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You Equals *Not-I*: Avowal, Disavowal, and Second-Person Narration in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the second-person narrative mode in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*. Its function is explained by situating the novel within that niche known as the "you-text." But the generic function must also be accounted for within the thematic tensions of the novel, specifically those oscillations of avowal and disavowal. So a second concern is this: how does the novel speak back to narrative theory? How does its "compulsion to tell the truth" – shadowed by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission – trouble, expand or extend the typologies used to talk about texts where "you" consolidates narrator and narratee? Considering this consolidation as part of what might be called a narratology of the self, I suggest that *Agaat's* "you" can be seen as further collapsing the roles of confessor and penitent. Such collapse reinforces the interiority of Milla's self-addressed excoriations, since it mirrors the doubled consciousness of Protestant confession. But it also inaugurates a new type of address – the "implied you" – which turns on the reader as much as on the novel's protagonist.

Writers are forever seeking out counter-voices, forms that turn in on themselves, ways to thwart chronology, perverse bonds by which the ostensibly necessary sequence of cause and effect are hollowed out.

(Van Niekerk, "Aanvaarding" 134-5, my translation)

Midway along the journey of her death, Milla de Wet, the narrator of Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*, wonders whether there will be time to complete her "project" (*Agaat* 212).¹ This doubt is kindled by exchanges between her physician and her carer, *Agaat* Lourier. The former is unconvinced that intelligible communication is possible for someone in the final, flesh-locked stages of ALS. The latter, polite but firm, insists that she and the patient understand each other. With her eyes Milla affirms, instructs: "Tell the man our imagination is a shared one, tell him we thought each other up" (*A* 211–2). Soon, though, she feels weak, her weakness worsened by doubt:

Perhaps we're not up to it, perhaps he's right, the doctor, perhaps we are jointly out of our minds to think we can complete this project in the allotted time. All the parts of it. The remembering, the reading, the dying, the song. (*A* 212)

Paradoxically, this moment of uncertainty glints with defiance, even surety. Milla doesn't waver on the knowability of other minds; she only worries about time's foreclosure, about a premature end to the shared project. And yet, however defiant her claim for empathy and intuition, it strains against her better knowing. In delineating them, Milla must be aware that *Agaat* cannot be privy to all the "parts", which uncannily if not metafictionally name four of the text's five narrative modes.² "Remembering" can be taken to stand for the self-addressed, second-person excoriations by which Milla confronts her past self. "Reading" correlates to

Agaat's punitive recitation of Milla's diaries, which double as memoir and as involuntary confession. "Dying" describes the main, deathbed narrative. Finally, "song" gathers up Milla's lyrical hallucinations which hold glimmers of reconciliation. Two of these parts – the "Remembering" and the "song" – preclude any access from outside. And of these two it is "Remembering" that is most impenetrable, given how its rending re-enactments play to an audience of one.

In making this claim, I am beginning to gesture at the central concern of this article: *Agaat's* formal handling of avowal and disavowal, of wrongdoing and truth telling. The story, after all, runs roughly from the inception of Apartheid to the initiation of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Set against this backdrop is the agon between Milla and Agaat, which begins when Milla, a white woman struggling to fall pregnant, removes the mixed-race infant Agaat from the care of her abusive and impoverished family – an act justified in Milla's diary on the grounds of divine "commission." When Milla eventually gives birth to her own son, Jakkie, Agaat is displaced from adopted child to domestic servant. By the end of the chronological timeline, Agaat has also become a fulltime nurse to Milla, performing her care sometimes lovingly, sometimes vengefully.

If the novel's moral quandaries have received ample critical attention, fuller accounting is yet to be made of the ways in which Van Niekerk's experimental techniques shape these quandaries. In fact, Van Niekerk has herself lamented a tendency to prioritize "messages" in her work over its aesthetic effects.³ One such neglected effect is her use of the second-person. While nearly every commentary mentions this feature, few have ventured thoughts on its function.⁴ This function may partly be explained by situating *Agaat* within that narratological niche known as the *you*-text, which, despite its proliferation over the last half-century or so, remains strange and estranging. The unusual form is self-conscious in a way that can put readers off or, at the least, on their guard. For if such texts disallow the absorption that more natural storytelling offers, they effect pointed and sometimes uncomfortable involvement: "You are the second person. You look around for someone else to be the second person. But there is no one else" (Merwin 116). Even when leaving room for evasion, *you* still unsettles the boundaries between the world of the story and the world of the reader. *You* makes it impossible to disavow that we are also being addressed, however glancingly.

Agaat's second-person mode, I will argue, moves the needle from involvement to what Michael Rothberg calls "implication." The implicated subject – the implicated *you* – is a not glancing category: it names someone who isn't the agent of a particular wrong yet bears some responsibility for it. What this implication might look like differs from reader to reader and context to context, which is to say the novel doesn't serve as evidence of implication but that its formal effects produce it.⁵ With this in mind, we may ask not only how *Agaat* stands alongside other second-person novels but, more importantly, how it speaks back to narrative theory. How does its "compulsion to tell the truth" (A 8) – shadowed by the TRC – trouble, expand or extend the typologies used to talk about texts where *you* consolidates narrator and narratee?

