



# The Transnational Rebirth of a Dutch Classic: J.M. Coetzee's Translation of Marcellus Emants' *Een nagelaten bekentenis*

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**Abstract:** The present article sketches the genesis and (para)textual substance of J.M. Coetzee's *A Posthumous Confession*, his 1975 translation of Marcellus Emants' novel *Een nagelaten bekentenis* (1894). Coetzee not only translated but also to an important degree remoulded, as it were, *Een nagelaten bekentenis* into an artefact commensurate with a transnational literary canon and an international book market. After a brief excursion on the translation's publication history and the concrete circumstances of its genesis, we will turn to the textual and paratextual aspects that have shaped its afterlife. My objective in this contribution is twofold: while sketching the concrete circumstances of the transnational afterlife of Emants' novel, I also aims to provide the basis for further research on Coetzee's work as author-translator.

**Keywords:** J.M. Coetzee, Marcellus Emants, *Een nagelaten bekentenis*, *A Posthumous Confession*, Translation

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

At first sight, Marcellus Emants' *Een nagelaten bekentenis* does not strike one as a particularly transnational novel that might appeal to a broad readership. With the exception of some wanderings through Brussels, Paris and the south of France, as well as an excursion to the Swiss Alps in the early pages, Emants' novel is almost entirely set in the petty bourgeois scene of late nineteenth-century The Hague. In fact, it is entirely set inside the deeply disturbed mind of thirty-five-year old solipsistic, misanthropic and self-appointed degenerate Willem Termeer, who at the beginning of the novel sits down to confess the murder of his wife Anna and to

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retrace how that event has gradually come about. The overall mood of the novel is claustrophobic and neurotic as we are trapped in the mind of an unreliable narrator who sums up his dismal existence halfway through his confession when he states that '[l]ittle has fallen to my share in life, and this little has always been disappointing'.<sup>2</sup>

In sharp contrast to its current status as a Dutch classic - still appearing in new editions, including e-book and audiobook versions - *Een nagelaten bekentenis* was not an immediate success upon its first publication in 1894: after a first edition of 1000 copies, the novel was not reprinted until 1918, with a third edition only appearing in 1951. As Pierre Dubois has argued in his biography of Emants, the novel generated quite a number of reviews, but not in important journals and not with great enthusiasm. As Emants himself wrote in a letter to d'Oliveira: 'The novel was favourably reviewed, but the audience finds it terrible, horrible, I am well aware'.<sup>3</sup>

It was only in the decades following the third, post-war edition that the novel became a classic in the Dutch literary canon, generating more than twenty new editions, theatre adaptations and even a 'cover novel'.<sup>4</sup> Correspondingly, the novel has only relatively recently emerged on the international scene. Although it was translated into German as early as 1906, French and English translations followed only in 1969 and 1975, respectively. After the publication of a new edition of Coetzee's English translation in 1986 and a Polish translation in 1991, nothing much happened until very recently, when a third edition of the English translation appeared in the New York Review Books Classics series in 2011 and two separate Spanish translations were published in 2013 (one in Buenos Aires and the other in Barcelona).<sup>5</sup> In the same year, the Dutch Foundation for Literature actively encouraged the translation of the novel into other languages by including it in the Frankfurt Book Fair Issue of its *10 Books from Holland*, a brochure aimed at foreign publishers that promotes the translation of Dutch literary classics.<sup>6</sup>

There can be little doubt as to the importance of Coetzee's translation for the recent transnational dissemination of *Een nagelaten bekentenis*, if not at the moment of its initial publication in 1975, then certainly in the wake of Coetzee's rise to international fame after being awarded two Booker Prizes (in 1983 and 1999) and the Nobel Prize (in 2003). This international rebirth of Emants' classic is largely a matter of sheer contingency: Coetzee's translation was not commissioned or part of a larger project, but resulted first and foremost from a personal initiative developed before he actually turned to writing fiction in the early 1970s. Since this translation has substantially determined the novel's transnational afterlife, it is interesting to have a closer look at the genesis and substance of Coetzee's *A Posthumous Confession*, which not only translated but also to an important degree remoulded, as it were, *Een nagelaten bekentenis* into an artefact commensurate with a transnational literary canon

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<sup>2</sup> Marcellus Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, trans. by J.M. Coetzee (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Pierre Dubois, *Marcellus Emants. Een schrijversleven* ('s Gravenhage-Rotterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar), p. 212.

