

The popular reception of Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* and the making of literary systems

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Abstract

Marlene van Niekerk's novel *Triomf* (1994) provides an eviscerating critique of the effects of the cultural, discursive, and physical separations of race and class enforced by apartheid. To the outside world, Van Niekerk offers in *Triomf* an in-depth and varied view of the Afrikaner's history and culture, thereby providing what readers might experience as a kind of informative insight into this demographic group and South Africa – here particularly the least empowered demographic of Afrikaners who lived under apartheid. But outside of the text, the impact of the novel has also been significant – first in Afrikaans literature, and later also in South African English literature (and beyond) through the success of the translation of the novel by Leon de Kock (1999). The purpose of this study is to revisit the popular reception of Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* within the Afrikaans and English spheres in the first decade after 1994. This article, which focuses exclusively on a chosen set of epitexts surrounding the novel (Genette), draws attention to the overlaps and divergences between the relevant literary systems. I show that while two broadly conceptualised clusters of popular responses may have concretised differently in the English and Afrikaans literary systems – and these differences should not be overlooked – the responses to the text also evidence varied and unexpected links between these systems that disavow any claims to narrowly defined literary cultures.

1. Introduction

Marlene van Niekerk's novel *Triomf* (1994, translated into English by Leon de Kock, 1999) is today considered one of the most finely crafted and impactful South African novels produced in the last three decades.¹ Both the original Afrikaans text and the English translation have been critically lauded and have, along with Van Niekerk's later novel, *Agaat* (2004), catapulted the author into the international literary arena.² To wit, it is hard to find a critic or scholar today who would not recognise *Triomf* as a significant contribution to South African literature during the 1990s.

In retrospect, contemporary readers might forget – or be unaware of – the fraught political years between the publication of Van Niekerk's preceding short story volume, *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* (1992), and her first novel, *Triomf*. While the novel appeared in 1994, it was written during a period where a peaceful democratic transition in South Africa was not guaranteed. Nevertheless, the novel rather presciently predicted a peaceful transition of power and the disenchantment that accompanies the failure of sudden transformation, while still thoughtfully acknowledging the intensity of the ever-present right-wing fearmongering leading up to the landmark elections in April 1994. Through its tragicomic depiction of the broken and incestuous Benade family, the novel provides an eviscerating critique of the effects of the cultural, discursive, and physical separations of race and class enforced by apartheid. To the outside world, Van Niekerk offers in *Triomf* an in-depth and varied view of the Afrikaner's history and culture, thereby providing what readers might experience as a kind of informative insight into this demographic group and South Africa – here particularly the least empowered demographic of Afrikaners who lived under apartheid.

Leon de Kock's English translation of the novel, which first appeared in 1999, is widely considered to have been a critical success, both in South Africa and abroad.³ As was also the case with *Agaat* and its English translation by Michiel Heyns, there has been an ever-present slippage in the way some readers, critics and scholars reference *Triomf*. By this I mean that, in many ways, the original Afrikaans novels and their English translations have become synonymous, even if only in general academic conversation. There are linguistic distinctions and differences, as well as an awareness of a text's situatedness within different literary systems, that allow one to distinguish between a source text and its translation as different, yet related, texts. However, such notions may fall well outside of the frame of reference of the average reader and may even appear as academic vagaries to those scholars who find themselves outside the field of translation studies. In the case of *Triomf*, this kind of view of the Afrikaans text and its English translation as, in essence, the same text, elides the overlapping but very different literary traditions of Afrikaans and (South African) English literature that these texts draw on and circulate with. What might seem like an innocent oversight, could also be "the relegation (willingly or unwillingly) of all experiences outside of what can be translated into English into insignificance" (Fourie, 2023:69).

The purpose of this article is to counter such relegation through revisiting the popular reception of Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* within the Afrikaans and English spheres in the first decade after 1994. Considering the case of the English translations of *Triomf*, as well as Van Niekerk's subsequent success, one might upon first glance assume that there is quite an equitable relationship between the literary systems of Afrikaans, a minor language, and English, a major language, with the former receiving a kind of well-deserved recognition by the latter because of the subsummation of one of its great works into English.⁴ As I have written elsewhere, however, this type of bartering between literary systems

is often iniquitous, if not in its intentions, then in its results. The actual reach of the minor partner is still limited by preconditions that serve to grow the major partner's literary canon by means of exorbitant gain, whereas the superficial reciprocal exchange can also easily peter out into irreparable loss on the part of the minor trading partner, because of the fossilising of a homogenising reading culture and an associated view of the non-English world (2023:69).

I would not contest the value and import of translation, and Van Niekerk's novels are a good example of the positive possibilities created by translation, but the more negative aspects of this process cannot be ignored. Most obvious of these is "the continued normalisation of the homogenising influence of English, whereby translation is not a way for different cultures to converse, but simply a route through which English enjoys being spoken to on its own terms" (Fourie, 2023:70). In revisiting a text through any kind of literary historiographic work, it therefore remains imperative to draw attention to the overlaps and divergences between the relevant literary systems so that one may speak back to the homogenising influence of English. Furthermore, it offers the opportunity to widen access to those parts of one system that might have previously been inaccessible to English readers.