Considering this consolidation as part of what might be called a narratology of the self, I suggest that *Agaat's you* can be seen as further collapsing the roles of confessor and penitent. Such collapse reinforces the interiority of Milla's "remembering" since it mirrors the doubled consciousness of the Afrikaner Calvinism that permeates her cultural and moral outlook. But by bringing the "reading" into the frame – Agaat's ventriloquized performance of Milla's secret writings – the possibility of a shared imagination may also be kept alive: not in the valorizing way Milla intends, but through Van Niekerk's pursuit of counter-voices, of forms that turn in on themselves, and perhaps even on the reader. On the one hand, then, I situate *Agaat* within a confessional tradition that maintains an awkward tension between the avowal of wrongdoing and the impulse toward self-exoneration. On the other hand, I suggest that the novel inaugurates a confrontational mode of writing whose ethical difficulty is inseparable from its aesthetic difficulty.

You As Antagonym

If, as Roland Barthes claims, *he* or *she* “mortifies its referent” (169), it might be said that the reflexive *you* has a unique capacity for self-mortification. Pointed at the very one who speaks it, the pronoun becomes an antagonym, a word that contains its own cancellation.⁶ Sometimes this *you* is the subject of seemingly innocuous report: “You are on your back in the dark” (Beckett, *Company* 3). Sometimes it is the object of vituperation: “You bowed to yourself in the mirror, stepping forward to applause earnestly, striking face. Hurray for the Goddamned idiot!” (Joyce 34). Between these registers is a difference of emphasis, not of kind. The voice that observes is the voice that judges, the observation furnishing grounds for the judgment. But being tied to the target of its scrutiny – that is, being tied to itself – the voice is entangled in autocritique. In saying *you* to yourself, you are also saying *not-I*.

This kind of avowing disavowal is central to *Agaat*’s second-person narrative. While there are instances in the novel where *you* is deployed in its more innocent forms, the “remembering” sections are marked by “self-recrimination and self-justification” (403), as Derek Attridge has noted. They occur in each of the twenty main chapters and comprehend a greater time-scale than any of the other “parts”, surveying what often remains occluded elsewhere. Here we learn most about Milla’s marital unhappiness, her failures as a mother, her abortive adoption of *Agaat*. It is apt that Van Niekerk makes use of a narrative address – variously referred to as the “fictional reference” (Herman 381), “completely coincident” (DelConte 211), or the “standard” (Richardson 18) *you* – that establishes tension if not outright opposition between the merged parties, namely the narrator and narratee. It is also apt that Van Niekerk herself has referred to these sections as a “court of conscience” (in De Kock 143), since the metaphor opens onto three related aspects of *Agaat*’s *you*-narrative. Firstly, a court of conscience presides over past actions. Secondly, it insists on veridiction: *telling* the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Finally, taken as one of the novel’s “chambered systems of retribution” (A 40), this telling is spectered by Calvinist self-examination.

The first of these aspects is a necessary point of departure in making sense of the “remembering” sections’ formal disposition to truth-telling. As uncommon as self-coincident second-person narratives are, it is even less common to find them using the past tense. *You*-texts tend to be written in the present, with one effect being a sense of immediacy.⁷ Another effect, made possible by what David Herman calls “double deixis”, is to create a sense of readerly involvement. Because the narrative *you* can sometimes seem to index both someone within and beyond the world of the text, it brings about a certain “ontological hesitation” (Herman 379).⁸ I will return to the entanglement between character and reader later. For now, though, it is necessary to list alongside immediacy and involvement a neglected feature of present tense second-person narration: its preference for action over reflection. The telling equals the doing, which is to say that the story proceeds through illocutionary force. “You lift your head and fall back onto the pillow” (Dangarembga 9). In this sentence from Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *This Mournable Body*, for instance, tense and address combine to produce a “live” feeling. There is no separation between narration and action; moreover, there is no pronounced separation between narrator and narratee. In the past tense, however, a gulf cleaves the *you* whose deeds are held up for scrutiny and the *you* who performs this procedure. The former is that “Goddamned Idiot” (in Stephan Dedalus’s case given above), the latter is the one who alleges idiocy. What divides them is the passing of time and the bitterness of hindsight. But this division is less a consequence of character growth than of narrative affordance. Using the past tense, the author needn’t rely on a sequence of developments to demonstrate the cleft between versions of the *you*, nor is the reader obliged to compare stages in the protagonist’s *Bildung*. The past tense second-person mode already implies a discontinuity: it segregates the teller from the told.

