(Post)Apartheid Literature, (Meta)modernism, Modernity

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This essay meditates on the key terms in its title in order to bring Afrikaans literature and literary studies into conversation with current debates in the US on the new modernist studies and world literature. While recognising the polemical desires behind the use of the term 'metamodernism' by South African critics, for whom it often signifies a new, post-postmodernist cultural dominant, this essay retains the usual semantic associations of the term 'meta': 'metamodernist' fiction is, in other words, about modernism. The essay offers readings of Eben Venter's Horrelpoot (Trencherman) *(2006), Ivan Vladislavic's "Propaganda by Monuments"(1996) and Marlene van Niekerk's* Agaat *(2004), noting their connections to contemporary trends: apocalyptic fiction, 'born-translated' fiction, and postcolonial historical fiction. But it also sees these works as sophisticated attempts to historicise the present by casting a backward glance at the modernist formal experiments of the early 20th century.*

1. Introduction

The recent expansion of the term "modernism" has been hugely enabling in the US literary academy, but the field of South African literary studies has perhaps not benefited from it quite as much. Let me support the second claim first. Though it includes a section entitled "Modernism and Transnational Culture" and a single chapter on "Refracted Modernisms," the mammoth *Cambridge History of South African Literature* somewhat downplays the term, seeming to favor, towards the end, the phrase "the experimental line" (Green, 2012: 779). The *Oxford Handbook of Global Modernities* includes only one chapter on South Africa, a dense piece by a US-based anthropologist on cinema and the Sophiatown renaissance deploying lots of Frankfurt School theory (as though its applicability confirms the moment's modernity) (Morris, 2012). There is nothing in the collection on any of our major literary figures, whether it be the Afrikaans writers of the Dertigers or Sestigers movements, or the world-renowned English writers, Gordimer, Fugard or Coetzee – all of whom could clearly be relevant. A few years ago, my seminars on global modernities and the new modernist studies at the Stellenbosch University's English department were met with some interest, but also with persistent skeptical questions about why I would want to use these terms: valid questions, really, about whether "modernism" was just a trendy US buzzword, deserving of some import restrictions.

In the field of Afrikaans literature, where European and especially Dutch connections have long nurtured an interest in theory and where an attraction to periodising hypotheses seems marked, modernist studies has been more influential. This is evident in the work of established scholars like Louise Viljoen (2017) and Andries Visagie (2016), as well as younger ones like Joanette van der Merwe (2017) and Janien Linde (2018). Visagie has even observed, in an agenda-setting inaugural lecture, that, while finer periodising distinctions can be put forward, Afrikaans literature can be viewed as modernist in its entirety (2016: 4). Lacking the pre-modern phases of older national literatures, Afrikaans, after all, arises from those simultaneously exploitative and productive colonial encounters without which global modernity is unimaginable.[1] These scholars have also rightly emphasised that the specific experience of modernity in South Africa – with its exploitative intensity, its institutionalised racial divisions, and its particularly cruel structures of urbanization – will necessarily give a distinctive quality to any literary response to it.

The purpose of this essay is to ponder, refine and apply the terms in my title. I would like to assess their heuristic potential (for they are, in the end, interpretive hypotheses) and articulate, without resolving, some of the differences I see in North American and South African emphases. I do so not in a spirit of correction, but of conversation, sustained by the recognition that the world has many sites of knowledge production. I am also mindful here of Robert Greig's (2017) observation, during the debates about the abolition of Afrikaans as instructional medium at Stellenbosch, that the language provides a privileged connection to certain strains of European thought, which are largely unavailable in English. Even though I may quibble with some propositions, the perspectives on modernism and modernity yielded by Afrikaans literary studies clearly present a counter to anglocentric, confidently monolingual approaches to world literature, transnationalism, and the global novel.[2] The new readings of Venter, Vladislavic and Van Niekerk I will offer at the end of this essay are generated by both the commonalities and disjunctions I will point to in my opening comparative observations.

Let me start by reviewing some of the critical gestures behind the expansion of modernist studies in the US. At stake, most fundamentally, is a reconceptualisation of the term "modernism" as relational rather than fixed. This move involves a recognition of modernity as a manifestation of the "new" and the "now" that may occur at different places at different times and may spark a wide array of aesthetic responses to that newness or rupture (Friedman, 2006: 433). This definition implies a radical re-conception of the place and time of modernism –

no longer seen as (roughly) the 1890s to the 1940s in Europe. It also adjusts an older understanding of the diffusion of literary forms and literary influence – of the directionality of world literature. Many of the essays in the *Oxford Handbook* register this adjustment in so far as they seem intent not only on proving aesthetic connections on a planetary scale, but also on denying the primacy of Western models and the presumed imitativeness of third-world creativity. At stake in all this, as Susan Stanford Friedman (2006: 428) has insisted, is a more inclusive conception of modernism's vaunted internationalism – a trait that has often been noted, but in a geographically limited fashion. Another effect of modernism's new global extensiveness has been to make the term "postcolonial" (never an easy fit in South Africa) feel somewhat obsolescent – as obsolescent, I am tempted to say, as 'postmodernism'.[3] For what need is there to speak of the 'postcolonial' if one could speak of the ongoing, uneven global project of modernity and modernisation, of which the struggles for aesthetic and political (including anti-colonial) transformation are part?

