# "Afrikaans does not yet exist in a normal context"[1]: On Unlaagering Afrikaans

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## The Unlaagering of teaching Afrikaans

The term "*unlaagering*[2]" may be considered in diverse ways, among others as an ideological concept, or as a heuristic instrument.

I shall approach *unlaagering* from four broad perspectives after questioning certain presuppositions, and making one or two remarks about the concept.

1. In order to examine the concept of *unlaagering* I will firstly place it in a historical context, as this is not the first time that the need for *unlaagering* has cropped up.

2. Secondly I focus on Afrikaans as subject discipline and on the connotations of forming a *laager* (see footnote below) which is, sometimes unjustly and frequently deservedly, associated with Afrikaans.

1 Hans Pienaar's words when reporting for the *Sunday Times* on the Wits Winter School in 1993.

2 'Forming a laager' ['lɑ:gə||-ər] corresponds with both the literal and figurative meaning of the US English phrase, 'circling the wagons'. The term 'unlaagering' [ʌn'lɑ:gə||-ərɪŋ] is the action of relinquishing such a fortified, military-style blockade.

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3. Thirdly I consider *unlaagering* in a time of globalisation.

4. Lastly I wish to look beyond the *laager* of Afrikaans, to the *laagering* of human sciences. To my mind, *unlaagering* is also called for within the broader human sciences.

I bring many issues to the fore, but offer few answers, and for that I apologise upfront. I have an excuse: I am merely kicking off the colloquium. It is fine for answers to follow later.

The title conceived by the organisers for this colloquium speaks volumes. On the one hand the title is weighed down by connotations related to a long history of a certain section of Afrikaans speaking people: that section of Afrikaans speakers whose forefathers could *laager* (circle the wagons). This might very well be one of the important points to address during the course of this colloquium, this tendency to consider Afrikaans from the vantage point of the history of a certain section of Afrikaans speakers. I will attend to that shortly.

On the other hand the title rests on at least two assumptions: the first is the assumption that the academic practice of Afrikaans (its teaching and research) has "*laagered*" (circled the wagons), that Afrikaans as subject discipline is practiced in isolation (an assumption which begs critical investigation). The second assumption is suggested by the prefix, namely that this supposed "*laager*" position, like a military blockade, needs to be relinquished. Exactly what this means also requires careful consideration. Possibly more lucid: when does one describe a subject discipline as belonging to a *laager*, and what is meant by relinquishing the *laager*? (This latter idea also relates to the tendentious discussions around decolonisation of higher education, a topic which sometimes elicits the very argument that the separate disciplines should be abolished, should be rethought in the postcolonial context.)

As point of departure for this reflection on the above-mentioned ideas, I refer to an earlier attempt to "*unlaager*" Afrikaans.

## 1. A history of "unlaagering"

A quarter of a century ago, in June 1993, on the eve of the democratic turn in South African history, a large "Winter Forum" was held at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). The title of the forum, *"Afrikaans uit die doofpot"* (literally meaning 'Afrikaans outside the dousing pot'), derives from the then recently published novel *Kroniek uit die doofpot* (later translated into English as *Deafening Silence*). Author John Miles was at that time still a member of the Department of Afrikaans and Dutch at the same university.

The intention of the Wits Winter Forum was clear: during the previous political dispensation Afrikaans was seriously set back through its intimate connection with the National Party government, and its association with oppression and colonisation. The idea was that Afrikaans could then, on the eve of the dawning of the post-apartheid democratisation, be freed from connotations such as being the language of the oppressor, be liberated from the idea that it is an Afrikaner white man's language; that the full story of Afrikaans might be swept out from under the carpet, as it were, and that the smothery views of Afrikaans be dissipated. The idea was that the context in which Afrikaans (and specifically Afrikaans literature) exists, would "normalise" in that Afrikaans would no longer hold a "privileged" position, and that the disconnection of Afrikaans from Afrikaner nationalism (and of Afrikaans from white Afrikaners) would lead to the language being set free from the grip of a white minority group. In all likelihood the hope was also entertained that the end of NP rule would almost automatically lead to a change of attitude towards Afrikaans, that Afrikaans would no longer be viewed as the language of oppression.

In his *Sunday Times* newspaper report on the Winter Forum (27 October 1993), Hans Pienaar concludes with the observation: "Afrikaans does not yet exist in a normal context". His reasoning is that the Wits Winter Forum attempt failed, as it did not manage to talk about Afrikaners. In his opinion the forum focussed on Afrikaans literature and a type of celebration of its thenceforth "free" status, while the political situation was largely ignored: 'Of course it is inconceivable that racism would have motivated the members of a department which has a proud history of fighting apartheid. Rather it was a most peculiar shunning of politics for "true cultural issues", and an ironic one, given the bruising battles fought with academia over the belief that one can keep culture free of politics.'