Such discontinuity can, of course, be muted. This is the case in the example of Edna O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place* (a “classic” in studies of second-person narratives), where the narrator’s tone is characterized by neutral if dissociated reflection. For the largest part, *Agaat*’s “remembering” seems to exhibit a similar tendency. It gives Milla’s past life through a kind of reportage typical of second-person narration. Even where events are emotively inflected, they don’t readily betray the presence of

a harsher, more knowing self. And this is because the earlier, more self-pitying Milla serves as focaliser during most such events. When Jak rips off his shirt in a fit of rage and we read, for instance, “You were shocked at his body” (A 415), it’s clear that the shock belongs to the Milla of that moment. She, the narratee, emerges as protagonist – principal agonizer if not agent – whereas the narrator seems simply to fulfill the role of amanuensis. And yet, even such apparently straightforward ascription is undermined by the intrusions of a voice that carps at self-exculpations, a voice that periodically shakes off its function as scribe to assume the part of antagonist.

Take the following passage, which occurs on Jakkie’s eighth birthday. Agaat has given him a penknife as present, which Jak then forces him to use in order to cut the tail of his own hand-raised lamb. Though present and involved, Milla is also a spectator:

You can still see it in front of you. There Jakkie is standing in the backyard with the knife shut in his fist. There you are standing, bent over with the lamb’s head clamped between your legs. There is Agaat. She is pushing Jakkie forward by the neck. [. . .]

Why did you not stop it then? You could have stopped it. But you helped with it. You wanted to get it over and done with. You didn’t know how else. (A 322-23)

The passage is significant in promoting *you* as antagonism. In the first instance, it draws attention to the affordances of second-person past tense narration exactly by casting it in relief, ostensibly, with the present tense. To understand why this is only ostensibly so, one must pause over the translator’s decision to employ the present continuous. In Afrikaans there is no such tense; it can at best be suggested adverbially.⁹ But the English translator, being able to choose between giving “*Sy druk*” (see A Afr 335, my italics) either as “She pushes” or “She is pushing”, is also able to nuance degrees of activity. Against the backdrop of the primary action – Milla’s seeing, her passive witnessing – the present continuous asserts a feeling of stasis, paralysis even. The description assumes an ekphrastic quality since we find here not a showing but a *telling* of what is seen, a still life (*nature morte?*) given in words. But an even finer distinction must be made: Milla isn’t told what she sees; instead, she sees what she is told. To recognize this is to recognize the narratee’s subjection to the narrator. The latter, far from being a mere observer, emerges as the prime mover who generates the remembering and so too the grounds for confession.

The second key feature of the passage, then, is its internal strife: it pits the Milla who lives again her life in every detail of doubt against the Milla who evaluates that life. The latter announces herself most clearly in rhetorical questions that probe motives and meanings which remain hidden in the novel’s other “parts”: “Was there love?” (A 24); “Why did you keep your mouth shut, Milla?” (91); “Was it the abominations of your family that opened your eyes . . . ?” (602). Such questions are often attended by direct accusations, as in the three clipped sentences which follow the excoriating voice’s question. Yet it’s in the fourth sentence – “You didn’t know how else” – that we find an ambivalence of tone which foregrounds an ambivalence of focalization and vocalization. Should the words be taken as sardonic or sympathetic? And if sympathetic, should they be understood as belonging to the late, excoriating voice that elides judgment and mercy, or as the defense raised by Milla in this past moment of moral failure, an old self-pitying refrain repeated anew? Put simply: which Milla speaks?

The ambivalence cannot be squared away. Greg Forter (174–5) writes perceptively about this “doubling of narrative consciousness”. He explains that the excoriating voice is a “self-critical agency” that appraises Milla’s past life and reflects “its story back to her as ‘yours’”. This asserts at once that it’s the old Milla who claims helplessness, but also that the claim itself is echoed as self-damning testimony. The indictment in this passage and others like it is therefore double: in a past moment, Milla failed to act when action was required; she also refused to own to this failure without qualification. The method of the excoriating voice, too, is double: it condemns by accusing but mostly by ventriloquizing. The significance of the latter aspect cannot be overstated since it envelops all parts of the “remembering” sections that are not clearly identifiable as judgments of the excoriating voice. Even the apparently trivial example of Milla’s shock at Jak’s appearance belongs to a body of evidence that is read against Milla in the novel’s court of conscience. This is not to suggest that every detail is itself an

act of wrongdoing. Rather, every detail features in a ceaseless confession – a narratology of the self – by which the *you* simultaneously avows and disavows.

Narratology of the Self

So far, I have outlined an adversarial dynamic within Milla's "remembering." In speaking of past tense effects, I remarked on the separation of the *you* examined and the *you* who examines. The statement is true enough, except that it fails to register a crucial present tense activity: the examining itself. The narrator, while saying "you did this, you did that," is of course *saying*. To recognize this is also to identify an implicit narrative frame within which voicing takes precedence over action. Or, more precisely, it's to identify voicing *as* action, as mimetic object. For if the "remembering" functions like a court of any kind, its primary procedure is verbal and not dramatic. When turning to Agaat's "reading" of the diaries in the next section, I hope to show why this distinction is more than a narratological nicety, why it realizes Milla's shared "project" with a vengeance. For now, two points of comparison will help to define the confessional voicings of *Agaat*.