It is easy to see, in sum, why the expanded conception of modernism could be enabling to South African literature studies. But it is not thereby unproblematic. The temporal expansion, for example, makes it rather difficult to say what exactly modernist form might entail – and that was always difficult enough. For what really yoked Kafka and Pound, Proust and Hemingway, Faulkner and Beckett, or, for that matter, Van Wyk Louw and Etienne Leroux, other than a phenomenon of difficult reading? A critic could claim almost infinite leeway in deciding which cultural product he or she might call "modernist", as long as it responds, somehow, to conditions of newness. The problem has become even trickier in the wake of the new debates about "peripheral realisms", which have shaken up the relationship between modernism and realism (Esty & Lye, 2012). Far from regarding these two modes as stable opposites, some US-based scholars now argue that realism is (or was) the first incarnation of modernism (Jameson, 2012: 476) and that the two terms cannot be seen as marking successive 'periods' – especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

But the most fundamental problem is that the relational definition proposed by Friedman can become all too diffuse and unwieldy. This is especially true when we note that not only aesthetic modernism, but also modernity – the set of social phenomena to which modernism responds – can be described in very different ways. The point holds even if we bracket off the possibility of "alternative modernities" – something James Ferguson has made us rightly wary of in its African applications – and consider only a single, uneven, planetary condition.[4]

2. Versions of South African Modernity

To demonstrate the problem, let me briefly sketch out three divergent, perhaps incommensurate, accounts of modernity in South Africa and their literary implications. The first is the version offered by Deborah Posel (2011) in her impressive contribution to the *Cambridge History of South Africa*. She describes apartheid as a modern or modernising project – a move that might surprise some readers, given the archaic, globally out-of-sync aspects of the regime (such as its formalised racism, repressive gender relations and religiosity). The apartheid project, she notes, had both a temporal and a spatial dimension. It was, on the one hand, a narrative of progress, not only in its own self-conception, but also in several observable material aspects, such as its elaborate bureaucracy, often housed in new international style buildings (think of those 1970s Pretoria high-rises). It involved also vision of the nation's position on a geopolitical map. The apartheid regime considered itself an agent for the promulgation of Western culture and technology and – pariah state though it became – it was clearly associated with a post-1948 enthusiasm for planning and dreams of broad statist command. The regime thus associated itself with what we might term high modernist ideas of order and the cultural and geographical reference point was always Europe (and, to a lesser extent, the US in its Great Society incarnation) rather than Africa. Apartheid, in other words, was a grand future-oriented project with professionalised managerial structures and systems of information gathering – not least in the domain of what was called "Bantu Administration". Posel (2011: 345) does point out, in no uncertain terms, that this modernity was more a matter of ideology than achievement: there was something delusional about what she calls apartheid's "modernist dementia". But ideas of the modern were, nevertheless, a significant aspect of the nationalist regime's statecraft.

While Posel herself does not speculate here on the creative responses this quasi-Weberian bureaucratised modernity generated, we could give her account an aesthetic dimension by revisiting Neil Lazarus's pioneering essay, "Modernism and Modernity: TW Adorno and Contemporary White South African Literature" (1986). Adopting an Adornian lens, Lazarus views the oeuvre of Brink, Breytenbach and Coetzee as modernist, not in a formalist way – their styles are quite divergent, after all – but in terms of a shared oppositional cogency. In the face of a total administration of life, of a project of reification and racist rationalisation, of conformity and inflexibility, these writers offered not so much defiance, or even commitment, as an essential gesture of negation. Their modernism, which is to say the aesthetic irreducibility of their work, is both generated by and stands firmly

against apartheid's modernity: those grand organisational schemes and delusions so well evoked by Posel.

A different account of South African modernity is offered in David Attwell's 2005 book, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History.*[6] The difference may lie in the fact that the work focusses on the black experience and literary tradition, rather than on apartheid's mode of governmentality and dissident white writers' response to it. For Attwell (2005: 4), modernity is associated with book learning, knowledge, science and, even more signally, ideas about personhood: autonomy, rights, citizenship and the like. Modernity has to do, in sum, with "what it means to be a subject of history" (2005: 3). These universalising, if originally European ideas, or so the book's broad argument goes, are subjected in the course of black South African intellectual history to a process of rewriting – and *writing*, which is to say print culture, literacy and authorship, is crucial here. The struggle to become a modern self, in Attwell's narrative, has to do with things like school, church, journalism and political organisation. What inspires him above all else – and this marks his book as responsive to the moment of the peaceful transition of the early 1990s rather than the moment of its publication – is the promise the new democracy holds for "reconnect[ing] the nation-state with a culture of rights" (2005: 7). At stake, in other words, is a revivification of the highest ideals of the Enlightenment: an actualisation and localisation, in Attwell's terms, of an often-compromised universality.

