

# A song of forgiveness: The dialectic between the rhetoric of place and the rhetoric of self in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*

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## Introduction

Can forgiveness – a concept that is notoriously difficult to pin down, even under the best of circumstances<sup>1</sup> – be discovered in instances where people who forgive seem powerless to forgive; where the perpetrator does not palpably acknowledge their guilt as a perpetrator; where forgiveness seems radically impossible in light of the numerous and continual instances of the perpetrator's abuse over many years, over a lifetime, in fact? I propose that just such an instance of forgiveness is at stake in Marlene van Niekerk's novel *Agaat*,<sup>2</sup> and that a meaningful conversation about the existence or absence of forgiveness in the novel's circumstances – which function as an allegory for “post”-apartheid South Africa – requires an understanding of the dialectic between the rhetoric of self and the rhetoric of space as it plays out in the novel.

I argue that understanding the workings of the dialectic between the rhetoric of self and the rhetoric of space can assist in mapping out how it is capable of setting the scene for an act of impossible forgiveness.<sup>3</sup> Such an understanding, and the mapping through which it provides access to a scene of impossible forgiveness, requires a holistic and critical engagement with the nature of the discursive<sup>4</sup> relationship between the primary characters – Milla, the Afrikaner “madam”, and *Agaat*, her “maid”<sup>5</sup> – from the first point of contact until the end of the novel.

I shall then proceed to engage with Jacques Derrida's thought on forgiveness in order to analyse critically whether it can be said that there is forgiveness at the end of *Agaat*. The question of this forgiveness gives rise to further questions, such as: if there is indeed forgiveness in *Agaat*, what are its conditions of possibility? I contend that when the question of forgiveness arises after a prolonged period of abuse, the conditions necessary for the revival of the rhetoric of self are ultimately at stake and these conditions, in turn, depend in a critical way on the rhetoric of space.

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<sup>1</sup> Audrey R. Chapman, “Truth Commissions and Intergroup Forgiveness: The Case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 13(1), 2007, pp. 51-69 highlights the difficulty of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in conceptualising forgiveness and reconciliation at intergroup levels. As a result, the TRC focused primarily on reconciliation and forgiveness at the individual level, diverting from its mandate of being a transitional justice mechanism for the country as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> Marlene van Niekerk, *Agaat*, trans. M. Heyns, (Portland: Tin House Books, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, “On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida”, in J.D. Caputo, M. Dooley and M.J. Scanlon (eds.), *Questioning God*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Du Discours Psychanalytique”, in G.B. Contri (ed.), *Lacan in Italia/En Italie Lacan 1953-1978*, (Milan: La Salamandra, 1972), p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> Although one should add that the relationship is more complex than these reductions, as will become clear below, yet its essence is nonetheless captured by these colloquial signifiers.

### **Milla and Agaat: The Discourse of Abuse**

Abuse defines the discursive relationship between Milla and Agaat. There are so many instances of Milla abusing Agaat that this entire paper could be written about these alone. I shall, however, limit myself to a few "exemplars" of abuse – those that stand out as lucid examples of the fact that the relationship is abusive through and through. At the outset, it should be noted that while Milla abuses Agaat often throughout the novel, it appears that she is also often remorseful, though this remorse is rarely in the moment, and even if it is, it is never explicitly articulated as remorse, because Milla never articulates it in the spoken word, nor indicates unequivocally her remorse in non-verbal forms of communication. Agaat thus does not know of Milla's remorse and it could be argued that the narrative arch of the abuse is throughout the novel closely constructed in relation to the inability to express remorse, as I will indicate by way of example below.