The first is Samuel Beckett's late theater which, paradoxically, also favors verbalization over dramatization. This holds for any of the late plays in which the stage is given over to a solitary figure confronted with a past self; *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Eh, Joe*, *Not I* all evince a priority of voice over action. Nowhere is this priority more apparent than in *That Time* – a one-act play which demonstrates Beckett's most merciless use of the self-coincident *you*. The stage direction gives as the only visual anchor an "Old white face [with] long flaring hair" (388). He, the "Listener," receives impassively "Voices A B C his own" (388), which come at him from the sides and from above, recalling different moments in a past life. The "remembering" here has an identifiable trajectory, proceeding from neutral recollection to heckling interrogation. "C," for instance, starts innocently enough by mentioning "when you went in out of the rain . . . that time in the Portrait Gallery in off the street out of the cold and rain slipped in when no one was looking" (388). Soon, though, the voice turns on the Listener: "for God's sake did you ever say I to yourself in your life . . . could you ever say I to yourself in your life turning-point that was a great word with you before they dried up altogether always having turning-points . . . that time curled up worm in slime when they lugged you out and wiped you off" (390).

Like *Agaat*, then, *That Time* mobilizes *you* as antagonym. There are moments when the memories are focalized through an older self, and moments when these memories are charged by the judgments of a later, crueller self. Another parallel is this: the "remembering", whether neutral or not, is spoken. It might be true that we can picture a forlorn figure caught in the rain outside Dublin's Portrait Gallery when we read *That Time*, but this is only because of a readerly amnesia by which we suspend what is actually given in the text. No such figure is represented. Instead, what is represented is a floating head and the voices that fill it; what is represented is an excruciating self-confrontation made all the more apparent in performance.¹⁰ This is not to say that we don't picture the same forlorn, rain-soaked figure when watching the play, since that would be to deny a basic imaginative reflex. But it is important to catch ourselves in the act of doing this, of subordinating the words' voicing to that which they signify. To perform this check is to mark the inwardness of a self-confrontation that is not quite confession. At the same time, it's to become aware of a mimetic hierarchy within the text that puts speech before action.

Though less explicit, the same hierarchy obtains in *Agaat*'s "remembering." Consider the difference between the following two passages:

In the mirror I can see something, a shadow of myself, my sloping shoulders, my face on which my features appear vague, as if an artist had rubbed his sleeve over a preparatory study, or flattened the modelling clay with his palm. (A 21)

You examined your body, your features [in the mirror]. You were not a pretty woman in the ordinary sense of the word. Your mouth was crooked, your eyes out of line, your body did not have the regularity and proportions that the magazines held up as models. (A 47)

In both cases the mind's eye creates an image of Milla as she regards her reflection. The first occurs in the "dying" narrative as her physical degradation is nearing its extreme end, whereas the second belongs to the "remembering" and gives her as a young bride scrutinizing her body with severe objectivity. The most significant difference between the passages is not varying degrees of self-criticism, nor their temporal distance from each other. Rather, it's the narrative affordances offered up by tense and person. What I said of present tense *you* texts – that they establish equivalence between saying and doing – applies also to first-person narratives. So, when Milla says "In the mirror I can see something," this seeing is what occurs and what is represented; the sentence has illocutionary force. By contrast, "You examined your body" does not represent what is stated. Or, at least, what is stated does not feature *first* within the mimetic hierarchy. That place is occupied by the act of stating itself, the act of voicing "You examined your body." Discerning this is no simple matter; it requires a conscious effort to enjoin hearing over seeing. It requires exactly what Maurice Blanchot saw as an essential divestment for anyone approaching Beckett's late work: "one must renounce the domain of the visible and of the invisible, renounce what is represented, albeit in negative fashion. Hear, simply hear" (*Infinite* 329).

This mimetic hierarchy – the priority of verbalization over dramatization – can be further refined by a second point of comparison: the practice of "veridiction". The word occurs in the seminars and lectures that make up Michel Foucault's final project on the relation between avowal and subjectivity. It serves as a catch-all term for a range of confessional procedures, otherwise called "technologies" of the self, by which the self is either constituted or rejected, depending on the historical moment. During modernity, veridiction is used affirmatively: psychoanalysis (the talking *cure*) or even diary-keeping, as we'll see below, reveals an authentic identity which the subject may lay claim to or even master (see Foucault "Technologies" 48–9; and "About" 222).¹¹ During the early centuries of Christianity, however, the self is expressed with the purpose of renunciation: "Penitence of sin doesn't have as its target the establishing of an identity but serves instead to mark the refusal of the self, the breaking away from self: *Ego non sum, ego . . .* . Self-revelation is at the same time self-destruction" ("Technologies" 43).