His inclination to read such acts of translation not as belated, but as original and vital (an inclination often echoed in the *Oxford Handbook*) is most striking in his comments on Nelson Mandela's reclamation and redeployment of liberal political traditions. But it also operates as a methodological principle in the approach to the writers discussed in each chapter. Whatever the precise literary shape of their encounters with, say, the apartheid city or the pass laws (experiments with lyric form, for instance, or stream-of-consciousness narration, or even realism), its effects and meanings are not the same as those of comparable writing elsewhere. Thus, Serote's reference to the lamentation of cattle taken to slaughter in his poem "Yakhal'inkomo" does not harken back to traditional oral poetry; rather, Attwell (2005: 146-67) argues, it works by applying a resonant, localised auditory image to evoke contemporary suffering in ways that are quite familiar to readers of modern poetry. Many of Serote's poems are, in fact, imagist in form, but that form is innovatively redeployed. What Attwell (2005: 149), in keeping with his view of modernity, calls the "distillation of agency to the human subject" is resituated, often in quite startling and shocking ways, to black urban life.[7]

What this all amounts to is not exactly an "alternative modernity", though Attwell seems to like and at times uses the term. While conceding that certain

Enlightenment values may exist in other times and places independently of the Western paradigm, he insists throughout (and here his scholarship precedes that of the Afrikaans critics cited above) that the process of modernisation in South Africa was so aggressive and so closely tied to the experience of colonialism and apartheid that a separately evolving political or literary practice is in the end unimaginable: "There is no escape clause from the encounter with modernity," he declares (note the singular here), "unless one is to accept isolation and eccentricity" (2005: 4).

The third relevant account of South African modernity, and therefore of modernism, is, I suppose, my own (as formulated in an essay for *Modernist Cultures*) (Barnard, 2011). Against Attwell's rather high-minded story of a localised acculturation of the Enlightenment narrative, I describe a version of modernity that is inseparable from a culture of consumption, with its rich new dimensions for self-expression, communication and display. It is a version of modernity that takes account of the novel object world, the seductive promises and the affective dimensions of the modern: of the whole sensorium of new experiences that underpinned modernist literary expression. My thinking here is linked to a number of revisionist studies of modernism in which the ostensibly oppositional relationship of high culture and mass culture is revised. I think of the work of Jennifer Wicke (1988), Michael North (1995) and Jonathan Goldman (2011), among others – indeed, any work of literary scholarship that investigates the embrace of modernist writing with new expressive media like cinema, advertising, fashion and the like. When applied to the South African context, such a conception of modernity requires a re-periodisation of the sort that Friedman invites: for apartheid so drastically curtailed black South Africans' participation in commodity culture that one really needs to speak of a "postapartheid modernism": a very late modernism indeed. It is under this rubric that I have discussed contemporary works that foreground a hitherto only dreamt of array of objects, codes, styles and desires and perhaps even new deadly sins (of which greed, so graphically represented in Eben Venter's figure of the obese Kurt Spies in *Horrelpoot*, is foremost).

I put forward, in sum, a description of a consumerist modernity that excludes apartheid – in fact views the old racist regime as staving off the advent of the modern.

3. New Notes on Metamodernism

To do so, of course, is to suppress Posel's cogent account, one that has the virtue of not shifting the received time frame of modernity and modernism in South Africa as radically as my hypothesis does. Perhaps, then, there is a need for a moment of self-critique – at least in light of the move I would now like to make

towards "metamodernism". This term has accrued some currency in recent Afrikaans literary criticism. I think it is worth acknowledging the force of a 2014 intervention in *PMLA* entitled "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution" in which David James and Urmila Seshagiri challenge the all-too-expansive new applications of the term of modernism. They note, quite astutely, that new and far-flung modernisms often become visible on the scholarly radar because of formal qualities reminiscent of European modernism – so that, for example, the Indian poet Kabir can be described as a modernist because his fifteenth-century verses conjure the rhythms of twentieth-century jazz (James and Seshagiri, 2014: 91). We are caught at moments like this in something of a 'scholarly loop': "modernism, ostensibly present across centuries of modernity, tends still to be recognized through its affinities for twentieth-century art" (2014: 91).

As a corrective, then, James and Seshagiri argue for a return to a more stable periodisation. For without a temporally bounded and formally precise understanding of what modernism does and means in any cultural moment, they declare, the ability to make other aesthetic and historical claims about its contemporary reactivation suffers. What they are against, really, is a fuzzy view of contemporary literature that results from considering it as a branch of modernist studies rather than a new domain whose aesthetic, historical and political particulars merit their own forms of intellectual inquiry. In other words, viewing aesthetic responses to and confrontations with the "new" through an already established optic may prevent us from properly reading and writing the "now".