Milla finds Agaat as a neglected child in a squalid house.<sup>6</sup> Believing that God has called her to take Agaat in and raise her as her own, Milla proceeds not only to tranquillise the child, but also to lock her up in a windowless room for three days on the family farm of Grootmoedersdrift.<sup>7</sup> Her motives for taking Agaat in may very well have been sincere, but the text makes it clear that at least one other primary character, Milla's husband Jak, sees the action in relation to this motive as abusive.<sup>8</sup> As Milla is about to die, many years later, she reflects on this time, thinking to herself: "my child that I forsook after I'd appropriated her, that I'd caught without capturing her, that I locked up before I'd unlocked her!"<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding this, Milla – at this point in the novel's time, unable to speak – fails altogether to communicate her remorse. This is clearly indicated when she asks herself in reflection: "why only now love you with this inexpressible regret? And how must I let you know this?"<sup>10</sup> The discursive consequences of the prolonged abuse, and the failure to express remorse in relation to it, are at least threefold: first, they quite literally rob Agaat of the possibility of an own voice (throughout the novel Van Niekerk makes it clear that Agaat's voice in relation to Milla's is a ventriloquism, such that Milla's own discourse constantly returns to her, is repeated back to her, merely in Agaat's inflection of voice);<sup>11</sup> secondly, they cause Milla to forego the external expression of the elaborate vocabulary of Western Christian modernity within which it is clear that she could find the words; and thirdly, in her silence (ultimately a chosen silence, despite the involuntary deterioration of her vocal apparatus and the rest of her body), Milla all but extinguishes the possibility of forgiveness.

The scene in which Milla captures Agaat as if she were an animal conjures, on the one hand, ideas of colonial-era racism which perceived black people as animals,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, pp. 469-70.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 470.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 637.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 540.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> For instance, when Milla accuses Agaat of stealing Jakkie to breastfeed him, Agaat responds not in a discourse of her own making, but by ventriloquising the one that Milla taught her. More specifically, she repeats an idiom of sheep farming that she had learnt verbatim from the *Handbook for Farmers* from which Milla had instructed her, and says: "weaning time is the most critical time." *Ibid.* 491.

<sup>12</sup> Yvette Abrahams, "Images of Sara Baartman: Sexuality, Race, and Gender in Early Eighteenth-century Britain" in R.R. Pierson and N. Chaudhuri (eds.), *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 220-236 writes about the supposed link

and on the other hand – but in relation to the first point – it is deliberately constructed to put the reader in mind of both the imagery and the procedure of taming that are so vivid in the colonial imaginary. A wild animal is tamed through first tranquillising it and then locking it up in a cage in order that it will frustrate itself upon waking to the point that it will yield to the will of its capturer.<sup>13</sup>

In reflecting on these first moments of interaction with Agaat as an abandoned child, Milla asks herself years later: “what must it feel like to be Agaat [...] would you be able to figure it out if she could explain it?”,<sup>14</sup> thus articulating the extent of the abyss that yawns between them. While she asks herself these questions, which seem to be an indication of remorse coupled with curiosity, as is often the case as regards the colonised subject, she never actually asks Agaat to give her the opportunity to explain what it must be like to be her. In fact, she makes the assumption that even if Agaat could explain what it is like to be her, that she would be unable to understand her. In other words, the discursive relationship in terms of which such an explanation would be possible is foreclosed from the outset, and it remains foreclosed until the very end of the book.

The second “exemplary” incident of abuse occurs immediately after Milla has cast Agaat out of the main house into a room outside the house, in anticipation of the birth of her son, Jakkie. As if kicking Agaat out of the main house is not enough, Milla seeks to ensure that she has, on the one hand, definitively severed the previously intimate and tender relationship of mother and daughter between them, and, on the other hand, that she has robbed Agaat of the innocence of her childhood, by also forcing her to slaughter her favourite childhood lamb, which Agaat had, until then, fed full-milk with extra cream.<sup>15</sup> That Milla makes Agaat slaughter her favourite lamb is not a random act of abuse, for it gestures directly at the rhetorical importance of the lamb in the Judeo-Christian tradition as the symbol of innocence. Further, the lamb as an offering of sacrifice is symbolically important in that its death is supposed to mark the end of one era and the beginning of another.<sup>16</sup>

