmanteau quality. I sometimes wonder about white English-speaking readers ... I don't think they read SA fiction very much ...

**LdK:** *Triomf* got an extraordinary number of English-speaking SA readers reading, which they wouldn't normally do. *Triomf* had the virtue of *berugtheid*, because of the roughness of it. It's a bit harder with *Agaat* ... it doesn't have that ...

**MvN:** Much harder ... It doesn't have the expletives and the coarseness. Compared to *Triomf* this is a much more difficult book to read, I think ...

**MH:** Well, there were people who told me they couldn't read – I mean, more delicate souls – they couldn't read *Triomf*, and they loved *Agaat*, so it appeals to a slightly different audience.

**MvN:** In Holland recently in the newspaper there was an article about the ten books that were most difficult to read, and one of the reviewers chose *Triomf* and said that she could simply not stomach what was going on there.

- This interview was conducted in Johannesburg in January 2007.

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