It is for this reason that James and Seshagiri (2014: 89) introduce the term "metamodernism". In their definition, the word designates "narratives of modernism" in two senses: it refers, on one hand, to experimental fiction shaped by "an aesthetics of discontinuity, nonlinearity, interiority, and chronological play." On the other hand, it describes fictions that – overtly experimental or otherwise – are "plotted around the very creation and reception of modern art and letters" (2014: 89). They cite as examples Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998) (about Virginia Woolf and *Mrs Dalloway*), Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004) (about Henry James), Bruce Duffy's *The World as I Found It* (1987) (about Wittgenstein at Cambridge) and Pat Barker's *Life Class* (2007) (about students at the Slade School of Fine Art in 1914): works that are in explicit conversation with their early twentieth-century Euro-modernist ancestors (2014: 89). If we were to see books like these as simply more modernism, the argument goes, we would miss the self-conscious periodising gestures implicit in these works, which deliberately incorporate, reactivate, adapt and complicate the aesthetic and sociopolitical urgencies of an earlier cultural moment.[8]

Now: it is interesting to note that this definition of metamodernism (the only one that has had any traction whatsoever in the US literary academy) differs from the definition that has been at play in Afrikaans literary criticism. Scholars like Visagie (2016), Van der Merwe (2017) and Linde (2018) have used the term in a much broader way, not as designating a certain body of contemporary writing, but as a name for an emerging sensibility or structure of feeling ("gevoelstruktuur") (Visagie, 2016: 11). At times, in their work, the "metamodern" almost sounds like a new period or cultural dominant, one that supersedes the postmodern, but recalls some of the lessons, or strategies, especially the affective seriousness of high modernism. The inspiration here may ultimately be Linda Hutcheon (2002: 165-166), who once declared that "post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own" and has extended "a challenge to readers to find it and name it for the twenty-first century". But the more direct source the Afrikaans scholars largely rely on is the work of two Dutch critics, Vermeulen and Van den Akker, especially their lively provocation entitled "Notes on Metamodernism".[9] At stake in their work, and also that of the Afrikaans critics, is really a desire to theorise the postmillennial cultural moment in ways that might illuminate the work of such writers as Ingrid Winterbach, Willem Anker, Ruth Ozeki and Marlon James and the later work of Marlene van Niekerk. The cardinal distinction does not lie between the modern and the contemporary, as with James and Seshagiri (2014), but between the postmodern and, well, something new and emergent: so that, to my thinking, the admittedly clunky term, "post-postmodernism" might be more apt.[10] There is actually little engagement with modernist studies here, whether in old or new guise, though another Dutch critic, Thomas Vaessens, is often a useful touchstone (see Visagie, 2016: 3). The reason for the definitional slippage I detect here is readily identified: it lies in Vermeulen and Van den Akker's (2010: 2) somewhat eccentric gloss of the meaning of the prefix 'meta'. For them "meta" refers to such notions as "with", "between" and "beyond": so that that "metamodernism should be situated epistemologically *with* (post) modernism, ontologically *between* (post) modernism, and historically *beyond* (post) modernism" (2010: 2). It may be a productive slippage, but, for most academic readers, at least on this side of the Atlantic, the prefix "meta" denotes referentiality or reflexivity: so, just as the "metacinematic" refers to moments in a film that refer to the art of cinema, so would "metamodernism" refer to the aesthetics and history of modernism. Or, to reiterate James and Seshagiri's (2014: 89) definition, metamodernism designates those contemporary novels that offer "narratives of the modern" – an important period subgenre, then, rather than a cultural paradigm.[11]

Now: I am not entirely ready to give up on the potentiality of thinking about the very real ruptures of South African history and literature in the late

twentieth century under the rubric of modernism and I do think that, given the unevenness of global modernity (however difficult that is to describe), it makes sense that modernism's temporal coordinates should change. Moreover, I think that what is missing is not so much the firmer literary periodisation James and Seshagiri (2014: 89) call for, but a richer historicisation: in other words, a more nuanced account of the particular shape and experience of modernity – and therefore of modernism too – in different sociopolitical or geopolitical contexts. Nevertheless, James and Seshagiri's (2014: 89) questions are worth teasing out and thinking through in relation to multiple examples, for, interestingly, there have been several South African works that are indeed "narratives of the modern"– metamodernist, in other words, in the narrower definition I am advocating. In fact, we have had a spate of them. We could think of Michiel Heyns's *The Typewriter's Tale* (about Henry James's amanuensis), Damon Galgut's *Arctic Summer* (about E.M. Forster in Egypt and India), Nadine Gordimer's short stories "Gregor" (2008) and "Letter from his Father" (1983) (which remembers Franz Kafka) and even Jane Taylor's play *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997) (which rewrites Jarry's absurdist *Ubu Roi*). To these we might add J.M. Coetzee's *Youth* (2002), an example cited by James and Seshagiri (2014), in which the focal character's fealty to a harsh version of aesthetic modernism and its prescriptive Euro-internationalism is wryly satirised and in which the discovery of Beckett's prose is a transformative incident. We could even go as far back as Athol Fugard's *Boesman and Lena* (1969), that moving localised, re-politicised version of *Waiting for Godot* (1952), or forward to, say, Marlene van Niekerk's *Memorandum* (2006), which takes considerable inspiration from Walter Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* (1982) – or, for that matter, to S.J. Naudé's story "The Noise Machine" (2014), which circles around the theft of such a modern device: the contemporary relic of the decayed Futurist fantasy of mechanical art.