In studying the reception of *Triomf*, one must inevitably rely on those texts surrounding the novel that can be termed *epitexts*. The notion of the epitext, along with the text and peritext, forms part of what Gérard Genette has conceptualised as constitutive of the so-called paratext. The paratext, according to Genette, includes all the elements of a text that enable the text to become a book (1997:1). While we cannot always determine clearly whether these elements should be regarded as "belonging to the text," Genette writes, "they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to present it" whereby the book's "presence in the world" and its subsequent reception and consumption is supported by the paratext (1997:1; original emphasis). The paratext has much to do with the physical copy of the book (name of the author, title, cover design, etc.), while the epitext, which is more important for this study, is any paratextual element that does not materially form part of the text, and, as such, exists outside of the book (Genette, 1997:344). The publisher creates a part of the epitext surrounding a

book through marketing campaigns, and the media and the academe further contribute to the epitext through book reviews (in print and online), author interviews, lectures, academic articles, papers, and colloquia. The epitext therefore contributes significantly to the processes that may lead to the inclusion of the text in the canon (Fourie, 2009:68).

It seems apt to offer a summative, collective overview of the initial reception of *Triomf* by literary critics as part of this special issue of *Stilet*, which marks the 30th anniversary of the publication of this influential novel. A literary historiographical project of this type, which traces the popular reception of the novel, is valuable for the way in which it helps us to understand literary cultures – especially in relation to texts such as *Triomf* that were produced during periods of incredible and meaningful (if very imperfect) political change. But such a project also deepens our understanding of relevant literary systems, while simultaneously providing access to readers and scholars who might not be familiar with a particular language or literary tradition, as may be the case here for non-Afrikaans readers of *Triomf*. In this article, I show that while two broadly conceptualised clusters of popular responses may have concretised differently in the English and Afrikaans literary systems – and these differences should not be overlooked – the responses to the text also evidence varied and unexpected links between these systems that disavow any claims to narrowly defined literary cultures.

2. Literary historiography and the Afrikaans/English relationship

To look back at the reception of a literary work is to be granted a glimpse into a literary history of a text that might not make itself immediately evident in the present. To write about this history is, as Bernard Lategan has it, not just a retrieval of the past, but a process of making sense, or making meaning, of our recollection of the past (2011:110). In following Jörn Rüsen (1997), Lategan writes that creating this kind of meaning is a complex process of mediation – mediation between the past and the future through the linking of expectations for the future with experiences of the past, through placing contingent events within the overarching trajectories of history, and through opening new perspectives in ensnaring scenarios and apparently immutable realities (2011:110). Through such mediation, he writes, an historical awareness is advanced in which the past can be presented in narrativized form to understand the present *in expectation of the future*. For H.P. van Coller, it is this linking of past and future that also situates literary historiography as concerned with multivocality (2011:685). By considering the reception of *Triomf* in the first years after its publication, one may distil something of that moment and context into a narrative that provides some access to that multivocal past.

To write an exhaustive exploration of the relationship between the Afrikaans and English literary systems would be an almost impossible task. In lieu of such an endeavour, which clearly falls outside the scope of this article, I offer a brief contextualisation. While both languages are classified as Germanic and they do therefore share certain linguistic similarities, these are not strong. Indeed, their geographical presence and continued contemporary influence in

the country have been brought about through processes of colonisation and indigenisation that are in many ways incomparable to the development of European nations and languages between the 16th and late 20th centuries. Importantly, Afrikaans and English are but two of the many languages spoken in South Africa, and their literatures contribute to South Africa's "extensive [...] literary range", as David Attwell and Derek Attridge call it in deference to the enduring quandary of defining a national literature for the country (2012:2).

One could argue that, rather than the dependent relationship between literary systems being guided by (either or both) geographic proximity or a primarily shared language, we see in South Africa a system that in some ways is less of a reflection of the geopolitical realities and cultural histories that still hearken back to the idea of nation states that are closely bound to a particular language, and more accurately reflect the postcolonial realities and cultural histories that have been entangled and continue to be entangled (in the sense of the notion as utilised by Sarah Nuttall in her 2009 book, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-apartheid*) within a complex, multilingual, modern nascent state. But in some cases, the rendezvous points that might exist between literary systems may indeed not reflect entanglement, but rather a parallel co-existence that mirrors the racial, linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic silos imposed by apartheid that still define so much of the contemporary nation. Perhaps, then, it would be better to conceive of the interaction between literary systems here as what can occur when signals are disrupted or influenced by noise – a mixed signal, if you will – resulting in an altered reception. At the risk of straining the metaphor, we have to do with a concurrency of literary and cultural signals. What interests us as readers are the ultimate practices of reception gained from these mixed signals and what that allows us to surmise about South African literature more broadly.

Enter the case of Van Niekerk's *Triomf* – a hugely successful and lauded novel, in both Afrikaans and English translation. While much may have changed in the way Afrikaans and English literature have co-existed (and entangled) since the 1990s, I wish to gain through my overview here a snapshot into the relationship between two of South Africa's literary systems in the first years of the democratic transition. I am thus reminded of a question that has been posed regularly by South African literary scholars for some time: Should a literature be defined "by its relationship to a particular language, or whether the shaping influences cut across language barriers?" (Attwell and Attridge, 2012:3). While my attempt to provide some answer to this may not be definitive, an analysis of the reception of *Triomf* and its English translation may yet provide some valuable insight into the interoperations of literature in South Africa. How does each constitute, respectively, the novel, the author, and itself in relation to these? Does the reception of *Triomf* and its English translation represent an instance in which we can see influences cutting across language barriers, or does it precisely highlight the limits of such a possibility?