Pienaar's rapportage is therefore not as positive as one would expect. There was an excited celebration of an Afrikaans literature which had been swept out from under the proverbial carpet and rekindled from the dousing pot of apartheid history, and could therefore become a "normal" literature. However, this failed to attend sufficiently to the actual problem of Afrikaans – namely the problem that Afrikaans remained and remains linked to Afrikaners. According to him, the organisers pointedly refrained from talking about Afrikaans – and avoided touching on the idea of an Afrikaner identity because they probably saw it as unnecessary given that Afrikaans would, with the demise of the apartheid regime, suddenly be released from ethnic connotations – that "Afrikaans out of the dousing pot" would also mean "Afrikaans freed from the Afrikaner hold", that Afrikaans would thenceforth exist without any political tarnish and that all attention could be focused on its literature.

Pienaar emphasises that, even if it was the intention of the organisers to avoid the concept "Afrikaners" due to its contentious nature, they failed to achieve that. Some white Afrikaners still seize Afrikaans as the primary marker of their identity, claim it, and colour its meaning to both inclusive and exclusive effect (the erstwhile Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging, or AWB, for example), while other speakers of Afrikaans want to deliberately distance themselves from the label "Afrikaner" in an attempt to be excluded from such narrow-minded definitions, because it is appropriated by "right wing", "nationalistic" groups or individuals (in those days the AWB – today perhaps Afriforum or Steve Hofmeyer?). At the time, Pienaar held that attempts to avoid association with these groups by not mentioning the concept "Afrikaner" at the Winter Forum and rather sweeping it under the carpet, as if Afrikaans and Afrikaans literature could ever be totally free from it, were false. And I think we need to take his critical words about that conference to heart. The fact that we are discussing the same topic 25 years later shows that Afrikaans did in fact not escape the dousing pot at that time, despite the Winter Forum having been organised and attended by the greatest "liberal" minds of the time. This should sound a warning to not sweep this connectedness of Afrikaans and Afrikaners under the carpet yet again.

Pienaar quotes Johan Degenaar: "Pretending that one's identity is created by oneself, is undemocratic." To talk about Afrikaans one must also talk about Afrikaner identity and failing to do so, Pienaar argues, constitutes a form of censorship:

> However, this amounts to censorship, even when it is done consciously to demonstrate non-allegiance to Afrikaner-hood. What springs to mind is the way in which Germans, for decades, refused to debate the problematics surrounding the word "German", with the results evident today. […] Afrikaans-speakers, especially those in positions of power such as the Wits conference convenors, owe it to their fellow South Africans to speak up on what it means to be Afrikaners, even (perhaps particularly) if it entails denying that it means anything. Afrikaans does not yet exist in a normal context.

The fact that, 25 years after the official end of apartheid, departments of Afrikaans at most universities in the northern half of the country still exist by the grace of mainly white mother tongue speakers, and the fact that it is not popular or even, in a neutral way, simply taken as an interesting subject by large numbers of non-mother tongue students, confirms that the language still has a negative connotation. And the reason is that the language is still intimately associated with a certain type of Afrikaans speaker, with a certain type of Afrikaans, and because Afrikaans undoubtedly does not yet exist in a "normal context".

The word "*unlaagering*" naturally stems from the idea of forming a *laager* or encampment, the proverbial "circling of the wagons" as explained in the footnote on the first page of this article,

an expression which evokes the history of the Voortrekkers (migrating Dutch-speaking settlers in South Africa) and summons an image of inclusion of an "us" inside the *laager* to be safe from a threatening "them" outside. This *laager* is, however, not necessarily a voluntary encampment, but is instead frequently experienced by Afrikaans-speakers as "us" having been forced into a *laager*, and that, for example, the mere mention of affiliation with a department of Afrikaans implicitly and pre-emptively connects one to the Freedom Front, Afriforum, Steve Hofmeyr, nostalgia for the previous dispensation or, straight away, to racism.

*Unlaagering* therefore in the first instance demands that we clearly express what it means to be an Afrikaner and what it means to be Afrikaans, and to say that it does not necessarily imply "white" and "racist", that it is not about a fight to protect white privilege. But one may only speak for oneself, who would dare to profess this on behalf of Afrikaans speakers? And even though one can endlessly repeat that "we aren't all like that", it sounds hollow. Saying "I did not know" does not help, neither does confessing one's remorse and apologising, nor does saying "I always dissented in my heart".