4. Historicising the Present: Venter, Vladislavic, Van Niekerk

In what remains of this essay, I would like to investigate to what extent the narrower definition of metamodernism can refine our readings of a triad of South African texts: Eben Venter's *Horrelpoot* (*Trencherman*) (2006), Ivan Vladislavic's "Propaganda by Monuments" (1996) and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004). This is not to dismiss the work done by Afrikaans critics (who, while using the same word, have actually applied a somewhat different heuristic lens), but to sharpen our sense of aesthetic continuities and discontinuities, both in terms of these works' redeployment of earlier modernisms and in their relation to contemporary generic formations. These three texts may seem almost too diverse

to compare (and their variety is partly what informed my choice). It might be useful, however, to see their differences as informed by modernist inventions. Both miniaturisation (the fragment) and gigantism (the encyclopaedic novel), for example, are actually aspects of modernist experimentation: distortions of scale in early twentieth-century literature challenged established conventions of the wholeness, shapeliness and totality of the work of art. It therefore makes a certain sense to consider Vladislavic's fractured collage-like short story alongside Van Niekerk's massive "multi-modal montage" (Forter, 2018: 14). More importantly, however, is the fact that my three texts share an explicit concern with transition or sociopolitical change. Each work is therefore concerned with what we might call the historicity of the present: it is in order to foster such an understanding that each writer very consciously imports modernist forms and ethico-political imperatives, which are then transformed and "recalibrated", as James and Seshagiri (2014: 92) put it, "in the context of new social or philosophical concerns". In addition, we should note a tension generated by each text's presentism. Alongside the strands of literary historical allusion and appropriation, there are also narrative strands that mark each of these three works as related to contemporary genres: dystopian or apocalyptic fiction in the case of *Horrelpoot*, global, "born-translated" fiction, as defined by Walkowitz (2015), in the case of Vladislavic and postcolonial historical fiction, as defined by Forter (2018: 14), in the case of Van Niekerk's *Agaat*.

Let us start with Venter's *Horrelpoot*, the most obviously metamodern of my three examples, despite its futuristic time frame. Though Venter has noted that his novel can be put into conversation with the work of contemporary post-apocalyptic writers like Cormac McCarthy, Jeanette Winterson, Margaret Atwood, and Carlos Fuentes (see the interview with Charles Malan from 2008), his most intimate interlocutor is clearly an earlier one: Joseph Conrad. Not only does *Horrelpoot* imitate the broad narrative arc of *Heart of Darkness*'s (1902) journey from civilisation outward and back, but it even sequentially echoes the incidents that make up the earlier novel's plot. The reader comes to anticipate Venter's recasting of familiar episodes with a certain dark curiosity. *Horrelpoot* also incorporates quotations from *Heart of Darkness* as sinister epigraphs to each chapter: a literary archival collage effect, designed to invite intertextual comparison. The narration is occasionally retrospective, but, for the most part, the reader is plunged into an intense stream-of-consciousness narrative in the present tense, along with an all-too-immediate and repugnant imagistic sensorium. Any charge of formal derivativeness is rendered absurd, since it is precisely in *Horrelpoot*'s ostentatious belatedness and apparent mimicry that its originality, paradoxically, lies. The novel's literary historical engagements are as defamiliarising as its futuristic imaginings: Marlow's (and

Conrad's) cognitive maps of the world are strikingly reconfigured, replaced by wholly different waterways – different modes of travel, different circuits of communication (and their breakdown) and different sites and signifiers of greed and privilege. Brussels is replaced by Melbourne and the Congo with an almost unrecognisably fallen South Africa. The prized commodity is no longer ivory, but meat, and the ivory piano keys, treated so ironically in the final scene of *Heart of Darkness*, are replaced with a beautifully done steak with porcini mushrooms, consumed in a shiny, white, upscale Australian restaurant. While reminding us, through these literary references, of the original brutalities of colonial exploitation and extraction of the era of King Leopold's misrule (the scandal of his treating the Congo as his own *magnifique gâteau*), Venter offers something of an environmental novel – and a meditation on the bare hunger and vicious greed of postapartheid South Africa's "belly politics" (Bayart, 2009). By staging his vision of a collapsed South Africa on a narrative platform provided by Conrad, Venter forces us to compare two historical moments: the moment of colonial modernity and its imperial drive (we might note that the novel renders moments of waiting, of suspended progress, as scandalous) and a moment of a "decomposed modernity", to borrow James Ferguson's (2006: 176-93) term – of progress once promised by now forestalled. Venter's metamodernism, in sum, has precisely the function of encouraging historical awareness through backward- and forward-looking perspectives.

Ivan Vladislavic's brilliant story "Propaganda by Monuments" (1996) might, at first glance, be described as postmodern, given its humorous foregrounding of language and textual play. The story is framed by sections set in Moscow and Pretoria in the early 1990s: a moment of radical transition in both locations. The focus of interest in each case is a very odd correspondence, which we read, as it were, over the shoulders of the characters: Pavel Grekov, a bored, but imaginative junior translator in the Administration for Everyday Services at the Kremlin and Boniface Khumalo, an up-and-coming shebeen owner in Attridgeville Township. The first letter, which Grekov, we are told, rereads for the umpteenth time, is an enthusiastic and eccentric missive from Khumalo to the Kremlin (complete with Grishkov's mistaken translations and baffled queries), asking whether a surplus statue of Lenin might be available for his shebeen; the second document, read by Khumalo, is the ministry's positive formal response to his inquiry (complete again, with the translator's impertinent and delightfully unidiomatic interpolations). To call the story postmodern *tout court*, or to see it as joking about bad English as the new global Esperanto, is to miss the meaning of its central section, which features yet another interspersed document. It is a fragment from a history book about Lenin and his Education Commissar, Anatoly Lunacharsky,