That the slaughter of the lamb marked a redoubled abuse is confirmed when Van Niekerk repeats the thematic concerns of the aforementioned slaughter, except this time years later on the orders of Milla’s husband, Jak, that their eight-year-old son Jakkie must himself slaughter a lamb that he is besotted with.<sup>17</sup> This scene occurs in the context of Jakkie’s eighth birthday celebration, a day on which Jakkie receives from Agaat, as a birthday gift, a Rodgers penknife from England with two blades.<sup>18</sup> Jak, seeing this birthday as a coming of age for Jakkie, orders Agaat to bring Jakkie to slaughter the lamb with the penknife, saying: “Agaat, go and look for your little baas and bring him here, on the spot.”<sup>19</sup> Milla, revealing that she knows full well the traumatic effect of such a slaughter on a child, attempts to prevent this from

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between black people and animals as ideologically functioning to justify the existence of slavery for white slavers whose conscience was premised on Christian morality.

<sup>13</sup> Heini Hediger, *Wild Animals in Captivity*, (London: Butterworths Scientific Publications, 1950), pp. 27-30.

<sup>14</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, p. 554.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 446.

<sup>16</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, ed. J. Weightman and D. Weightman, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 224.

<sup>17</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, p. 322.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 321.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 322.

happening. She recalls the scene: "You signalled at [Agaat] with your eyes, look for him but don't find him, she looked back at you with blunt eyes. It didn't take her very long. Then you heard the crying. Across the yard she was dragging him by the ear ... Jakkie straining back."<sup>20</sup>

On the one hand, the scene can be read as an act of resistance – it clearly is Agaat's repetition of the same cruelty that Milla had, years before, perpetrated in relation to her (it is Agaat who gives Jakkie the knife as a birthday present and so sets the scene in motion). Yet, it is this very repetition that reveals just how deeply Agaat is entrapped in Milla's discourse of abuse. Agaat not only ignores Milla's plea, but also subsequently looks at Milla with blunt eyes after having brought Jakkie by force to Jak. In its entirety, Agaat's conduct in this scene amounts to a non-verbal ventriloquism in which Milla's abusive discourse returns to her in inverted, indeed perverted, form: this is what Milla made Agaat do all those years ago, and so she must watch Jak subject her beloved Jakkie to it too. This form of ventriloquist torsion is perhaps the only form of discursive resistance – if it can be called "resistance" – of which Agaat is capable in relation to Milla during the decades before Milla's illness. Thereafter, Agaat's ventriloquist torsion persists as a defining feature of the discourse that remains between them, although it could be argued that it comes to fulfil a different function.<sup>21</sup>

The third incident of abuse to which I will refer is one in which Milla metes out unjustified physical abuse on Agaat when an older Jakkie has lost his confidence in himself after not getting a girl he had his sights on.<sup>22</sup> This incident is chilling for two reasons, the first being that Milla turns her frustration about Jakkie's lack of confidence in himself on Agaat, when the frustration has nothing to do with Agaat. The second reason pertains to the manner in which Agaat takes the abuse as if it were a normal occurrence. Indeed, it is as if Agaat is Milla's punching bag on which she often releases her frustrations and tensions in relation to the other characters. In this scene, Milla is described as having struck Agaat on her shoulders, her breasts and her face, while Agaat is described as having "[s]tood stock-still absorbing the blows without moving a muscle, without retreating a single step, without any retort."<sup>23</sup> After this violent scene, Milla buries her head in her hands and begins to whimper. When she looks up from her hands, she finds Agaat in the kitchen going about her business as if nothing has just happened.