On top of that, strong statements to distance oneself from those who are happy with the linking of Afrikaans as subject to Afrikaners, may lead to a loss of students, the very students who take Afrikaans at university in the hope to find a shelter against the English and multiracial university in a last, white, separate enclave!

The need for *unlaagering* expressed by the colloquium organisers is therefore related to that which Gilliomee calls the "Afrikaner debate on survival":

> During the entire twentieth century Afrikaners who campaigned for Afrikaans were confronted with a key issue which they never answered properly. The question was: is the Afrikaner community a race-based community whose language struggle is subordinate to the establishment of white supremacy? Or is it mainly a language community whose social identity is formed by the struggle for Afrikaans as public language on par with English? (Giliomee, 2004:44)

The fact that Giliomee, in a book about Afrikaners, automatically works with a particular concept of the Afrikaner which largely connects with his first question, even though he would rather link up with the second, confirms the problem indicated by Hans Pienaar.

Disengaging Afrikaans from a specific conception of Afrikaner (much as we would like to deny it) is essential for *unlaagering*. This can be done in two ways – first by departments of Afrikaans taking a clear stand to redefine Afrikaans so that everyone may see it is not a language struggle or a white struggle, but something totally different. Perhaps the so-called Carla option of Schoeman's *Na die*

*geliefde land*, the repeated indication in *Ons is nie almal so nie*. I do not know if this can be effective, I don't know how, I always thought one can simply live down the other connotations – but it does not really work. (Some years ago I entered the Berg River Canoe Marathon and trained for the event along with other paddling club members. It takes months of preparation, during which time we were on the water for roughly an hour and a half on four out of five weekdays, and paddled together for three to four hours on Saturdays. And that is not counting the hours spent together in the car travelling to various rivers. One gets to know the group of training buddies well. I was the only Afrikaans speaking team member. After six months, on a flight back from the Cape, Johnny Hayes tentatively asks me why I am not like "other Afrikaners". I ask him what he means. He reckons he and I have the same values and ideas, we think alike about the world, about being human, about politics, canoes, religion, and this way of thinking is unlike that of "other Afrikaners". When I ask which other Afrikaners he is talking about, he can't name any individuals, he can only mention Steve Hofmeyr and Afriforum, and he is at a loss when I question him about Beyers Naudé and Van Zyl Slabbert. After six months of intense togetherness he can accept me as friend, quite separate from the fact that I also happen to be Afrikaans. How will one change perceptions on a large scale? Until then one remains in the *laager*. Because, as is clear from the earlier Degenaar reference, it is undemocratic to think that you, and you alone, can determine your own identity.)

One practical way to undermine stereotypical views of Afrikaners is through active participation in the greater debates, in English, from the Afrikaans vantage point, and by many of us – so that it does not come across as mere exceptions. (But then it's always possible that those of us who do want to *unlaager* are the exceptions?)

The second way in which Afrikaans may be uncoupled from a specific conception of Afrikaner will have to emanate from people other than white Afrikaans speakers. Afrikaans as subject field will have to be a comfortable, natural terrain for speakers of Afrikaans who do not look like nearly all of us present here today. We are to a large extent still the *laager* – and we are in any case viewed as such and regarded with suspicion. And our studious clinging to certain standard language norms is part of an exclusive problem.

Might it be true that departments of Afrikaans don't offer a home for broader possibilities – regarding language usage, regarding prescribed works, regarding the approach? And this is a problem which relates to the point mentioned first. Individuals who dare to visit the *laager* are immediately and far too easily included in the *laager* (or reluctantly allocated to the *laager* – which Nathan Trantraal inveighs against with such clarity) and would therefore rather avoid it.

## 2. *Unlaagering* of Afrikaans as academic discipline

The idea that Afrikaans as academic discipline can be *unlaagered* (and the insinuation that it should be *unlaagered*) presupposes that Afrikaans as discipline is in a *laager*, be it a *laager* deliberately formed for fear of threats, or because speakers of Afrikaans are forced into a *laager*.

An easy, lazy assumption is that the subject discipline of Afrikaans has always been in a *laager*. Afrikaans as medium of instruction was introduced in 1914 – in Transvaal schools only in 1917, up to standard 1. The first Afrikaans language examinations were introduced in 1917 and in 1918 – exactly a hundred years ago, the first professors were appointed in Afrikaans – D.F. Malherbe and J.J. Smith (Bot & Kritzinger, 1926:xxxi).