about an aspect of the early Soviet experiment in proletarian art: a call to all artists (even modernists, anarchists and futurists) for the erection of statues celebrating the Russian revolution. The effect, as I noted earlier, is collage-like: the Lenin-Lunacharski "offcut" (1996: 25) even has its own pagination and page format, so that Vladislavic's story, suddenly and jarringly, assumes the function of a kind of textual repository or archive. It assumes, in other words, a historical dimension. This is true despite the fact that the story does not have much by way of narrative progression: it hovers, seemingly, at a moment of transition. All that happens is that Grishkov witnesses how a very large statute of the head of Lenin is removed by workers from its pedestal, while Khumalo observes how an equally hideous and oversized bronze head of the apartheid leader, J.G. Strydom, comes to assume a less menacing aspect. Indeed, it seems suddenly to take on an expression of "stupefied terror" (1996: 36) in the face of the demise of the regime it so aggressively symbolised.

However, the story's suitably fragmentary reminder of the defunct dreams of a much earlier moment of revolutionary change gives it precisely that sense of the historicity of the present I discussed earlier. The last sentence is enigmatic, yet somehow reassuring: "After a while [Khumalo] began to see how, but not necessarily why, the impossible came to pass" (1996: 38). While the "why" remains elusive, the line's meaning is clearly deepened by the story's deliberate return to early twentieth-century Russian modernism. "Propaganda by Monuments", one might say, is a kind of metamodernist fable about novelty and obsolescence and about disjunction and connection – both historical and geographic – between different sites and different moments of political transformation. But the story's verve and humor sustain a sense of optimism and innovation, despite (or because of) its interest in historical detritus and fragments. Even as it conveys the dire message that newness is destructive and revolutions cannot last, the very brio of the prose – the story's implicit celebration of its linguistic medium, flaws and all – revivifies the modernist ethos of inventiveness, of making it new, that may outlast changes in the political domain. Vladislavic, in sum, gives a kind of rebirth to avant-gardist possibilities, even as he also underscores the inevitability of historical and political upheaval.

For a final example and in the spirit of this celebratory special issue, I would like to turn to the work of Marlene van Niekerk, who is surely the boldest of all South African novelists in her devotion to formal experimentation. If we were to apply the term "metamodern" to her work, as has already been done in a very different way by Janien Linde (2018), it would not be in the sense of explicit references to modernist predecessors (as was the case with Venter and Vladislavic). Van Niekerk's major novels would rather constitute

a narrative of modernism in the looser or more formal sense: they deploy "an aesthetics of discontinuity, nonlinearity, interiority, and chronological play, (James and Seshagiri, 2014: 89)" and in such a way that these formal features are deliberately foregrounded and significantly repurposed.

I will briefly redescribe *Agaat*, Van Niekerk's great masterpiece, although the novel is probably familiar to the present readership. One may call it a kind of *As I Lay Dying*[12] novel in which a moribund Afrikaner woman, a farmer of renown in the Overberg district, lies paralysed in the final stages of Lou Gehrig's disease during the waning years of the apartheid regime. She is watched over by the formidable Agaat, her adopted daughter, whom she cruelly demoted to maid when she reached the age of twelve. The work is a brilliant exercise in stream-of-consciousness narration, allusion, symbol and linguistic play, with a beautiful chiastic structure in which the initially mute Agaat's process of language acquisition is crossed with the story of her mistress's loss of all communicative ability. The question that animates the work is that key postcolonial one: "Can the subaltern be said to speak?" (see Morris, 2010) – or, more specifically: "Can the subaltern be said to speak if the only language and knowledge that she has was given to her by her mistress?" The work's treatment of this question is complex: indeed, paradoxical. The art of embroidery, in which the mistress trains the maid, for example, is in one sense an expression of domestic servility and subjection, but it is equally an expression of freedom, of self-making. It is beautifully described in the text, in a passage that Van Niekerk herself flagged to a seminar at the University of Pennsylvania as metatextual – a poetic evocation of her own laborious and excessive artistic practice:

> You fetch it and stretch it and tie it together, Agaat explains, 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 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 [the shroud]. (2010: 541)

While Agaat, the character, gets her stitches from a craft compendium intended for Afrikaner *volksmoeders* (mothers of the nation), it is clear that Van Niekerk gets her licks from the transnational modernist canon. In other words, the novel stages the problem of colonial mimicry at the level of the text as a whole: the servant absorbs all the knowledges, skills and languages her mistress imposes

on her, but with an attitude of "anything you can do I can do better", and that attitude is restaged and reperformed by the novelist. Van Niekerk has absorbed all that the modernists can offer: Joyce's wordplay, Faulkner's experiments with temporality and Coetzee's interest in the silence of the oppressed, and she is saying to them: "Guys, I know every stitch in your book." Yet, this is no blasé pastiche, but rather an impossibly virtuosic and untimely experimental work, metamodernist, if you will, in that it is hyper-aware of its belatedness, eccentricity and marginality (especially that of the Afrikaans language), but eager to compete with, trouble, subvert and supersede the literary canons that it ambitiously devours. Thus, we may see in the outrageously ambitious performance of this novel, a residual element of local pride: this, again paradoxically, in a work that energetically clangs the death knell of ethno-nationalist forms like the *plaasroman* (farm novel).