<sup>4</sup> The 'cover novel' in question is Frank Verkuijl's *Niets verandert* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1996). Audiobooks were published by Librivox (2008, read by Anna Simon) and Meesterwerk (2012, read by Cees van Ede). Theatre adaptations were written by Ton Vorstenbosch (1978), Yvonne van den Hurk (1999) and Ger Thijs (2000).

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed overview of the respective translations, see the bibliography.

<sup>6</sup> The brochure can be consulted at <http://www.letterenfonds.nl/nl/publicatie/92/10-books-from-holland-najaar-2013> [accessed on 2 December 2014].

and an international book market. After a brief excursion into the translation's publication history and the concrete circumstances of its birth, we will turn to the textual and paratextual aspects that have shaped its afterlife. My objective in this contribution is twofold: while sketching the concrete circumstances of the transnational afterlife of Emants' novel, I also aim to provide the basis for further research on Coetzee's work as author-translator.

Coetzee's translation was published at three different moments in time: in 1975 as part of the 'Library of Netherlandic Literature' in Boston, in 1986 by Quartet Books and in 2011 as an imprint in the New York Review Books Classics Series. As far as I have been able to establish, the text itself has remained unedited and is identical in all three editions, so that the main differences occur on a paratextual level. A brief glance at the respective covers and introductions of the three editions indicates two main trends: the increasing importance of the identity of Coetzee as a translator and a shift in the introductions from a primarily Dutch to a markedly transnational contextualization.

The first edition appeared in 1975 in a twelve-volume academic series called 'The Library of Netherlandic Literature', edited by Egbert Krispyn (Professor of German literature at the University of Georgia) between 1972 and 1979 and included authors such as Boon, Van Eeden, Lampo, Gijzen, Streuvels and Michiels. As the introduction to the series stipulates, it was 'devoted to the literature of Holland and Belgium' and 'includes translations of some of the finest fiction, drama, memoirs, and essays produced by Dutch and Flemish writers'. Apart from the cover, where his name is hidden in small print in the bottom right corner, Coetzee is totally absent in the volume itself and it is Krispyn who provides the introduction. Emants is presented as one of the precursors of the 1880s revolution in Dutch literature, when the 'Movement of '80' shaped its own literary style from a blend of 'disparate stylistic and philosophical ingredients' amongst which 'naturalism was probably the most significant'.<sup>7</sup> After an initial idealist phase, Krispyn argues, Emants subsequently embraced naturalism 'in its most deterministic form' but he also combined it with a 'strong individualistic trend' by the time he founded *De Banier* in 1875.<sup>8</sup> In his epic poem *Godenschemering [Twilight of the Gods]* published in 1883, Emants supplements his naturalist philosophy with an 'existential pessimism' and a 'predilection for figures on the periphery of existence and society - the mentally, morally, and physically underprivileged'.<sup>9</sup> It is this singular mixture, Krispyn concludes, that ultimately produces the murder confession in the form of a psychological self-analysis in *A Posthumous Confession*.

When the translation is reprinted in 1986, it is included in the 'Quartet Encounters' series, a paperback series published by the independent publisher Quartet Books. As indicated in the series advertisement at the back of the book, the purpose of the series is 'to bring together influential and outstanding works of twentieth-century European literature in translation' and to provide each volume with 'an introduction by a distinguished contemporary writer' (including Italo Calvino and Czesław Miłosz). Coetzee, who had been awarded the Booker Prize for his *Life & Times of Michael K* three years earlier, is promoted from a semi-anonymous translator to a 'distinguished author' who will introduce the work in question and whose name is already slightly more prominent on the cover - though still at the bottom, Coetzee's name figures in the same font and size as Emants'. For this edition, Coetzee produced a short introduction himself, in which he not only recontextualizes *A Posthumous Confession* in an

<sup>7</sup> Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Idem, p. 3.

international literary context but, as will be discussed in detail below, also provides a glimpse into his specific interest in the thematic substance and narrative techniques of the novel.