Five years later in 1922 A.K. Bot and J.S.B Kritizinger's *Letterkundige Leesboek* ("Literary Reader") appeared, to fill the teaching needs. This *Letterkundige Leesboek* which offers an overview, an anthology as well as a history of Afrikaans literature, provides a rather useful insight into how the teaching of Afrikaans literature was viewed at that stage.

The first paragraph of their foreword reads as follows:

> In compiling this book, we intended a dual purpose. First of all, we wanted to show our friend and adversary, kinsman and stranger, that there is an Afrikaans literature. It is Afrikaans through and through, and does not want to be anything else. The main goal, however, is to help young students. Afrikaans literature is occupying an increasingly important position in our High Schools, Teacher-training and University colleges. It is for that line of education that this book wishes to serve as an aid, in the moulding of literary discernment. Literary pieces which can demonstrate the main literary phenomena have therefore been included. (Bot & Kritzinger, 1926:vii.)

This remark in one of the first textbooks for the teaching of Afrikaans literature naturally speaks of a sense of pride, the awareness that something like an Afrikaans literature exists is acknowledged and placed on display. One might retrospectively say that that body of Afrikaans literature is read in isolation, but this cannot as such be viewed as the *laagering* of Afrikaans literature teaching. It is after all, at the start of the 20th century, common practice at European schools and universities for literatures of distinct languages to be studied – usually alongside Latin.

At times we quite readily assume, through the lens of a unilateral historiography, that all older efforts to study literature were constrained by a blind nationalism, and that the purpose of teaching Afrikaans was simply to serve the interests of Afrikaner nationalism. Implied here is that one can readily believe that the history of teaching Afrikaans was (from the word go and with little ado) guided by this nationalistic aspiration, and that this led to *laagering*.

In the Introduction they position Afrikaans literature within the "Dutch literature": "It is a remarkable phenomenon," writes Bot and Kritzinger in 1922, "that the last half a century has seen an unprecedented burgeoning in Dutch literature in all three of its branches, Dutch, Flemish and Afrikaans" (Bot & Kritzinger, 1926:ix). They expressly state that Dutch literature "previously had a classical past" and that Flemish literature "burgeoned until the sixteenth century and began resurging by the mid-nineteenth century" and that Afrikaans is new born. The origin of an "own literature in Flanders as well as in South Africa" was, according to them, "a natural development of an own artistic sense" and they state expressly: "Pure art is always national".

This conception of art is not foreign to that era and, indeed, many debates on world literature in our own time boast similar points of departure. They reason as follows:

> There is no such thing as international art. Even if Dutch were the national language of South Africa, the literature of this country still would not correspond to that of the Netherlands. If it is true that all word art is individual, how much more will it not be true about literatures of different races. And surely nowadays no one will deny that the insignificant colony of a few centuries ago has produced an own independent race? (Bot & Kritzinger, 1926:ix)

Their emphasis on "race" may trigger an overhasty mental connection with the dilemma of seventy years later, of which Pienaar speaks in his criticism of the "Afrikaans uit die doofpot" conference. But Bot and Kritzingers' remarks about race are followed by another comment, this time about language, with a finer nuance:

> But over and above the distinction in race there is also distinction in language. Regardless of how differently we may think about the origin, the value, the authoritative say of the Afrikaans language, the fact is that the language exists and has born literary fruits (Bot & Kritzinger, 1926:ix).

In addition it is clear that Bot and Kritzinger, with this first textbook for the study of Afrikaans literature, do not want to form a laager, when they argue:

> While artistic expression is coupled to nationality there is nevertheless an art appreciation which one could call international. An American can enjoy a Rembrandt canvas, and we a poem by Longfellow. And if we value a multifaceted education, it is imperative that we take note of the best literary works of all ages, even if in translation (Bot & Kritzinger, 1926:ix).

They also immediately acknowledge that Afrikaans literature is small in scope:

> Our harvest is still slim when we compare it to the pen fruit of the older countries. We have few word artists. Pure art criticism is near fully absent in our magazines. Public appreciation is negligible and confused, and the readership is small. Our young people – thanks to the lamentable method of prescribed books at certain exams – have only in the past few years begun to realise that there is an Afrikaans literature (Bot & Kritzinger, 1926:x).

Nonetheless, they expressly say that the "ideal of literary study is not [allowed to be] anything but the evoking of deep emotion when encountering beauty" (Bot & Kritzinger, 1926:x).

The teaching practice might have been aimed at fostering nationalist needs, and the teaching of Afrikaans might have been encouraged for that reason. However, it does not seem as if these attempts at teaching necessarily pointed to *laagering* and its concomitant, unhealthy self-patronage. There is an apparent awareness of the limited scope and quality of literature and literary criticism, and attempts to position the study of Afrikaans literature within a larger international context.