There are several ways of articulating *Agaat*'s relationship to earlier modernisms. Let us start, since I touched on it earlier, with the matter of scale: the novel's enormous heft and almost tautological degree of inclusiveness. A key line for me in the novel is when Agaat declares that she is "volleerd" [her learning is replete]: she has memorised the exhaustive *Handbook for Farmers* in its entirety (2004: 244). To say that *Agaat* is encyclopaedic is today nothing new; however, the work's relationship to the modernist encyclopaedic novels like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Ford Maddox Ford's *Parade's End* (1924) and Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities* (1943) has not been assessed in any thoughtful detail. In his study of these encompassing works from the interwar period, Paul Saint-Amour (2015: 317) has argued, very convincingly, that their scale has particular historical determinants. Written in the wake of a devastating total war and in anxious expectation of the next one, these novels reveal an urgent impulse to provide an alternative totality; both their gigantic size and their desperately inventive "formal turbulence" are symptoms of this affective-temporal condition (2015: 317). As Saint-Amour (2015: 189, 190-198) argues, the encyclopaedia was (from its originary moment at the eve of the French Revolution onward) an effort to construct a comprehensive archive in the face of catastrophe, a project animated, paradoxically, by the threatened loss of its own legibility. *Agaat* shares that impulse. But – and this is the key point – the imagined futures are not the same. Van Niekerk's novel confronts not the threat of total war, but rather the demise of Afrikaner nationalism, of certain modes of rural life and of racial relationships of dominance and submission: it is a future to be welcomed, more than dreaded. *Agaat* revives the modernist encyclopaedic novel's ambitious scale and deploys it for quite different political purposes. The comparison that Van Niekerk's metamodernist self-consciousness

initiates allows us to register not just a sense of future loss and catastrophe, but something utopian as well. If her novel creates a counter-totality, it is one that strives to undermine, even as it assembles, the culture that sustained apartheid. It is also an imagined alternative to the totalising presence of global capitalism and its all too assimilable cultural commodities. At stake in Van Niekerk's encyclopaedic efforts is an affirmation and revivification of a minority language in all its registers, from the archaic to the demotic, as a possible alternative to contemporary transnational cultural hegemonies. It is a tricky act, because Van Niekerk (2008: 116-17) refuses to reactivate a defunct ethno-nationalism, yet the novel nevertheless registers the desire for a mode of contemporary literature that is resistant to the homogenising formulae and *de facto* monolingualism threatened by what has been called "World Bank Literature" (Kumar: 2003) or "World Lite" (N+1, 2013).[13]

I cannot make this claim without returning to another respect in which Van Niekerk's work needs to be understood in relation to modernist formal experimentation. It is important to note, along with Greg Forter (2018: 3), in his excellent recent meditations on *Agaat*, that the possibility of utopian recovery is by no means presented naively. *Agaat* deploys various features of modernist stylistic experimentation, but the defamiliarising density of the work must be understood as having a specifically post- or anticolonial meaning. To be sure, the novel's verbal inventiveness, polyglossia and weirdly wonderful forms of estrangement may recall modernist strategies for making the medium visible, but the aim here is not the subversion of traditional forms of expression for the sake of formal innovation *per se*. It is rather, as Forter has made clear, a problematising of language in order to register something of a political impasse. In the context of unequal colonial power relationships, in the intimate world of master and slave, or mistress and maid, there can be no liberation without the virtually impossible task of utterly remaking the languages that have encoded that world. At stake, then, is an even more urgent, even more ethically charged project of making it new. To read *Agaat* as metamodern, in sum, helps us perceive both continuity and difference; it deepens our sense of the historicity of the South African transition and its cultural expression – not least if the novel now seems to speak to the moment of 1996, even as it foretells something about the intractability of inequality in our current "post-transition" predicament.

A final note: Van Niekerk's recent critical interventions suggests something of a retreat from any writing that could serve a utilitarian or overtly political purpose. She seems, for example, in an extended reading of J.M. Coetzee's hunger-artist novel, *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), to endorse the work's radical inassimilability and abstemiousness. We may well ask, then, if she is

tempted by the posture of pure refusal I evoked earlier on, in the discussion of Neil Lazarus's Adornian take on Breytenbach, Brink and Coetzee (1986). My inclination is to think that a utopia of pure negation is too anorexic an option for Van Niekerk: that she will continue to seek and find, whether in the literatures of the past, or in music, or in painting (as suggested by her late experimental novels and verse) fulsome resources for the radical imagination. Such an imagination, in her case, will surely remain excessive, eccentric and incantatory, rather than spare and abstemious.