When *A Posthumous Confession* is published again in 2011 in the New York Review of Books Classic Series, Coetzee has meanwhile been awarded a second Booker Prize for *Disgrace* in 1999 and the Nobel Prize in 2003. As a result Coetzee's name appears right in the centre of the cover, together with Emants. In all other respects the 2011 edition is a reprint of the 1986 edition with a new cover (featuring Munch's *Self-portrait in Hell*) and a retailored marketing pitch. The latter two elements indicate that Emants' novel is being prepared for a North American reading public. Consider the blurb on the NYRB website:

What is the self, and how does it evade or come to terms with itself? What can make it go permanently, lethally wrong? Marcellus Emants's grueling and gripping novel - a late-nineteenth-century tour de force of psychological penetration - is a lacerating exposition of the logic of identity that looks backward to Dostoyevsky, forward to Simenon, and beyond to the confessional literature, whether fiction or fact, of our own day.<sup>10</sup>

While this translation has so far failed to attract much critical attention of reviewers and academics, it has found its way to an online community that has received it with mixed enthusiasm. Among personal reviews on booksellers' sites or blogs to discussions on the world literature forum, we find comments on *A Posthumous Confession*, linking the novel to Edgar Allan Poe, Knut Hamsun, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Thomas Bernhard and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.<sup>11</sup> From lukewarm reviews in obscure journals at the end of the nineteenth century to the claim that 'the singularity of Marcellus Emants's novel is astounding and strange' on Bookslut.com, Emants' *Een nagelaten bekentenis* has travelled quite a distance. This journey is all the more remarkable given the almost coincidental origin of the translation and the concrete circumstances of its publication.

The most direct evidence as to the motivations behind Coetzee's translation has surfaced only recently in J.C. Kannemeyer's 2012 biography, in which he quotes the following letter he received from Coetzee in October 2009:

I began work on the Emants translation in Buffalo. There were several reasons why I embarked on it. (1) I had an interest in the naturalist school (Zola, Gissing, Dreiser, to an extent Hardy) to which Emants belonged. (2) Emants hadn't been translated into English (he had into French and German). (3) I wanted to keep up and improve my Dutch in an environment (Buffalo) where there was no interest in Dutch studies.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nybooks.com/books/imprints/classics/a-posthumous-confession/> [accessed on 2 December 2014].

<sup>11</sup> Although it would certainly be worthwhile, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this online reception in further detail. For a sample of online discussions and reviews, see [http://www.bookslut.com/fiction/2011\\_03\\_017309.php](http://www.bookslut.com/fiction/2011_03_017309.php), <http://thephantomcountry.blogspot.be/2011/03/marcellus-emants-posthumous-confession.html>, and <http://splendidlabyrinths.blogspot.be/2012/12/a-posthumous-confession-1894-by.html> [accessed on 2 December 2014].

<sup>12</sup> This quotation is actually taken from Kannemeyer's 2011 lecture on 'J.M. Coetzee en die Nederlandse letterkunde' (in *TN&A: tydskrif vir Nederlands en Afrikaans* 18.1 (2011), 6). The Dutch translation can be found in Kannemeyer's *J.M. Coetzee. Een schrijversleven* (trans. by Joost Poort, Amsterdam: Cossee, 2012), p. 196.