This does not mean that the teaching and practice of Afrikaans did not contribute to *laagering*. In 1938, D.J. Opperman completed his MA dissertation, *Afrikaans literary criticism until 1922*, under the supervision of Dr. Nienaber at Natal University. In his essay "The beginning of our literary criticism" (1939 in *Wiggelstok*, 1959:1-9) he points out that the first phase of Afrikaans literary criticism was a "national criticism". He particularly includes the criticism of the "Genootskappers": "The literary criticism was a publicity bureau for literature in the national struggle of the Afrikaner" (Opperman, 1959:8). In the first place, the criticism merely extols the use of Afrikaans as written language. Secondly, there is a demand that the work must be "Afrikaans in content and spirit", must reflect the "Afrikaans reality" and that it must be "instructive, edifying, benevolent" and educational (Opperman, 1959:6). Although Opperman rejects this kind of literary criticism, he makes it clear that this phase was "of the utmost importance for the development of literature [in South Africa]" (Opperman, 1959:9).

However, Opperman praises aspects of the criticism by Gustav Preller, because, in Opperman's judgment, he began to move away from nationalist criticism: "Where literary criticism used to be subordinate to all sorts of things, Preller, as our first conscious critic, comes with a literary ideal" (Opperman, 1959:10).

Rialette Wiehahn (1965:21) includes Preller among critics for whom the "reflection of a national reality" is the main criterion. For her, the gradual detachment of nationalist criteria begins around 1922, when critics such as Malherbe, Dekker, C.M. van den Heever and H.A. Mulder emphasise the "poet personality".

In any case, according to all these opinions literary criticism had by 1922 already begun to move away from national criteria, and the practice of literature no longer entailed the forming of a *laager* around the own Afrikaans content and spirit, the Afrikaans reality, or the demand that it should be

"instructive, well-intentioned". However, one cannot proceed from this to assume that the national ideal and *laagering* was absent. For example, look at Gerhard J. Beukes' introduction to Afrikaans poetry in his and Lategan's book, *Skrywers en Rigtings*, which was published in 1952 and was reprinted seven times, the last being in 1973: "Suffering is as indispensable for deepening a nation's spiritual goods, as joy is for the peaceful expansion and deployment thereof" (1973:1). Beukes writes that the work of the first Afrikaans language movement (Eerste Afrikaanse Taalbeweging) and the Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners (GRA) held little literary value because the "nation was still leading a far too cheerful and carefree existence around the flesh pots of Egypt to understand the need for interiorisation and deepening of pursuit". After rebuking Afrikaners for sending their children to English schools, he comes to the dramatic next move in his introduction:

> And then, like a mighty shock, the Anglo-Boer War exploded across the northern Republics. It shook through all the faintness and half-heartedness like a lightning bolt and shook our nation in its deepest *raison d'être*. In a cruel but powerful manner they were made aware that there was something in the nation's existence worth suffering for. (…) And the disillusionment and bewilderment that followed, permeated through the life of every Boer.

These kinds of views can, of course, be viewed as a kind of *laagering*. The idea of literature as an expression of a nation's spirit is, as such, not that strange. Undeniably, the teaching was in part a kind of propaganda with the (very emotional) emphasis on the unjust treatment of the Afrikaner, with the literature being an expression thereof, and the act of studying it thus an encouragement of Afrikaner nationalism.

Although there are these elements of *laagering*, there is a long tradition of Afrikaans literature that expressly does not want to be inside the *laager*, a tradition of a dissident literature – Eugene Marais was often claimed for the national ideal, whilst that was clearly not the purpose of his creative work. The increasing emphasis on aesthetic criticism advocated by Opperman and which was later also practiced and discussed by Van Wyk Louw, also wanted to undermine the idea of literature for the national ideal. An interesting tension presents: on the one hand, there is the insistence on a body of literature that strives for aesthetic ideals, rather than narrow nationalism and a literary criticism which views literature within the broader domain of all written works, rather than within the more restricted Afrikaans nationalism. On the other hand, there is pride in an Afrikaans body of literature that is in fact aesthetically accomplished.

Afrikaans literature – especially since the 1960s – is, however, a dissident literature and in the 1960s the authors often come into conflict with authorities. It may be a loyal resistance (to echo Louw's essay "lojale verset"), but the work of some of the writers of the sixties definitely revolted against the

more narrow-minded nationalism – hence the sharp debates between, for example, Chris Barnard and Breyten Breytenbach. Indeed, Ingrid Jonker and André Brink frequently argued that Afrikaans should not stand in isolation, and wrote about Afrikaans literature in English publications.