Foucault's genealogy of this disavowing-avowal fixes on two related but divergent practices: *exomologesis* and *exagoreusis*. The first is a "truth-doing" or dramatization of one's status as sinner. To show forth their shame, penitents would publicly abase themselves. Applying scourges, rending their clothes, and covering their head in ashes, they perform their penance. *Exagoreusis*, by contrast, is a "truth-telling" or verbal technique, and thus more properly veridictional, etymologically speaking. A monk, submitting himself in complete obedience to his superior, ceaselessly expresses his thoughts. No categorization, no filtering, and no sorting of sins takes place; instead, the point is to lay bare "the relation between the hidden thought and an inner impurity," which implies "that we are always in a self-illusion which hides the secret" (Foucault, *Wrong-Doing* 47). In one instance Foucault even provides a gloss in the generalized second-person: "You interpret your thoughts by confessing not of course your acts, not confessing your faults, but in confessing continuously the movement you can notice in your thought" ("About" 219).

If Milla avails herself of either of these modes, it is decidedly not *exomologesis*. Any enactment of remorse is precluded by the novel's fourfold interiority. It goes without saying that her paralysis in the "dying" sections makes a display of atonement impossible, and that her "reluctant diminution" (A 369) bears no relation to the voluntary mortification of a penitent. The impossibility of "truth-doing" also holds for the other "parts", defined as they are by a conscience written up in secret or voiced beyond all hearing. *Exagoreusis*, however, offers suggestive parallels to the truth-telling in *Agaat's* "remembering", given the mimetic hierarchy outlined above.⁹ In the first place, the general formula for penitential disavowal (*I am not myself*) mirrors the *you*-text's pronominal disavowal (*you equals not-I*). Then there is the dynamic of the two: confessor and confessant, narrator and narratee, later self and earlier self. Finally, priority is given to tracing the saltation of thought as it moves without clear distinction between recall, ridicule, justification, and judgment:

The beginning you never recorded. You couldn't bring yourself to it. It would take too long, you told yourself. A piece of explanation while everything was already in motion You always told yourself, one day. When you're not so busy. When you'll be able to focus. When you'll be able to sit at your leisure and try to piece together everything as it happened Excuses, all of it. (A 653)

More generally, *exagoreusis* aligns with Van Niekerk's stated tendency to use "over-determined narrative situations where the narrator's 'motivation to tell' is situationally amplified" ("Interview"). Her narrators, she remarks in the same interview, "are without exception extremely anxious and must perform his or her 'public confession' under some form of inner or formal duress". While the latter comment pertains particularly to the apostrophic experiments *The Snow Sleeper* (2010), it nonetheless holds true for *Agaat* whose "inner and formal duress" is unmatched for intensity and extensiveness elsewhere in the oeuvre. And yet, the crucial differentiating feature of *Agaat*'s veridiction is the self-reliance and interiority by which "public confession" is evaded entirely. This also means that the exagoreutic model slips: where the voicing of the monk is a physical and audible expression of subjectivity, Milla's is mental; where the monk submits to the authority of a senior spiritual director, Milla submits to the authority of a "self-critical agency"; and where the monk annunciates his thought to discern the influence of the "Evil One" (Foucault, *Confessions* 293), Milla's does it to uncover a false self. In a word, her veridiction is distinctly Calvinist.

What defines Calvinism is not merely the rejection of communal protocols but also a pronounced self-antagonism. Remarking on Protestant confession generally, William Paden (75) explains that penitents in this tradition "must in some way become both accused and accuser. With no earthly superior in the picture, the external, two-part dialectic of confessing and examining becomes an entirely internalized dialogue." That Milla should be drawn to this lonesome "technology" is hardly surprising, considering the extent to which Calvinism colors the novel. It's there in echoes of the doctrine of total depravity (" . . . wholly incapable of good and inclined to all evil . . ." [A 566]), in the diary inscription which belatedly frames *Agaat*'s adoption as both commission and election (" . . . to deliver her from the bitter deprivation in which she certainly would have perished as an outcast . . ." [681]), in the monolithic stature of the Dutch Reformed Church, and in the pervasive etymological play on "goodness": "Agaat . . . from the Greek 'agathos' which means 'good'. And if your name is good . . . it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like a holy brand it will be, like an immanent destiny, the name on the brow, to do good, to want to be good, goodness itself" (487).¹² It is telling, too, that Milla is "haunt[ed]" by the phrase "the law and the prophets" (543) without being able to recall its connection to love and community (the pivot in Christ's Summary of the Law), and that she claims – however ironically – that a central preoccupation for Afrikaner women of her class and time was "to unbosom ourselves in our inner chamber to the Lord" (270).

Despite this religious baggage, doubt remains about the confessional nature of Milla's voicings. Offering only an insular if not "sterile monologue," is it possible – as J. M. Coetzee ("Confession" 291) has asked – that a confessant can "tell the truth of itself to itself . . . without the possibility of self-deception"? Also with Coetzee ("Note" 94) in mind, one might wonder whether Milla's *you*-address projects the phantasmal character of a "middle voice" which may speak "without reference to the self, perhaps, though not necessarily, on behalf of someone else."¹³ For if the narrator's is the only voice we hear in the "remembering" sections, can it be said that there is any avowal of wrongdoing? It is one thing to present the accused with unimpeachable evidence of their guilt, but another thing for the accused to accept the guilt as such. This irresolvable dialectic is as much a product of the novel's Calvinist interiority as of its second-person mode, since both features collapse the boundary between accused and accuser.