3. The Popular Reception of *Triomf* in Afrikaans

I begin with an overview of the reception of the original Afrikaans version of *Triomf* shortly after the novel was published in 1994. I seek to draw attention to the reception repeatedly focusing on Van Niekerk's situatedness within Afrikaans literature and its literary tradition – a characteristic that distinguishes it most clearly from the English reception of the novel.

After beginning her writing career with two volumes of poetry,⁵ Van Niekerk debuted as prose author with the short story collection *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* (1992), which was fifteen years after the publication of her first volume of poetry. While her first short story collection was generally well received, the author was criticised for the overly intellectual nature of the stories and her lyrically profuse, leaden, baroque, and extravagant use of language.⁶ In some regard, the vulgarity of the language in *Triomf* could be seen as a response to this criticism, but initially, this was not what dominated the reception of Van Niekerk's first novel.

Some of the earliest criticism on *Triomf* to appear was in the newspaper column "Op my literêre sofa" ("On my literary sofa") by poet and academic, Joan Hambidge. Hambidge expresses apprehension towards the marketing strategy employed by Queillerie, the publisher of *Triomf*. According to Hambidge, the marketing was particularly aggressive in its strong-armed attempt to influence the critical reception of the novel by announcing the book to be the "Great Afrikaans Novel" ("Groot Afrikaanse Roman") even before it had been released to the general public (1994:3).⁷ Specifically, Hambidge was concerned by how the critical reviews for the publisher had reportedly been circulated amongst critics even before the novel's publication.

The critic acknowledges *Triomf* as a good novel but mentions that the "look-how-clever-I-am attitude" of the narrator irritates her: As was the case with her preceding short story collection, Van Niekerk's narrator still employs, according to Hambidge, gimmicks, such as the phrase "poetic licence", that seem poorly suited to the simple characters featured in the novel (Hambidge, 1994:3). Hambidge finds that the narrator patronises the characters, and she does not feel that *Triomf* quite deserves an "over the top" reception – especially, she writes, in comparison to the (implied great) texts by other authors that appeared the year before. Hambidge's critique is further accentuated by a sardonic exclamation in her conclusion: "Long live the overestimated book!" (1994:3). Although time has revealed her estimation of the book's value to be wrong, it would be fair to the critic to emphasise that her main concern here is not with *Triomf* as a text (though she nevertheless makes known her view in that regard), but instead with the marketing of the novel and how it encroaches upon the objectivity and authority of literary critics.

Hambidge also objected, in a short piece in *Die Burger* in 1995, to the (allegedly) opaque workings of the committee responsible for awarding the Noma Prize for Publishing in Africa to *Triomf* (1995:4). Amongst other claims, Hambidge accuses the committee of awarding the prize to Van Niekerk's text not because of its literary merit, but because of the novel being a politically correct choice (1995:4). Hans M. Zell, at the time secretary of the committee,

responded to these accusations, giving some explanation as to the decision-making process for the awarding of the prize, and rejecting Hambidge's claims (Zell, 1995:6). These discourses fall within debates that had raged for several years in broader South African literary scholarship and critical reception regarding the tension between the aesthetic and the political, and how this tension plays out in literary works and the larger literary system.⁸

Early reviews of Van Niekerk's novel by Fanie Olivier (1994), Barry Hough (1994) and Tom Gouws (1994) depart from the harsh nature of Hambidge's assessment. Gouws (1994:6) sees the novel as an even more incisive dissection of Afrikanerdom than *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*, while Olivier boldly situates *Triomf* with other novels of the time – such as Jeanne Goosen's *Ons is nie almal so nie* (1990), Mark Behr's *Die reuk van appels* (1993) and John Miles's *Kroniek uit die doofpot* (1991) – all, according to him, key Afrikaans texts that explore the psyche of South Africa (Olivier, 1994:10). For Olivier, *Triomf* is a comprehensive text in which a part of the Afrikaans-speaking community (and their language) takes shape in a unique way. He lauds the novel but does gesture towards what critics previously remarked about Van Niekerk's short stories as well – that is, that the narrative at times loses focus. He furthermore hints at Van Niekerk as a kind of chronicler, with the novel as a kind of rescue mission that aims to ensure that the lives of the community depicted, like the one of erstwhile Sophiatown, are not just erased by what might come after (1994:10).

Hough (1994) correspondingly praises the honesty and authenticity of the author's attempt at narrating the lives of the characters in *Triomf*, through which, he argues, the author resists – contrary to what Hambidge (1994:3) claims – looking down upon the characters (Hough, 1994:3). The imaginative power of the novel leads Hough to place Van Niekerk amongst the foremost authors of Afrikaans prose. Not only does he credit the novel for its intertextual conversations with Jochem van Bruggen's *Ampie* (1924) and the work of American playwright Eugene O'Neill, but he emphasises that the novel succeeds in providing an amusing and entertaining story. While Hambidge (1994:3) criticised the novel for imbuing its characters with a level of intellect and field of reference that seemed unconvincing, Hough sees the character Treppie as an ordering consciousness that successfully resides within the character, and not within the author (Hough, 1994:3). Hough's observation here suggests a development in the work of the author insofar as her authorial voice has become, seemingly, better disguised. What emerges clearly from the pieces by Hambidge, Hough, Olivier and Gouws is that Van Niekerk's work is very much read within the context of both her own oeuvre and, crucially for this article, the literary tradition of Afrikaans prose.