In a letter written in the early sixties by Etienne Leroux to Jan Rabie he says that his writing in Afrikaans is mere coincidence; his actual goal is to write good novels. He simply writes in Afrikaans because it is the language he knows best. His aim is not to write Afrikaans novels, but to write world-class novels, coincidentally in Afrikaans (and states that he is glad he is not Zulu because then he would have had even fewer readers).

However, before one assumes too readily that Afrikaans literature did not form a *laager* in the 1960s, bear in mind Breyten Breytenbach's comment on the Afrikaans authors of the era (the Sestigers) in his famous "A view from outside" speech at the Sestiger Summer School in 1973. In the speech famous for his words, "we are a bastard nation with a bastard language" (2015:12), Breytenbach has the following to say about Afrikaans writers, specifically the Sestigers:

> We helped build the walls, we maintain them; now they have become the walls of our prison. From time to time we mount the walls to see if the night has not yet passed. One moment we think our literature can be compared to "the best in the world", the next we sneak around with both tails between our legs, tearing at our own breasts because we are snubbed and jeered at everywhere. We are in Africa and we are not Africans. We go to Holland, to France, and we realise they lied to us. We are not Europeans. We go to England and we realise that we are Boere trying to live like English here under the Southern Cross. By whom shall we measure ourselves? For whom do we write our distorted, pretentious, nouveau riche works, apart from the few university friends who, by prescribing the works, afford it a right to exist? We are in nature's garb and we don't even realise it. We try to knit little blankets of great values and even greater concepts borne from other cultures, without an inkling of their meaning. What do we know about the rest of South Africa? Do we have any knowledge other than the feared knowledge of the boss? (…) I would argue that our literature, no matter how clever it might be at times, is largely the product of our stagnation and alienation and that, given its framework of origin, it cannot be otherwise. (Breytenbach, 2015:13-14).

I quote this warning from Breytenbach in its entirety because it can also serve as confirmation that we may be overhasty to categorise of Afrikaans literature as dissident literature - as a literature that is chipping away at the *laager*. As Breyten argues, during the "bloom period of the sixties" Afrikaans writers were busy collecting "nice fat prizes and fighting to death over who should get the Hertzog prize", but that time coincided with "a period during which more and more unread and therefore non-existent books of fellow South African writers were prohibited" (ibid:14). Even this boom of rebellious Afrikaans literature was, in a way, still a literature of *laagering*.

The emphasis on aesthetic criticism, rather than nationalist criticism practiced by people such as T.T. Cloete and A.P. Grové, as well as the emphasis on formalism and later on structuralism, actually

helped construct the *laager*. Implicit in the denial of the social implications of a text is the act of forming a *laager*.

The rise of theory in the 1970s, coupled with the changing social conditions in South Africa, contributed to the *unlaagering* of Afrikaans literature study for many students during the 1980s.

As Ronel Johl indicates in her work *Kritiek in Krisis* (Criticism in Crisis), the late seventies and early eighties saw a crisis in Afrikaner ranks over apartheid and increasing state oppression and censorship, while there was also an "explosion" of theories that "sounded the death knell" for the autonomy of the literary text (Johl, 1985:x).

The theory explosion largely contributed to literature from being subjected to text-focused to increasingly contextual investigations. The influence of the Frankfurt School's critical theory and the emergence of cultural studies challenged textual approaches and contributed to the fact that, in departments of Afrikaans, Afrikaans texts were no longer admired simply for their beauty or their importance to Afrikaans literature, but placed in a broader context – often specifically with the emphasis on how Afrikaans literature is exclusive – in terms of race, class, gender.

Johl goes on to claim in the same study that the rejection by the late 1970s of the New Criticism's text-based approaches was more than just the rejection of a perception of literature, it was also part of a rebellion against Calvinism, all kinds of taboos, conventions and patterns of expectation (xii).

It is not only a literary model that is rejected, but "Afrikaans speakers who feel alienated and deliberately detach themselves from the sphere of the Afrikaner way of thinking and Afrikaner identity, aspects that have been able to unite and incite most of the Afrikaner people since 1948" (xiii).

Additionally, text-based literary criticism in the 1970's was experiencing pressure from the idea of "engagement" of literature – especially in the sense as used by Brink (Johl, 1985:109).

I think that many Afrikaans students who have been confronted with this critical theory and the idea of "engagement" since the 1980s have had the experience that their education challenged them to break out of the *laager* of Calvinism, patriarchy, and nationalism.