For this reason, I have spoken of the novel's narratology of the self. Nodding to Foucault, the neologism comprehends the near-religious veridiction and verbalization by which Milla would seem to examine her past actions. But the term also comprehends what Paul Gready, writing about the relation between fiction and truth commissions, has called "novel truths": the "unique truth practices and repertoire available to the novel as genre" (156). Part of *Agaat*'s unique truth practice is using the second-person to enforce Milla's antagonymic self-relation, to facilitate

veridiction though not exactly confession. Also part of this practice is Van Niekerk's attempt to undermine the very "compulsion to tell". This phrase occurs in the prologue not long after Jackie rails against the "[a]ttack and defence" that defines "self-exculpating autobiographical writing" of the post-democratic, TRC-inflected moment. The indictment, one senses, applies to works that attempt to "come to terms" with personal culpability in Apartheid's wrongs.¹⁴ But it also hangs over the novel in which it occurs: *Agaat*, too, belongs to the post-democratic moment; its dynamic, too, is attack and defense. By sustaining these orders of irony and ambivalence – these novel truths – Van Niekerk achieves her pursuit of counter-voices. Milla's inner self-confrontation may avoid the temptation of co-opting public confession for personal "reinvention", which Michiel Heyns ("Whole Country's Truth" 44) has identified as one of the perversions of TRC narratives. But the same interiority also forecloses on the possibilities of reparation and, more fundamentally, on any avowal of wrongdoing before others. It also raises the question: in saying to herself, "*You did this*", does Milla actually say, "*I did this*"?

The Implicated *You*

Any answer to this question must contend with two forms of irony kept in tension by *Agaat's* *you*-address. The first is what Paul De Man called "autocritique": "duplications of the self . . . within which the self looks at itself from a distance" (169). Milla's excoriating voice exercises such distancing self-regard when surveying the past from a vantage of apparent insight. But the monologic and inward nature of this autocritique means that it also guards against outside censure and public avowal. "*You did this*" can therefore not be read as "*I did this*" – not because of a literalist pronominal distinction, but because of the entanglement between self-accusation and self-exculpation. Put differently, the first type of irony is embedded within the second: *qui s'accuse s'excuse*, to accuse oneself is to excuse oneself. In this final section, however, I want to consider a third and still more capacious irony that undermines this insularity: an irony that transforms veridiction from a technology of the self into a technology of the Other; that shows Milla's self-excoriations to be inflected from without; and that locates her "project" within a "shared imagination". In short, I want to read the "reading" as another *you*-narrative.

Such an undertaking is licensed by the diaries' primary status as intradiegetic object, as a text encountered within the story world: no single entry can be taken as discrete from the main narrative, nor can the authorial "voice" be taken as Milla's alone. Structurally, the first chapter reinforces this subordination by excluding the diary section, though it does establish the diaries themselves – "the growing pile of little blue notebooks" (A 9) – as a physical feature of Milla's room. Not only are they kept here, but their covering inscription has been fixed on the "reading stand right up against [Milla's] nose" alongside the "table of symptoms, medicines and therapies" associated with her illness, as if these writings "belong to the same order of truth" (10). Leaving no doubt about their accusatory function, the diaries are "recited" by *Agaat* as though they were a "lesson" (9). The little blue books, then, are a conspicuous feature of Milla's "dying" in a double sense: they are embedded within the main narrative (the "dying"), and it is here that they serve as a means of mortification. Both senses are significant in coming to terms with Van Niekerk's challenge to the private journal as the quintessential genre of subjectivity.

As Blanchot, Lionel Trilling, and H. Porter Abbott, and Coetzee have suggested in different ways, the journal traditionally purports to be a site of authenticity. It is where the writing subject confronts their innermost self to give an honest if partial accounting. Both this honesty and partialness are reflected by the medium's elliptical format, its ostensible artlessness, its sense of immediacy. Within this schema Milla's de-voweled abbreviations, unpunctuated sentences, and timestamps reinforce not only verisimilitude but also her confused efforts to make sense of her life, which efforts veer between telling the truth and letting the telling serve as a means of redemption. On the one hand, then, her diary is a technology of the self-examination. Foucault remarks that the "achievement" of Protestantism is its conjunction of the "hermeneutics of the text and the hermeneutics of the self," which freed the penitent from the authority of the Church by allowing them "to follow a path of internalization or doubling, of involution such that the truth of the text, I would find it within me"

(*Wrong-Doing* 168–9). On the other hand, Milla’s diary is a technology of self-justification. It is, in Blanchot’s estimation, a form of writing that aims “to save writing, to save one’s life by writing, to save one’s little self (the revenges one takes on others, the nastiness one distills) or to save one’s great self by giving it scope” (“Diary” 186).