A review that is far less positive about the novel is that of Gawie Botma (1994). While he acknowledges Van Niekerk as a talented artist whose novel sometimes includes outstanding poetic descriptions and striking images, and features a liberating use of language, he finds the novel boring, and disqualifies it as contender for the title of "Great Afrikaans Novel" (Botma, 1994:5). He negatively compares *Triomf* to Goosen's *Ons is nie almal so nie*, describing the latter as shorter, subtler, more affecting, and funnier (loc. cit.).⁹ He scathingly criticises

the author for not being able to resist the temptation of purple prose, while he views the novel's political content as superficial and the characterisation as falling flat (loc. cit.). In a curious conclusion, Botma seems to undermine his own analysis of the novel when he opines that time may tell that *Triomf* is a masterpiece, mentioning that some "learned individuals" ("geleerdes") have already done so, but he does not seem to care, as long as, he sardonically writes, he never has to read the novel again (Botma, 1994:5).

Like Hough (1994), Louise Viljoen (1994) in her early newspaper review of the novel draws attention to the possible symbolic and allegorical readings of the text. She further highlights aspects of the novel that engage both with political issues and debates of the time, as well as social, cultural and political histories that remain relevant to these debates (1994:53).¹⁰ Establishing a link to Van Niekerk's earlier work, the reviewer notes the shift in the utilisation of language between, on the one hand, Van Niekerk's short stories two years earlier, and, on the other, *Triomf*. The Afrikaans of *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*, which excels in its utilisation of baroque language, is replaced in the author's debut novel with a sustained Triomf-Afrikaans that at times reaches a breath-taking crudeness (Viljoen, 1994:53). Viljoen ultimately finds, in contrast to criticism by some other reviewers, that the novel is a remarkable example of the liberating potential of the imagination (loc. cit.).

Both Viljoen (1994) and Tom Gouws (1994) comment on what they view as some postmodernist elements in the novel. The former refers specifically to the blurring of boundaries between so-called high and low literature (Viljoen, 1994:53), while the latter identifies several intertextual references to other Afrikaans texts as well as to the work of Anglo-American writers such as John Steinbeck, William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell, in addition to the Belgian writer Hugo Claus (Gouws, 1994:6). These references are well disguised in the novel, Gouws feels, as the narrative point of view enables the narrator to make the characters say "such clever words," without it clashing with the characterisation (loc. cit.).

The originality of the novel's language is also what impresses Martie Muller (1994), who compares it to a kind of musicality. Muller's book review takes the perspective that *Triomf* is an exploratory lens of the Oedipus myth, which, according to her, is utilised to explore the human condition (1994:27). She singles out the language of the novel as a highlight:

The natural originality and inexhaustibility of the language; the individuality of the expression; the sharp conciseness; the *tours de force* of the rhythmic mobility; the wealth of strong meaningful words; simplified sentence constructions; the ebullition of the colloquial language of the personas in their own idiom, can be described as the text's own music.¹¹ (Muller, 1994:27)

Rykie van Reenen (1994:3) calls the language used in the novel a copulative-scatological sociolect (“kopulatief-skatologies[e] [sosiolek]”) that might be inaccessible for “decent” readers. Van Reenen’s piece comes across as pensive, which, after the controversy the novel had elicited, was written on the invitation of the book editor of *Beeld*. Van Reenen sees the novel’s clever humorous appeal; she refers to it as a depiction of certain aspects of the Afrikaner roaringly out of control – a sort of Boer surrealism in exaggerated colour (1994:3). Though she again detects the author’s tendency to write in too much detail (as was also pointed out in relation to *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*), she views the cleverness of the character Treppie not as the author speaking too directly through the characters, but as a necessary sardonic accent that saves the novel from sentimentality (Van Reenen, 1994:3).

Not only was there controversy amongst critics, as discussed here, but the reading public also expressed some outrage about the content (or imagined content) of the novel. As an example, in two letters, one in *Die Volksblad* (1994) and another in *Die Burger* (1994), Van Niekerk’s novel is described as no triumph for the Afrikaans language or its literature (Du Preez, 1994:6) and not suitable reading material for family or friends – a conclusion that is come to despite the author of the latter letter admitting to not having read the book (Le Roux, 1994:14). The language of the novel is referred to by one reader (1994:6) as abhorrent, and it is implied that Van Niekerk (as well as fellow authors Koos Prinsloo, Mark Behr and Marita van der Vyver) are traitors to Afrikaans. In the conservative publication *Die Afrikaner*, Koos Venter sees the novel as a weapon of the Afrikaner’s “enemies” to use as reflection of the “typical” Afrikaner (Venter, 1999:8). This shows the power, and perhaps risk, associated with the epitext, since some individuals have formed a strong opinion of the text based simply on the discursive exchanges that surround it.