The problem is, however, two-fold. The emergence of a critical awareness of the *laager*, that issue which everyone present here today experiences, mainly within the *laager*, applies to 'The Included'. And secondly, it is not enough to open the *laager* to others – this aspect of Afrikaans and a department of Afrikaans cannot be "sold" to the larger community. One of the strongest points

of evidence is that the excellent Department of Afrikaans and Dutch at Wits who organised the Winter Forum no longer exists. Despite their critical points of departure and their open opposition of *laagering,* and of the automatic connection between Afrikaans and Afrikaner nationalism, they could not attract students from outside the *laager*, and it reached a point where there was such a reduction in numbers within the *laager* (ironically the very ones who had been opposed to *laagering*) that the department had to close.

Thus, in a certain sense, *unlaagering* can possibly lead to disappearance – something to think about. Perhaps also in terms of Van Wyk Louw's idea of 'Voortbestaan in geregtigheid' (Continued existence in justice)?

I would like to raise two more issues. Here the focus is more on literature (but I suspect that linguists will be able to think about the study of Afrikaans linguistics in a similar way, within a wider field of linguistics) in favour of the conception of Afrikaans literature within a greater South African and world literature.

## 3. *Unlaagering* in a time of globalisation: National literature vs Literature

In these times we are all too conscious of the fact that the Afrikaans literary world is a small world. However, we live in a time of growing reference to "world literature". It may never have been the case before, but today it has become impossible to investigate a small literature such as Afrikaans which is continuously in contact with other literatures, in isolation. Afrikaans writers and readers (and researchers – even specialists in the Afrikaans literature!) are probably far more exposed to English literature than to Afrikaans literature.

In fact, it has never been desirable to investigate Afrikaans literature in an exclusively Afrikaans literary history, but in current times it has become impossible to read an Afrikaans work in isolation. If Afrikaans literature is not increasingly read as part of the South African literature, and even more widely as part of African literature or "world literature", it will rapidly choke in isolation. This route of a wider contextualisation, of studying "Afrikaans literature in the world" may be one route out of the *laager*. Let's consider this possibility for a moment.

Goethe expressed the desire for a world literature, a *Weltliteratur*. In *The Curtain*, Milan Kundera again takes up this idea. He writes that there are two basic contexts within which a work of art can be placed: either within the context of the history of the nation from which it comes (a smaller context), or in the context of the supranational art history (the wider context).

He argues that we are accustomed to placing music within the wider context – this is the "supra-national art history". For the musicologist, it doesn't really matter what language Bach or Verdi spoke. One could certainly say that the same applies to the visual arts: the language of Picasso or Michelangelo and the nations from which they originate are of lesser importance – their work is included in all art histories.

Literature is different. Literature is inextricably linked to the language in which it is written and it is studied worldwide at universities in language departments where it is placed in the smaller, national context. (Of course, in the case of South Africa, there is an even smaller context, namely that of a language group within the national borders. Often, literature is only read and discussed in this smaller context.)

Kundera views the fragmentation in the study of, for example, novel writing in Europe into the smaller national contexts of the various European countries and languages, as an "irreparable intellectual loss" (Kundera, 2006:35). For him the history of novel writing is intimately related to renewals that have repeatedly taken place in different countries as a consequence of novelists' reaction to each other's work: Laurence Sterne responded to Rabelais. Diderot was influenced by the work of Sterne. Time and again Fielding found inspiration in Cervantes, while Stendhal compared himself to Fielding. The tradition of Flaubert was continued by James Joyce and Hermann Broch based the poetics of his craft on the work of Joyce. In his autobiography Gabriel García Márques confesses that he discovered another possibility for novel writing, a new possible direction, when he read Kafka.

The idea of a *Weltliteratur* originated with Goethe who wanted to see literature being studied in such a wider context (Damrosch, 2003). Even now this idea of a world literature has still not realised. We continue to speak of national literatures, a history of literatures, rather than the history of literature.

An event like this where Afrikaans literature is discussed can easily degenerate into a kind of provincialism. Kundera warns against the provincialism of small language groups. Sometimes wordsmiths from small language groups and the readers of their work refuse to view their own literature in a wider context. Artists are often expected not to set their sights on world literature but to remain chained to the context in which they write. This becomes a requirement – and the justification for this is that the survival of the language depends on the localness of their contribution.

On the other hand, the great languages or nations can act equally "provincial". Sometimes speakers of the 'big' languages do not even take note of the literatures of other languages. There is a feeling

of superiority that they do not need the other literatures, nor the knowledge of what is written in other languages. Kundera also defines this "provincialism" as the refusal to view one's own literature in the wider context.