Coetzee's translation thus seems to be the result of a relatively contingent decision: at the end of the 1960s, he wanted to improve his Dutch and Emants' naturalistic and still untranslated novel presented itself as an excellent opportunity to do just that. In a later interview Coetzee confirmed that his translation of Emants was not commissioned and started as an early personal project before he had any publishing contract. As he explains in the same interview, he had sufficient command of Dutch in the early 1970s to consider himself a professional translator from that language (his native languages are English and Afrikaans and Latin was the only foreign language that he studied at school).<sup>13</sup> Kannemeyer describes in detail how Coetzee started attending courses in French, German and Russian directly upon arrival at the University of Texas Austin in 1966. Using his knowledge of Afrikaans as a basis, he also decided to start learning Dutch, through the lectures of professor and translator of Dutch literature Francis Bulhof.<sup>14</sup> By 1970, Coetzee's mastery of Dutch was already quite advanced, as evidenced by the publication of his English translation of Gerrit Achterberg's sonnet cycle 'Ballade van een gasfitter'.<sup>15</sup> According to Kannemeyer, Coetzee started translating *Een nagelaten bekentenis* in 1968 and first sent the finished manuscript to Heinemann in London in 1972, who rejected it for publication, primarily because of the assumption that the novel would not appeal to a sizable American readership.<sup>16</sup> The translation was subsequently picked up by the *Stichting ter Bevordering van de Vertaling van Nederlands Letterkundig Werk* [*Foundation for the Promotion of the Translation of Dutch Literature*] and was published in 'The Library of Netherlandic Literature' in Boston in 1975. The publication went largely unnoticed, mainly due to the fact that, as Coetzee noted in a letter of 21 January 1984 to Jacques Kaat, 'Twayne did absolutely nothing to market, or even to advertise, [their series].'<sup>17</sup>

The question as to the more precise motivations behind Coetzee's decision to translate Emants and the actual attraction to *Een nagelaten bekentenis* necessarily leads to conjecture beyond these objective data. Emphasizing the biographical background of Coetzee's attraction to Emants' novel, Kannemeyer goes to great lengths to draw parallels between the respective lives of Coetzee and Termeer: at the time of translating Emants, Coetzee had also roamed the streets of foreign cities (Brussels and Paris for Termeer, London for Coetzee), he was also an aspiring author (Termeer has his manuscript rejected, Coetzee still had to start writing his first novel), and both were or had been in unhappy marriages. 'Coetzee', Kannemeyer concludes, 'recognized something of his innermost being in the narrator of *Een nagelaten bekentenis*'.<sup>18</sup> Another recent commentary on *Een nagelaten bekentenis* and its appeal to Coetzee ventures into a more narratological explanation of the relation between Emants and Coetzee. In their 'detective-like tracing of reflections that Coetzee's close reading of the Dutch novelist might

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<sup>13</sup> J.M. Coetzee, 'Interview', in *Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews*, ed. by David Attwell (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee*, pp. 158-9.

<sup>15</sup> A thoroughly revised version of Gerrit Achterberg's sonnet cycle 'Ballade van een gasfitter' was later reprinted in *Landscape with Rowers*, the 2004 collection of Coetzee's translations of Nooteboom, Claus, Polet, Faverey and Kopland.

<sup>16</sup> Idem, p. 195.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Jacques Kaat, 'The Reception of Dutch Fictional Prose in Great Britain', p. 299.

<sup>18</sup> Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee*, p. 197, my translation.