In keeping with modernity’s veridictional methods, these self-directed functions should serve the constitution of an autonomous subjectivity. But because the “reading” sections are subordinated to the “dying”, because Milla’s diaries speak *for* her only *through* Agaat, they are emptied of their authority and autonomy, let alone their redeeming capacity. They are not fragments shored against Milla’s ruin but fragments used to guarantee it, shards in a mortifying, even torturous act of coercion. In light of this more clearly delineated separation between accuser and accused, the recurring references to Agaat’s “mitre”, her “Pope”-like appearance, her “bishop’s cap” (A 55, 389, 609) take on new significance, suggesting her peculiar dominion over moral affairs. At the same time, it should be recognized that there can be no avowal on the part of another. Agaat’s reading is an act of ventriloquism, albeit the most extended and most subtle of her “old parrot ways” (A 189), those acts of mimicry by which she turns Milla’s words, beliefs and culture against her. Agaat exacts her revenge not by any direct opposition, but by transforming the *I* of the diary into another an antagonym. On the one hand, the first-person pronoun signifies Milla the author: the person responsible for filling the little blue books, the person who writes, for instance, that it is “[d]ifficult to sound heartfelt on paper but that’s how I feel” (A 202). On the other hand, the same pronoun signifies Milla the the auditor, the person subjected to a recitation of her secret writings. And so, when Agaat reads *I*, she implies *you*:

Sometimes [you] feel as if the child is a dark little storage cubicle into which [you] stuff everything that occurs to [you] and just hope for the best and that one day when [you] open the door, she’ll walk out of there, fine and straight, all her limbs sound and strong, grateful and ready to serve, a solid person who will make all [your] tears and misery worthwhile. So that [you] can show all the world: See, I told you! (A 576)

The transposition is significant for two reasons. The first is that Agaat comes to occupy a place uncannily like the excoriating voice of the “remembering”. Continuities include the duplications of voice and vantage, the ceaseless verbalization of what would be kept private, the reflection of a past life as self-damning testimony, the assumed position of antagonistic narrator. The crucial difference, however, is that Agaat’s implicit rebuke is not a feature of internal resolve. Indeed, her recitation of the diaries, her “perfect imitation” (A 448) of Milla’s voice, offers a kind of veridiction more closely aligned with the Other-directed externalization of *exagoreusis*. In Agaat’s mouth, Milla’s words are an audible and not a mental annunciation of hidden thoughts; in her company, Milla is made to submit to a kind of spiritual direction, however perverse. The “reading” thus offers something approaching dialogical confession, a court of conscience that is not exclusively interior. More than that, the “reading” makes Milla’s belief in a “shared imagination” possible. For in staging a confrontation between the Milla who wrote and the Milla who hears – the earlier and the later self, accused and accuser – Agaat seems to condition, perhaps even to model, the disavowing avowal of the “remembering”. And yet, to insist on this etiology would be to underestimate not only the labyrinthine complexity of the novel but also how this complexity serves an ethics of indeterminacy. If Agaat insinuates herself into Milla’s “remembering”, if she models and projects what will become the excoriating voice, we cannot know if it contains fictions and false charges. After all, Jakkie’s epilogue informs us of some of Agaat’s editorial interventions: “All the words written out in full, the sentences provided with punctuation. As if she couldn’t tolerate the abbreviations and untidiness” (680). At the same time, it is impossible to discount that the diaries are recited verbatim and unadulterated. For a novel whose very title foregrounds notions of the good, it leaves us with no clear understanding of what goodness might entail. This absence may be taken as intimations of a Calvinist streak in Van Niekerk herself. But the same absence may be explained by her frequent insistence that readers should avoid the temptation to extract “messages” without considering the formal ambivalence to which they are subject.

To this we may add a second and related point: *Agaat* broadens known typologies of the narrative *you*, specifically within the horizontal or intradiegetic plane of address.¹⁵ Along this

horizontal axis we find three types of *you*: the generalized *you* (exemplified in one of Milla's "Do It Yourself" booklets); the "fictional reference" or "completely-coincident" *you*, which defines the "remembering" sections; and the "horizontal fictionalized" reference, where one character addresses another who is absent or who does not speak. It is this latter mode which *Agaat* seems to expand, since the "reading" constitutes an address, however circuitous, to a character who cannot respond except by using her eyes. And yet, even granting this transposition from *I* to *you*, can the address be understood as interpersonal when one character essentially abdicates their subject position to inhabit that of the addressee? A truer characterization would be to say that *Agaat* inaugurates a mode of address by which Milla is made to hear herself speak *against* herself: the "implicated" *you*.