In literary criticism, the result of provincialism is possessiveness and the limiting of each artwork to the role it plays in the small group.

Where Afrikaans, as a small language, finds itself in such an "endangered" position, one must guard against demanding that authors should in the first place not be making a contribution to Literature, and not belong to The Aesthetic, but should always, in the first place, serve the "nation". This type of demand is fatal for any meaningful contribution to a particular art form.

But the renunciation of local demands in favour of a broader world literature, of a participation in the greater literary history, emphatically does not mean that the particular way in which a certain language enables a perspective from a particular location should be abandoned. On the contrary, it is precisely the different ways of viewing made possible by a variety of languages that often lead to the renewal of the different literary forms.

When Franco Moretti pleads for "distant reading" in order to come to grips with the greater stage of world literature, he also simply relies on the opinions of critics who read attentively, on local literary criticism.

Thus, although it may sound lovely to suggest that Afrikaans literature can break out of the laager by being placed within a greater world literature, the approach is not without problems. Someone should still be able to, and want to, read Afrikaans books in Afrikaans, write reviews about them, prescribe them and teach them. And once again, this happens within a Department of Afrikaans. The manner in which this is done may well constitute attempts to break out of the laager – whether with the aid of theory, or through the references and embedding it in a broader context. Nevertheless, we have seen in the past that, no matter how commendable such efforts may be, they did not ensure the survival of the Department of Afrikaans at Wits, they did not lead to the dismantling of the laager from the outside.

The role that translation plays in this regard may be important, but maybe even more so the obligation for academics to bring Afrikaans literature to the attention of a wider public – by writing in English about Afrikaans.

It is worth noting that all works on the shortlist for the *Sunday Times*'s Barry Ronge Fiction Prize earlier this year were originally written in Afrikaans and that the winner, Harry Kalmer, had of

course first written his *1 000 stories about Johannesburg* in Afrikaans. This may be rather a more successful way of breaking out of the laager. (But, one wouldn't know if those tracks leading back to Afrikaans will be erased.)

## 4. The Laager of the human sciences

In conclusion, there is yet another type of *laager* where departments of Afrikaans along with other departments of languages, and for that matter, many human sciences, encircle themselves. It is especially visible in defences of the human sciences in the time of the widely mentioned fourth industrial revolution.

I don't think that the study of language and literature can, or dares to, be exclusively claimed within a *laager* of "humanoria" of the human spirit and soul. Apropos of CP Snow's famous 1959 lecture "The two cultures and the scientific revolution" we encounter frequent references to the "two culture debate". On the one hand the first culture of "natural sciences" and on the other hand the second culture of "human sciences". Snow was particularly critical of the fact that most politicians are trained in the "second culture" rather than in natural sciences and therefore make poor decisions. The problem with this type of debate is that it tends to get intense when one of the two cultures demands the position of exclusive right to all knowledge.

There is little doubt that human sciences are in trouble. Student numbers in human sciences are shrinking, the young generation of academics do not find work, and morale is low.

Steven Pinker has the following comment:

> No thinking person should be indifferent to our society's disinvestment in the humanities. A society without historical scholarship is like a person without memory: deluded, confused, easily exploited. Philosophy grows out of the recognition that clarity and logic don't come easily to us and that we're better off when our thinking is refined and deepened. The arts are one of the things that make life worth living, enriching human experience with beauty and insight. Criticism is itself an art that multiplies the appreciation and enjoyment of great works. Knowledge in these domains is hard won, and needs constant enriching and updating as the times change (*Enlightenment Now*, 406).

While it is true that anti-intellectual tendencies in our society and the commercialisation of universities undoubtedly add to the deterioration of the human sciences, it is equally true that we, in the human sciences and the arts, may be contributing to the damage. Our studies are often trapped in a haze of abstruseness and fuzziness, rendering its intrinsic value noticeable to only a few fellow inductees. This *laager* has the potential to become really small and it might also be

necessary to break out of the human sciences *laager* by cooperating with the natural sciences, where new possibilities exist. Art and culture and the community are products of the human brain and originate in our ability to observe, in our emotions, our ways of thinking, and cooperation with the biological investigations; the big data investigations can hone our insights and may also attract young talent again.

There are many new possibilities for investigation that open up through research into the human brain, about memory, about cognition, about understanding, about allocation of meaning. We should guard against becoming *laagered* in the *laager* of a second culture.

I realise that I am not providing answers. This is an attempt at opening up some possibilities, to look past the obvious, and to question presuppositions.

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