have left in his own book [*In the Heart of the Country*],<sup>19</sup> Jerzy Koch and Pawel Zajjas also explore the possibility that perhaps 'Coetzee felt attracted to the character of Termeer and his confession'.<sup>20</sup> This biographical excursion, however, soon gives way to a comparative narratological analysis of *Een nagelaten bekentenis* and *In the Heart of the Country*, which draws heavily on a deconstructionist reassessment of the confessional genre and stages its narrative experiment with the confessional genre as an anticipation of the 'linguistic turn'.<sup>21</sup> It is this Nietzschean, proto-deconstructionist dimension of Emants' novel, they argue, that Coetzee discovered and studied in detail through carefully translating it. Supplementing naturalistic with linguistic determinism, Koch and Zajjas thus establish a firm link between Coetzee's translation of Emants and *In The Heart of the Country*, positioning the former as the inspiration for the latter's use of an unreliable narrator and for its epistemological relativism and narratological complexity. Koch and Zajjas make a strong claim for adding Emants to the list of authors who have substantially influenced Coetzee (most notably Defoe and Dostoevsky), yet the chronology underlying their argument is not fully accurate. As they explain in their abstract, Koch and Zajjas assume that '[i]n 1976, Coetzee translated a novel by Marcellus Emants *Een nagelaten bekentenis*' and that '[p]arallel to this translation work, Coetzee also worked on his second novel *In the Heart of the Country* (1977)'.<sup>22</sup> In fact, *A Posthumous Confession* appeared in 1975 and, as the manuscript materials included in the 'J.M. Coetzee Papers' held at the Harry Ransom Center indicate, the drafts and typescripts of the translation date from the period between 13 January 1972 and 10 January 1974.<sup>23</sup> Given that Coetzee started writing *In the Heart of the Country* in December 1974 (according to the date on the manuscript),<sup>24</sup> the novel was actually written after the translation had been finished. This observation of course does not deny the possible influence of *Een nagelaten bekentenis* on *In the Heart of the Country*. It does correct the view, however, that both were produced simultaneously, while it also highlights the fact that Coetzee was actually writing his first novel, *Dusklands* (published in 1974), at the time of translating Emants. In fact, a cryptic reference to '[t]he voice of Jacobus Coetzee' in the 'Commentary' inserted in an early draft of the translation dated '13 Jan '72' clearly indicates that 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' should definitely also be involved in a close comparative study of Coetzee's early translations and his first novels. Be that as it may, Koch's and Zajjas' deconstructionist comparative analysis of *Een nagelaten bekentenis* and Coetzee's early fiction compellingly show a structural affinity: both texts are preoccupied with the tension between history and narrative and both explore this tension narratologically by means of unreliable narrators and the creation of auto-fictional and intricately self-reflexive narratives.

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<sup>19</sup> Jerzy Koch and Pawel Zajjas. 'Uit de donkere dagen van voor *linguistic turn* oftewel wat J. M. Coetzee in de bekentenis van Willem Termeer zag en wat hij daarmee deed', in *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 48.2 (2011), pp. 93-111 (p. 93).

<sup>20</sup> Idem, p. 95, my translation.

<sup>21</sup> Koch and Zajjas, 'Uit de donkere dagen van voor *linguistic turn*', p. 99.

<sup>22</sup> Idem, p. 93.

<sup>23</sup> Many thanks to David Stromberg for consulting the manuscripts and typescripts in the J.M. Coetzee Papers relating to *A Posthumous Confession* at my request. Further close analysis of these materials, which will provide detailed insight into the genesis and substance of Coetzee's translation, will be pursued as a follow-up to the present article.

<sup>24</sup> Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee*, p. 293.

It is this specifically narratological interest in the novel and its experimentation with the genre of secular confession that Coetzee picks up on in his introductory critical reevaluation of the novel that has accompanied his translation since 1986. With its focus on the novel's generic innovation and transnational context, Coetzee's introduction marks an interesting intervention in the novel's post-war reception. If, as Jos Joosten suggests, the post-war rehabilitation of Emants' novel in the Netherlands occurred 'in the *slipstream* of polder existentialism',<sup>25</sup> this rehabilitation has alternatively been pursued from psychological, narratological, ideological and theoretical angles. In the early 1960s, J.J. Oversteegen staged *Een nagelaten bekentenis* as a proto-Freudian novel that interweaves the abstract naturalistic emphasis on heredity and environment with the concrete psychological phenomena of guilt and the minority complex. As the confession of a neurotic man, Oversteegen argues, the novel presents us simultaneously with a subject's autobiographical account and with the symptoms of his pathological state. About a decade later, Sötemann countered Oversteegen's psychological approach and instead focused on the novel's intricate and innovative narrative techniques. The crux of this innovation, Sötemann argues, resides in Emants' simultaneous embracing of the naturalistic doctrine of determinism and his departure from naturalism's adherence to objective narration through the use of an I-narrator who is ironically counterbalanced by the implied author. Sötemann accordingly credits Emants with having created the first Western European novel with a pathological I-narrator as protagonist and indicates that this radically innovative strand in Emants' work has gone largely unnoticed as the result of the poor international dissemination of the Dutch language. Interestingly, Sötemann's analysis appeared in the same year as Coetzee's translation was first published, and in his final footnote he refers to an American translation that is underway. Another decade later, Ton Anbeek took a more ideological and ethical approach to the novel, foregrounding the 'double strategy' underlying Termeer's confession: on the one hand, he clearly shows the reader the determinacy of his actions, while on the other, he proves with equal clarity that his evil nature and actions are not that different of those of so-called decent people.