An early review of *Triomf* to appear in English is that of Marion Hattingh in the *Southern African Review of Books* in 1995 – well before the English translation of the novel would appear in 1999. Although Hattingh wrote this review in English, she was at the time a lecturer in the Department of Afrikaans and Dutch at the University of the Western Cape. Her approach in the review to the Afrikaans version of the novel is aimed at the English readership of the *Southern African Review of Books*, but the critic is herself firmly established in the Afrikaans literary system at the time. The review draws the reader’s attention to the novel’s reception by Afrikaans critics, calling the novel “a most important milestone in the history of Afrikaans literature” (Hattingh, 1995). The reviewer praises the novel by likening it to Etienne Leroux’s highly regarded *Sewe dae by die Silbersteins*,¹² claiming that *Triomf* “exposes the myths of a ‘new South Africa’” like Leroux’s text had exposed some of the myths of apartheid South Africa. Hattingh implies that Van Niekerk’s novel would be more accessible to Afrikaans readers (who it is implied might probably find Leroux’s work to some extent inaccessible), but that it offers in its more accessible Afrikaans a point of junction for English readers who might wish to engage with Afrikaans literature’s questioning of its own myths.

Hattingh also mentions *Triomf*'s connection to Jeanne Goosen's *Ons is nie almal so nie* (1990) – a novel that also features working class characters and engages the racial politics of South Africa – noting that, rather than repeating what Goosen achieves in her novel, Van Niekerk builds upon it, exploring “the epistemological possibilities” of the characters’ perspectives, revealed through their “self-delusion and racist self-righteousness.” The review provides an overview for the English reader of what to expect in the novel, drawing attention to its use of “a colourful and earthy, non-standard Afrikaans,” as well as the novel’s conscious oscillation between what is morally acceptable and the profane, the postmodern game it plays with so-called high and low literature, its critique of the patriarchal family and concomitant gender relations, and its illustration of the illusionary successes of sudden societal and political changes.

Around the turn of the century, Leon de Kock’s English translation of the novel appeared, and a positive review by Jo Nel (1999) of the translation appeared in Afrikaans in the newspaper *Beeld*, which indicates something of the significance with which translation into English was regarded at the time within the Afrikaans literary system. Nel comments on the authenticity of the translation, which was, according to the reviewer, probably greatly improved through the assistance of the author in the translation process (1999:6). Indeed, the use of certain Afrikaans words and phrases throughout the translation are, in the reviewer’s view, particularly successful: the reviewer feels that this situates the novel strongly within the South African context (and it is implied that the international translation, which does not use Afrikaans words and phrases in this way, will be poorer for it) (1999:6). The overtly positive reception of the translation in Britain and in the United States of America was also reported on in *Beeld* (Pretorius, 2004) and *Rapport* (Engelbrecht, 2004).

Reading the Afrikaans reviews of *Triomf*, it is clear that Van Niekerk’s work is predominantly read by these critics within the tradition of Afrikaans literature, and within the context of her own oeuvre and development as a poet and prose author. There is a strong focus on the rhythm and aesthetics of Van Niekerk’s use of Afrikaans. To a certain degree, this is understandable. The novel is in Afrikaans, after all, and Van Niekerk’s preceding literary output remains to this day available only in Afrikaans. Despite some references to international authors such as Eugene O’Neill, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner and Hugo Claus, the critique of the novel remains mostly inward looking in that Van Niekerk’s work is judged against those of her Afrikaans contemporaries, while there is a keenness to understand the novel within the author’s oeuvre (however limited it might have been at the time). Simultaneously, the reception also reveals a strong and justifiable preoccupation with the cultural and socio-political milieu in which the novel is both situated and comments upon. On the one hand, there appears to be an almost giddy excitement for the novel as an early example of Afrikanerdom emerging from beneath the yoke of apartheid (see especially Van Reenen, 1994), which chimes well with the novel’s denouement, in which the Benades do not actually have to flee Johannesburg, as they had feared and planned, but are rather underwhelmed by the mundanity of the transition (after

Lambert's violent outburst that results in the death of Pop). On the other hand, the heavy criticism that the novel presents of insular Afrikanerdom and apartheid, and the real levels of insecurity and uncertainty experienced by Afrikaners at the time, which are also depicted in the novel (albeit with comedic absurdity), conversely also drew in the reception attempts at cultural policing, judgement and excommunication (see Du Preez, 1994; Le Roux, 1994; and Venter, 1999). To put it plainly, the novel touched both a progressive and a conservative nerve.

In the Afrikaans reception of *Triomf*, certain characteristics that have come to define Van Niekerk's work – somewhat redefining a genre, her lyricism, and her engagement with present-day issues – are both criticised and praised, with definitive emphasis on the latter. What stands out for many of the reviewers is not just the rootedness of Van Niekerk's texts in a broadly conceptualised and varying Afrikaans cultural tradition, but the almost obvious obsession of these texts to act as a kind of cultural, historical, and political chronicle of Afrikaans (a characteristic which would intensify with the publication of her work after *Triomf*). Indeed, this seemed to be at the root of the conversation about *Triomf* as potentially the "Great Afrikaans Novel". What is powerful and valuable about this inward gaze, is the complex and layered image it generates for the reader of this novel and of Van Niekerk as author within Afrikaans literature.

4. The Reception of *Triomf* in English

While the Afrikaans reception of the novel broadly evidences a contemporary cautiousness that reflects some of the fears and concerns – but also hopes – of Afrikaners (and Afrikaans) at the time, a somewhat different set of concerns would animate the popular reception of Leon de Kock's English translation of the novel, which appeared in 1999. The reception of the English version of the novel tended to focus on the quality and success of De Kock's translation, as well as reading the text as a curious ethnographic narrative of the Afrikaners, mainly, and of South Africa, secondly. The novel and author's rootedness within the Afrikaans literary system and tradition receive a cursory mention, and the English translation is actively situated within both the South African English and broader Anglo-American literary system.