5. Coda

This paper has meditated on a set of key terms "modernism", "modernity" and "metamodernism" – in order to bring Afrikaans literature and literary study in conversation with US debates on world literature and the new modernist studies. The meanings of these terms are not fixed: one might call them "translation terms" in the sense once defined by James Clifford,[14] but they are appropriate and productive: for their very mutability encourages us to see world literature not as a container, but as a set of shifting transnational practices and agendas, which retain their local determinants and exemplary expressions. While recognising the polemical desires behind the use of the term metamodernism in the South African academy, I proposed that we experiment with using it in a narrower sense, along the lines suggested by David James and Urmila Seshagiri (2014). In this essay the prefix "meta" therefore retained its usual semantic associations of reflexivity: metamodernist fiction, in other words, is *about* modernism. The formal variety of recent South African works that can productively be seen under this rubric – fictions by Venter, Vladislavic and Van Niekerk – reveals not only the sophistication and inventiveness of these writers, I would argue, but their intense ethicopolitical engagement with the "now". In various ways, these works are "narratives of modernism" which historicise the present by means of backward glances to the artistic practices of the early twentieth century. The present essay, in a similar spirit, aims to sharpen our understanding of the continuities and discontinuities of contemporary critical practice; it has drawn definitional lines in order to foster transnational connections and ongoing intellectual conversations.

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Notes

1. If I am right about Afrikaans literary scholarship's affinity for periodisation, this may be attributable also to a modernising tendency towards renewal and obsolescence, an attraction to beginnings and endings.
2. The translation theorist Lawrence Venuti (2016: 183-84) has singled out the work of Rebecca L. Walkowitz (2015) and Jahan Ramazani (2009) as particularly culpable of the Anglocentrism and "aggressive monolingualism of the US academy".
3. I am particularly persuaded here by Imre Szeman, who has argued that "globalization" has really

fully taken over and expanded on the once-fashionable, but far too exclusively cultural and literary term "postmodernism" (2007: 150-53).

4. To summarise briskly, Ferguson argues in *Global Shadows* that Africans, eager for the benefits of modernisation, which have assumed the aspect of a future once promised but derailed, often find the reassurance that they already have their own eccentric version of the modern to be disparaging and exotising: an avoidance of the very real problem of ongoing global inequity (2006: 31-33).
5. I should note here that Posel has also reflected brilliantly on a different modernity in postapartheid South Africa. Her work clearly registers a kind of affective-temporal as well as political rupture. It was with the end of apartheid, she notes, that the country finally and fully joined Western modernity, albeit in ways that were placed under tremendous strain by the emerging AIDS pandemic (Posel, 2003). She also recognises vividly the importance of consumption in postapartheid South Africa (Posel, 2010), something to which I will shortly turn. Suffice it to say here that my thinking is very much indebted to her oeuvre as a whole.
6. I am reiterating here my discussion of Attwell's book, first published in my essay, "(Post) apartheid Modernism and Consumer Culture". I apologise for indulging in the shortcut of self-quotation and assure readers we will soon enter new terrain.
7. South Africans of a certain generation will remember the stunning sense of newness that attached to Soweto poetry when it first emerged.
8. I am of course deliberately citing here Sarah Nuttall's (2009) provocative phrase "Writing the 'now'", which has inspired a broad array of meditations on the cultural ramifications of South African transition.
9. Hutcheon (2002: 165-166) also reminds us, salubriously, that "literary historical categories like modernism and postmodernism are, after all, only heuristic labels that we create in our attempts to chart cultural changes and continuities". To speak then of "epochs" or of "early metamodernism" is a bit incautious: I detect in this that tendency to periodise in a manner that insufficiently recognises the propositional character of our terminology.
10. Compare here the terminological discussion proposed by Van der Merwe (2017: 5 fn1).
11. The OED online gives the following definition: "meta" as adjective means self-referring or referring to the conventions of the genre; self-referential. "The enterprise is inherently 'meta,' since it doesn't review movies, for example, it reviews the reviewers who review movies."
12. This novel by William Faulkner was published in 1930.
13. Van Niekerk's late thinking seems to be to accord with the skeptical positions recorded in these two provocations. See, for instance, her essay "The Literary Text in Turbulent Times" in which she turns to *Life and Times of Michael K* as an example of the kind of work that refuses "co-optation in an imagined hegemony fostered by city festivals in the context of the Culture Capital initiative of the EU Culture Programme" (Van Niekerk, 2013: 3). Elsewhere she asks (a real question not a rhetorical one): "Watter soort kunstenaar kan effektief wees in 'n wêreld waarin die ryk noorde (die meesters) die sistematiese armoede en geweld in die suide (die

agterkamerkinders) help in stand hou" [What kind of artist can be effective in a world with which the rich north (the masters) help to sustain the systematic poverty and violence of the south (the backroom children)] (2008: 116). The term "backroom children" applies to the marginalised and powerless, yet disruptively creative figures like Agaat.

14. Clifford (1997: 39) defines the useful idea of the "translation term" as follows: "a word of apparently general application used for comparison in a strategic and contingent way […] All translation terms used in global comparisons—terms like 'culture,' 'art,' 'society,' 'peasant,' 'mode of production,' 'man,' 'woman,' 'modernity,' 'ethnography'—get us some distance *and* fall apart."