In his introduction – written initially for the 1986 edition and reprinted on two separate occasions (in the essay collection *Stranger Shores* and in the third edition of 2011) – Coetzee lifts Emants out of the Dutch national canon and inscribes him into a transnational literary context by comparing his exploration of 'the discontents of modern Western civilization' to that of Flaubert, Tolstoy, Ford Madox Ford and D.H. Lawrence.<sup>26</sup> Coetzee also questions Emants's canonization as a Naturalist, arguing that, although he was certainly influenced by the Naturalists (the Goncourt brothers, Zola, Taine, Spencer, Charcot), Emants' unwavering pessimism, his interest in psychological processes rather than in 'milieu', and his analytic style also set him apart from that movement. 'His true sympathies,' Coetzee concludes, 'lie with the older generation of European Realists, in particular with Flaubert and Turgenev'.<sup>27</sup> According to Coetzee, the best description of Emants' philosophy can be found in his essay on Turgenev (1880):

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<sup>25</sup> Jos Joosten, 'Speurwerk vanaf het ziekbed of: waarom Willem Termeer zijn vrouw niet vermoordde. Een nieuwe hypothese over Emants' *Een nagelaten bekentenis*', in *Nederlandse Letterkunde* 5.4 (2000), pp. 333-341 (p. 340).

<sup>26</sup> Marcellus Emants, *A Posthumous Confession* (trans. from the Dutch and with an introduction by J.M. Coetzee, London: Quartet Books, 1986), p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*, p. 2.

In youth, [Emants] writes, we create a fantasy ideal of the self we hope to be. The pattern our life takes, however, is determined not by an ideal but by unconscious forces within us. [...] The transition from living in terms of fantasy ideals to living in self-knowledge always entails disillusionment and pain. Such pain becomes acutest when we recognize how unbridgeably vast the gap is between the ideal and the true self.<sup>28</sup>

While Termeer's life is clearly marked by this dual presence of uncontrollable unconscious forces and painful disillusionment, Coetzee argues, it is incompatible with his own deterministic view of life, according to which he is the 'victim of heredity, of the Darwinian jungle of life',<sup>29</sup> the helpless product of a spiteful mother and a mentally sick father. Far from a naturalistic novel, then, *A Posthumous Confession* presents us with an I-narrator's incapacity to confront his own powerlessness and cowardice, and his recourse to an autobiographical narrative of deterministic degeneration in which he figures as a powerless victim. For Coetzee, *A Posthumous Confession* is first and foremost 'a singularly pure example' of the genre of the confessional novel, yet as such it fails to follow Dostoevsky's lead beyond Rousseau and the latter's claims to true self-knowledge and 'feigned disinterestedness'. Lacking Dostoevsky's 'deeper insights into the motives behind and inherent demands of the confessional mode',<sup>30</sup> Coetzee concludes, Emants is 'a lesser thinker, a lesser artist, a lesser psychologist' and ultimately 'remains bound in Rousseau's toils'.<sup>31</sup>