In their reviews of the translation, both Z.B. Molefe (1999) and Joanna Walus (1999) point to the significance of the translation of *Triomf* from Afrikaans to English. Walus finds it satisfying that the English text is "peppered with" Afrikaans words that will be familiar to the average South African English reader (1999:10), and Yves Vanderhaeghen also writes in a positive tone of the translation retaining "much of the local idiom," resulting in "an unarguably South African flavour" (1999:17) – thus suggesting that the choices of the translator, and particularly the retention of some Afrikaans, add strongly to the inherent *South Africanness* of the text.

The English reception thus draws on particular colloquial imaginings or traces of a white Afrikaans sociolect that circulates within English communities. Molefe's review draws this point out even further, as he identifies what he calls the "trend of dipping into translation to tell the South African story under apartheid" (1999:7).

While some expresses appreciation for De Kock's translation (Willoughby, 1999:22), others, such as Peter Randall, are less enthused by the translation, merely calling it "competent," while also mentioning "occasional infelicities and off-key oddities" (1999:11). It also becomes clear that the local English reception is hinged to an international Anglo-American Englishness. The international translation of the novel is praised by Maya Jaggi (1999; *The Guardian*, UK), Christina Patterson (1999; *The Observer*, UK) and Rob Nixon (2004; *The New York Times*, USA). Jaggi calls De Kock's translation "fluid" (1999:1), while Patterson is impressed by a novel "beautifully translated" (1999:13), and Nixon calls the translation "exhilarating" (2004). Elizabeth Lowry (2000; *The London Review of Books*, UK) notes a strength of *Triomf* lies in it not "[spelling...] metaphors out," showing that,

[o]n the whole, mainstream Afrikaans literature seems to tolerate a greater degree of abstraction and schematism than its English equivalent. In this case it works equally well in translation: Leon de Kock has done an excellent job of turning *Triomf's* lapidary prose into taut, abrasive English (2000:37).

Much like Hattingh (1995) does in her English review of the Afrikaans text, Molefe, Jaggi, Patterson, Lowry, and to a lesser extent, Walus, situate the novel within the socio-political landscape of South Africa in the run-up to the country's first democratic elections. Charlie Hill (2000) summarises this well in his positive review when he describes *Triomf* as "a novel that demands to be read on the grounds of both outstanding literary merit and profound historical significance" (2000:53). In addition to drawing attention to the novel's irreverence towards not just this history, but also the present, especially as it takes aim at notions of Rainbow nationalism, Molefe and Jaggi place the emphasis on the obviously ironic title of the text, with the former reviewer concluding that "Van Niekerk's book [...] tells us that apartheid built a number of individual hells for some South Africans" (Molefe, 1999:7). Jaggi finds that "the novel suggests the limits to which even momentous political change can improve the lives of the very poor" (1999:1), a sentence which, curiously, almost echoes verbatim Marion Hattingh's statement in the *Southern African Review of Books* from years earlier that the "life history of the Benades reveals how little momentous political change affects the lives of the poor" (1995). In what can be read as an attempt to draw on some part of South African literature that may be familiar to international readers, both Jaggi and Julie Wheelwright (1999) compare the international edition of De Kock's translation to J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999). Molefe in his turn links the novel by way of its concerns with working-class people to the work of Athol Fugard (1999). By linking the novel to the work of Fugard, in many ways a doyen of

South African English literature, the reviewer therefore again emphasises the opening idea of his review that the novel tells “the South African story under apartheid” – albeit in an English translation of the Afrikaans text. Willoughby, who similarly removes the text from the literary tradition of Afrikaans prose, even more directly states that “the post-apartheid novel [...] begins right here” (Willoughby, 1999:22).

In reference to the novel’s original impact when it first appeared in Afrikaans, Randall’s review of the translation of *Triomf* refers to the reading public’s response to the original text in 1994 as a “shock reception” (1999:11); a reception similarly called “a deep cultural trauma” for Afrikaans speakers by Willoughby (1999:22). This is indeed at least partially proven by the letters from ordinary readers referenced earlier (Du Preez, 1994; Le Roux, 1994) and the piece by Venter published in the conservative *Die Afrikaner* (1999). Walus points to this controversy as a clear illustration of how “a conservative way of thinking” like apartheid “still dies hard” (1999:10). She draws attention to a certain expected shift in the reception of the English translation that she puts down to the distance between the potential (assumed) English-speaking reader and the subject of the novel; “close enough to be relevant but distant enough to be comfortable.” Here one does see a more bifurcated view of how readers from different language groups in South Africa might experience the novel.

A comparable view is also born out in a discussion on “the poor whites” by John MacLennan (1999), in which *Triomf* is incorporated. MacLennan contextualises the historical events that led to many Afrikaners flocking to cities (he uses the loaded word “trekked”) during the 1930s due to drought and the depression “to live as poor whites” (1999:6). The odd moralist phrasing here – implying that the very purpose of Afrikaners moving to cities was to live as poor whites, rather than seeking better economic fortunes – continues in his description of this group of people as a “sub-culture of little hope” that “[gets] by on Klipdrift and Coke and Russian sausages and chips from the local store” (loc. cit.).