In using this term, I hope to suggest a relation between the aesthetic and ethical significance of Van Niekerk's experimentalism. It comprehends, in the first instance, the implied or transposed second-person address which is made possible by *Agaat*'s recitation and mimicry. But the term can also be understood more broadly when seen as a form of indirect accusation or suspicion, as a politically charged form of double deixis whose formal significance is inseparable from its social significance. In other words, the "implicated" *you* is a narratological equivalent to what Michael Rothberg has called "implicated subjects": those who "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without themselves being direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes". Clearly this definition does not apply to Milla, who, at the very least, is complicit in the injustices perpetrated under Apartheid. Instead, the implicated subject or implicated *you* points to the reader. To recognize this is to recognize that the implicating mode of *Agaat* is not hermetically or hermeneutically sealed off. This mode registers in the novel's translations, each of which has to introduce or adapt the intertexts and canons which underpin Milla's cultural formation and, by extension, *Agaat*'s.¹⁶ Still more broadly, the implicating mode extends to criticism's inherent ventriloquism. Quotation allows us to perform simultaneous acts of avowal and disavowal. By reproducing a damning sentence from Milla diaries, by citing it as evidence of a certain moral failure, and by using *Agaat*'s recitation or focalization as the gauge of such failure, I am able to assert their interpersonal entanglement without myself becoming involved; I am free to reproduce "I" or "you" without risking any conflation with my own identity. But this dissociation is put under pressure by Van Niekerk's formal challenge to pronominal stability. Her use of second-person narration, in both its self-coincident and implicated forms, brings about not only an ontological hesitation but an ethical hesitation which would have the critic question the disinterestedness of their scholarly interest. As a white, Afrikaans-speaking South African male born not long before the putative end of Apartheid, then, I am forced to ask whether my own interrogation of this novel is not in some measure a retreat into supposed objectivity; whether my preoccupation with form and function is not itself an evasion of implication. I would own that it is, but also that such an avowal, however curtailed and incomplete, has been spurred by the novel's form.

Notes

1. Hereafter *A*. When referring to the Afrikaans original, I will give it as *A Afr*.
2. Excluded here are the "Prologue" and "Epilogue".
3. "Not all critics are sensitized to what one 'does' (or effects) in the literary field, or how one 'sounds' amidst the hubbub, they only care about what one 'means' by a reference or an image" (Van Niekerk, "Interview"). The same sentiment occurs elsewhere: "My hypothesis is that the true ethical importance of a certain caliber of artwork lies not in the 'messages' that could be extracted from it, but in the autonomy and singularity that makes it 'stand on its own' through nothing but its own internal conceptual complexity and formal cohesion" (Van Niekerk, "Literary Text" 1).
4. A notable exception is Forter's excellent chapter, mentioned below.
5. My approach aligns with Rothberg's (23): "... in the aesthetic realm, revealing the conceptual contributions of these materials entails reading them closely: their most powerful contributions to conceiving and responding to implication emerge not primarily from their content but from their form".

6. “Antagonym” describes a word that contains opposite or antonymic meanings. It belongs to the same class of words as enantiosemes, contronyms and autonyms.
7. See Fludernik (288) and Richardson (19).
8. It is worth mentioning here that Hedley Twidle rightly calls you “immersive” (50) when speaking of the present-tense second-person passages in Hugh Lewin’s Apartheid memoir, *Stones Against the Mirror*. He is also right to call them “confrontational,” though it should be added that this is only because of autobiographical writing’s implicit use of the past tense. In Twidle’s example (“You decide to blow up an electricity pylon. It’s an obvious target in your campaign of protest against an unjust system.”), there is no inherent confrontation of the *you* in these sentences, but only from the vantage point where we see the older Lewin writing against his younger self.
9. For example: “sy is besig om hom vorentoe te druk” (“she is busy pushing him forward”).
10. Beckett (in Ackerley and Gontarski 569) stressed the priority of sound over sight in *That Time*: “To the objection that visual component too small, out of all proportion with aural, answer: make it smaller, on the principle less is more.”
11. It is in this spirit of mastery that the terminally-ill narrator of Van Niekerk’s novella, *Memorandum*, performs certain “spiritual exercises” (30, my translation) directly recommended by his reading of Foucault’s *Technologies of the Self*.
12. For the most incisive discussion of the ambivalence of “good” or “goodness” in *Agaat*, see Sanders. And given the unflattering depiction of Milla’s Christianity, what Vincent Pecora (92) has said of J. M. Coetzee seems true, too, in Van Niekerk’s case: her “perspective is both a furious attack on and an inescapable reproduction of the Dutch Reformed Calvinism of [her] tribe”. It’s worth noting also that Van Niekerk has disparaged “critics [who] are under the spell of the exegetic allegory-mongering magic performed by the old theologians of the Dutch Reformed Church” (“Interview”).
13. For the most sustained discussion of Coetzee’s “middle voice,” see Clarkson, particularly Chapter 1.
14. For an excellent discussion of the ethical ambivalence of the phrase (“come to terms”) in the context of TRC-inspired fiction, see Heyns, “Whole Country’s Truth”.
15. I follow David Herman’s (381) still-definitive categories for the narrative *you*.
16. See, for instance, Van der Vlies, Heyns and Barnard.

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