If Coetzee's transnational assessment of *A Posthumous Confession* is thus not unreservedly positive, he nevertheless deemed the novel worthy of translation, despite obvious obstacles to broad international appreciation. Heinemann's initial rejection of the translation in 1972 should not have come as a surprise: apart from the obscurity of the author (not to mention the marginal status of Dutch literature as such), the nineteenth-century setting and language of the original would not appeal either to an Anglophone audience. Originally, *Een nagelaten bekentenis* was for the most part written in the then current spelling of De Vries and Te Winkel (established in 1863 and officially adopted in the Netherlands in the early 1880s). Although the spelling was modernized in subsequent editions, many obsolete or archaic words and inflections still survive. While it is not known which edition Coetzee used, it is clear that his translation recasts the novel into a modern English spelling and diction that erase much of the original nineteenth-century Dutch. Interestingly, an edition as recent as 1994, published in the Salamander series of Querido, only modernized the spelling but not the archaic words and conjugations, thus partly retaining the nineteenth-century sound of the original. In Coetzee's translation, nothing of the obsolete spelling, grammar or vocabulary survives.

Perhaps the most salient characteristic of Coetzee's translation, however, derives from his decision to remain very close to Emants' syntax so as to mimic the neurotic and claustrophobic feel of Termeer's diction. Throughout the novel, Coetzee retains Emants' diction down to details of interpunction. This is a conscious strategy, as might be inferred not only from Coetzee's consistent use of it, but also from his later comments on translation. In his 1988

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<sup>28</sup> Idem, pp. 2-3.

<sup>29</sup> Idem, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Idem, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Idem, p. 6.

review of Mark Harman's translation of Kafka's *The Castle*, for example, Coetzee analyses the latter down to the smallest details and comments on Harman's careful replication of the rhythm and slackness of Kafka's sentences, stating that

In producing sentences as slack as Kafka's own, Harman has in principle made the right decision [...]. Nevertheless, it is only Kafka's classic status that gives grounds for such a decision: translating a more run-of-the-mill writer, one would be eminently justified in lightly and silently fixing up the original.<sup>32</sup>

In line with his valuation of *A Posthumous Confession* as a semi-classic, Coetzee has both reproduced the neurotic syntax of the confession and 'fixed up' the original in details of spelling, poetics and reference.<sup>33</sup> While this preliminary conclusion is certainly in need of further close analysis, such further study should also involve Coetzee's other translations, so that a beginning can be made of acquiring a more accurate insight into his practice and poetics of translation and its relation to his fictional prose. As a follow-up to the present article, the handwritten and typed drafts of Coetzee's translation of *Een nagelaten bekentenis*, held in the archives of the Harry Ransom Center, will be closely analysed so as to arrive at a more detailed insight into the genesis of the translation and the concrete choices and strategies that have informed it.

As regards the transnational afterlife of Emants' *Een nagelaten bekentenis*, any reader of Coetzee's translation will readily observe that it presents us with an altogether reshaped and remoulded novel that nevertheless retains the dark, neurotic diction of the original. By means of an originally contingent translation, one that modernized the original and was subsequently repeatedly reproduced and recontextualised in the wake of the rising prominence of its translator, Emants' novel has gradually found its way from the Dutch canon to a contemporary transnational scene. And even if the novel only moves in the margins of this transnational scene, its story reveals the way in which translations can remobilize a text and the contingent trajectories they travel.

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<sup>32</sup> J.M. Coetzee, 'Translating Kafka', in *Stranger Shores. Literary Essays 1986-1999* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 82.

<sup>33</sup> A final remark concerning Coetzee's translation concerns the very title of the novel. From the movement from 'nagelaten' to 'posthumous', an ambiguity is irrecoverably lost that, as Oversteegen argued, might be essential to the interpretation of the novel. The adjective 'nagelaten' remains ambiguous as to the final fate of Termeer: did he actually die or commit suicide (as in 'posthumous'), or did he merely 'leave behind' the confession? Or still, perhaps Termeer actually 'forsakes' confession, as he tricks his readers into excusing him for his murderous act. So in the end, he does not confess at all, but only exonerates himself from guilt through narrative –perhaps not unlike Madam Bovary, his favourite source of happiness and bliss.

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