While MacLennan recognises what both Molefe and Walus noted – that is, that Afrikaners were meant to be the beneficiaries of apartheid, yet some (like the Benade family in the novel) were still failed by this system – he remarks that “they remained losers” – a rather unnuanced way of discussing a complex socio-economic issue. The reviewer seems to fail to see the exaggerated events in the novel, open as they are to allegorical interpretations, as part of the complexity with which the author imbues both the grand myths of the Afrikaner and the intricacies of a nascent democratic dispensation. In his piece, he furthermore humourlessly explains how the Benades are simply illustrative of existing stereotypes of (poor) Afrikaners, which he seems pleased to be able to regurgitate in confirmatory tones.

MacLennan’s reading appears to miss the ironic humour that is balanced out somewhat in the text by the empathy it elicits in the reader for the miserable Benades. The character of Lambert is reduced to being mentioned as “a violent, misshapen retard,” entirely disregarding the deep pathos this (admittedly reprehensible) figure manages to evoke, his vile actions

notwithstanding. The reader “is forced into a kind of unwilling compact” with this and the other characters, and “driven to celebrate [their] insistent life” (Willoughby, 1999:30). Despite the moralistic and misplaced tone of his discussion, MacLennan seems positive at least about the quality of the English translation.

Almost as if responding to MacLennan’s reading of *Triomf*, Eve Bertelsen (1999) comments in her review on “this superb translation of *Triomf*” and writes that it would “be a pity if the book is read as a quaint tale of Afrikaners,” drawing attention to the novel’s postmodernist occupation with narrative, showing that “manipulative myths never die,” but rather, “they are simply recycled” (1999:12). It is because of these constantly recycled and repeated myths, she writes, that “shrewd readers may [as they read *Triomf*] see this story currently being replayed with a new cast of black Benades” – in other words, Bertelsen sees the text as being critical of apartheid ideologies, but also the ideologies that followed on apartheid (loc. cit.).

In 2004, *Triomf* was voted by members of the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) as one of the top ten books “focusing on democracy and contributing to the development of democracy in South Africa” (Smith, 2004:10). Some of the strongest international praise for the novel comes from Rob Nixon’s review in *The New York Times* that year. He calls the novel “South Africa’s only world-class tragicomic novel,” naming Van Niekerk as the only South African novelist who has effectively used the country’s “comic vernacular” – something he claims the country’s other most famous novelists (such as Coetzee, Gordimer, Brink and Mda) have not been able to achieve (2004). The reviewer sees *Triomf* as far more akin to the work of playwrights Fugard and John Kani, due to its theatrical qualities. We again see here a sort of benchmarking of Van Niekerk’s work against that of other South African English writers, with *Triomf* being, in the view of Nixon, at least, the highest achievement by a South African author within a certain subgenre of the novel form. In fact, it is particularly noteworthy that Nixon views *Triomf* as an achievement unmatched by the internationally acclaimed, Nobel Prize-winning Coetzee and Gordimer, and it serves as a moment of clear indication that Van Niekerk had, within ten years of the publication of *Triomf* in Afrikaans, risen through the ranks of South African literature – *in English*.

What stands out in the English reception of the novel, is the tension between, on the one hand, the reviewers’ desire to situate the novel firmly for its locality – its *South Africanness* – and, on the other hand, statements that situate the novel within a broader conceptualised South African literature. There is therefore a strong emphasis on the novel’s allegorical characteristics, and how it thusly engages the history and place of Afrikaners in South Africa at the turning point that was the 1994 democratic elections, which also emphasises the novel’s success at eliciting a kind of soul searching amongst Afrikaner readers, in particular. Less positively, perhaps, the figure of the Afrikaner and how it circulates with the novel results in the reception here to somewhat reducing the novel to a type of ethnography of the Afrikaners, who are “close enough” to white, English speakers “to be relevant, but distant enough to be comfortable”, to utilise a phrase from the review of the novel by Walus (1999).

This point emphasises a kind of othering of the Afrikaners as a demographic group by white English speakers during apartheid. The validity of such strategic essentialism within Struggle discourses falls outside the scope of this article, but to see it employed again in the reception of *Triomf* reveals it as a kind of policing of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries that helps further the notion of white Englishness as an “untainted” way of accessing the post-apartheid project.

At the same time, the novel is raised onto a literary altar by placing it alongside works by the other famous South African writers, such as J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer. Further comparisons are made with the work of Athol Fugard and playwright John Kani, who enjoyed considerable success overseas, like the aforementioned novelists, even though their literary stature has never quite reached the heights of Coetzee and Gordimer. Finding Van Niekerk being situated amongst these esteemed English authors is, of course, a testament to both her literary achievement and De Kock’s translation.

5. Conclusion

In a 2005 interview, Marlene van Niekerk revisited how she came upon the idea for *Triomf*:

Triomf announced itself via the spade with which I dug in the little vegetable garden that I laid out. All the rubble and the marbles, porcelain, rusted sewerage pipes that came out of it, forced me to sit with it. It was a tangible and physical confrontation with the history that played out there. I wondered how the people of *Triomf* became so. Which effects had an impact sociologically? The more I wrote, the more I asked: How did it come to be as it was? How did other times become like they became? And thereafter: How did I become the way I am? And the big question: How much of what we are was determined by our own choices and how much was caused by circumstances? It becomes a philosophical matter and there Calvinism breaks through. For me, it will always be a mixture – you are responsible for what happens to you, and also responsible for understanding what happens to you (Van Niekerk in Kotzé, 2005).¹³

This metaphor of digging into the past to try and understand not just the present, but also the self, is one that is almost too obvious in Van Niekerk’s novel. But like Van Niekerk’s vegetable patch in the erstwhile suburb of *Triomf*, and Lambert’s similar digging in the novel through the remnants of the original Sophiatown, literary scholarship compels us to revisit the past – in the very sense of how literary systems operated at one time or another, even in granular detail – in our attempt to understand the present, but to also understand literature itself.

In the critical reception of *Triomf* and its English translation (1999), there is a bifurcation that speaks to the internal machinations of the respective Afrikaans and English literary systems at the time. The Afrikaans reception of the novel reveals a strong awareness of what has come before, both in literary and historical terms, while also looking forwards: both with a positive and a negative view of the Afrikaners, Afrikaans, and the future of these within a democratic South Africa. The novel is read as a critical gaze on Afrikanerdom for Afrikaners – a conversation very much about Afrikaners, for Afrikaners.

A comparable situatedness in its specific locality is also important in the English reception of *Triomf*. However, the text is presented as an allegorical and historical novel that draws gazes from outside. The story of the Benade family is read in almost apologetic terms as an attempt to understand the follies of apartheid. There are very few references in the English reception of the translation of *Triomf* to the novel's position within the Afrikaans literary tradition. Indeed, the reviewers seem keen to rather stress how *Triomf* is situated within a bigger picture – not just in terms of South African literature, but also English literature on the global stage.

It would be unfair to claim that the English reception shows a high level of ignorance of the Afrikaans literary tradition. First, because many of the reviewers do show some basic awareness that Van Niekerk is already an established author in Afrikaans literature, and second, because many of the reviews also appeared in publications in other English-speaking countries – principally the UK and the US – and familiarity with the details of South African literature amongst these critics would be an excessive expectation. Nevertheless, what is revealed here is how elements of the novel that stand out in the Afrikaans reception – mainly the critical look at South Africa's past, particularly during the latter half of the 20th century – do cut across language barriers, however vaguely, in the English reception. But these overlaps are at this stage but brief instances of such a phenomenon. Much of the concerns of the Afrikaans reception do not register within the sphere of the English reception. Perhaps not unexpectedly after so many years of apartheid, the reception of *Triomf* here shows that the Afrikaans and English literary systems at this point remained concurrent, rather than entangled. Ultimately, though, what this presents is how texts such as *Triomf* remain chained by the machinations of the literary systems into which they are released. Fortunately, this also shows clearly how the literary systems that make up the larger South African literary system cannot remain entirely separated. While texts might not always cut across language barriers entirely, even via successful translation, a deeper understanding of moments of important literary historiography enables us to dig beneath the surface and see that the imperfect transition after apartheid may yet promise greater entanglement of the diverse literary traditions of South Africa.

Notes

- 1 Terblanche (2015) provides a complete list of all the awards the novels received or were shortlisted for.
- 2 In 2015, Van Niekerk was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize.
- 3 See De Kock (2003:357) regarding the two different translations for the local and international markets.
- 4 Minor and major are here used in terms of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's conception. See for example Anker (2011) and Pieterse (2017), who use these concepts within the context of literatures. I also use these terms as markers of a particular language's predominance within South Africa and around the world, in which case Afrikaans is a language far smaller in the economic, cultural and political sense than English.
- 5 *Sprokkelster* (1977) and *Groenstaar* (1983).
- 6 These descriptions are taken from various reviews: Aucamp (1992), Ferreira (1992), Gouws (1992), Johl (1993), Lindenberg (1993), Pienaar (1992), Van der Westhuizen (1993), and Van Zyl (1993).
- 7 All English translations of the original Afrikaans reviews in this section are my own.
- 8 Perhaps one of the clearest examples of this was in the 1980s when Afrikaans publisher Charles Fryer referred to poetry by coloured poets as "sonbesiepoësie" (cicada poetry), contestably calling their work predictable and humdrum due to their privileging thematic engagement with real-world socio-political concerns over a more traditional aesthetic engagement. Arguably, though, this binary was always a false opposition, as the aesthetic and the political are not necessarily as easily separated from each other as this straightforward bifurcation would suggest – nor had it ever been as obviously separate from one another at any point in history.
- 9 In a letter to the newspaper, Goosen (1994) distanced herself from Botma's review, calling it a poor review. She furthermore expresses in the letter the high regard in which she holds Van Niekerk and describes *Triomf* as one of the most important works in South African literature (1994:12).
- 10 A similar English review of the novel, also by Viljoen, appears in the journal *Ariel* in 1995 (Viljoen, 1995).
- 11 "Die natuurlike oorspronklikheid en onuitputlikheid van die taal; die individualiteit van uitdrukking; die skerp bondigheid; die kragtoere van ritmiese beweeglikheid; die rykdom van sterk betekenisvolle woorde; vereenvoudigde sinskonstruksies; die opborreling van die personasies se geselstaal in eie idioom, kan as die teks se eie musiek beskryf word."
- 12 Translated into English by Charles Eglinton as *Seven Days at the Silbersteins* (1968).
- 13 My translation from the original Afrikaans.

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