When, many years later, Agaat brings up in conversation the trauma that Milla subjected her to when she made her slaughter her favourite lamb years before, Milla fails to recall it.<sup>24</sup> In response to Milla's failure to recall the incident, perhaps because she is aware that the forgetfulness is disingenuous, Agaat responds by saying: "Please Ounooi, don't force me to get angry, I've long given up being angry."<sup>25</sup> This rare instance of Agaat speaking in a voice that is authentically hers confirms that she has been trained by Milla and has trained herself, long ago, to accept Milla's violence and abuse. However, at the same time, it is also a small indication that Agaat retains, no matter how diminished, an agency of her own.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 321.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 550.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 551.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 446.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

This instance, it should be noted, occurs in the context of Milla's degenerative condition, which has rendered her bedridden, affects her ability to speak, and deems her ever more dependent on Agaat. During this time, Milla does not see her dependency on Agaat as an opportunity to speak to her, but instead continues with her pattern of internally expressing remorse for what she has done to Agaat – failing, as usual, either verbally or non-verbally, to articulate this remorse. On one occasion, Milla thinks to herself: “Her name is good”, referring to the meaning of the name Agaat, and she continues by wondering: “would it be good for her to forgive me? ... Would it be good for her to take revenge?”<sup>26</sup>

Notwithstanding all the important questions Milla poses to herself and to the Big Other in relation to the numerous instances of abuse that she meted out to Agaat over the years, Milla, as we have seen, ultimately chooses to remain silent about the remorse she feels about her treatment of Agaat. For even though Milla has suffered a disease that deprives her of the ability to communicate verbally, the novel nonetheless makes it clear that even in the face of the degenerative disease, Agaat makes it possible for Milla to “speak”. In choosing to leave her remorse unexpressed, she effectively makes it impossible for Agaat, her ventriloquist, and for herself to come to terms with, and engage, the instances of abuse. Withholding her remorse is thus Milla's final act of abuse, poignantly illustrating that it is not only words that are weapons, as Philippe-Joseph Salazar has argued,<sup>27</sup> but also the absence of words that maintain the violence of the relationship of abuse.

### **The Discourse of Abuse and the Rhetorical Situation**

Can a prolonged discourse of abuse entirely erase the conditions of possibility of the rhetorical situation? As long as the abuse and the related violence of the verbal and non-verbal forms of communication persist, it is clear that no rhetorical situation exists between the two characters. There is neither deliberation nor negotiation in their discourse, because there is only the dissymmetry of violence, of order and obedience, of abuse and brutality. As Lloyd F. Bitzer has argued,<sup>28</sup> a particular discourse exists because of a particular condition or situation that invites utterance.<sup>29</sup> For Bitzer the situation is the source and the ground of rhetorical activity.<sup>30</sup> To this effect, he explains that the rhetorical situation must exist as a necessary condition of rhetorical discourse, just as a question must exist as a necessary condition of an answer.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the ability to alter reality through participation is a necessary condition for the presence of a rhetorical situation.<sup>32</sup>

Agaat does not truly participate as an agent in the situation or condition that determines her everyday life during the period marred by Milla's violence, nor can she alter the reality of the situation in which she finds herself. Indeed, even the way she is described throughout the novel is perpetually framed from Milla's perspective, who in a part of the novel goes as far as describing Agaat as *her* legacy, saying: “You

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 439.

<sup>27</sup> Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *Words are Weapons: Inside ISIS's Rhetoric of Terror*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation”, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 25, 1992, pp. 1-14.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

watched her, her gestures, her phrases, her gaze. She was a whole compilation of you, she contained you within her [...] that was all she could be, from the beginning. Your archive."<sup>33</sup>

For Tracy Symmonds, the description found in the aforementioned quotation is not only quintessential of Milla's arrogance, it is also a brutal and clear commentary on the social conditions of apartheid, in which the white mistress wooed, usurped, and promised to protect her servant under the guise of maternal generosity, only for her to bind the servant in a stranglehold of duty, love and hatred.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Milla can be argued to represent in allegorical form the brute force of apartheid's attempt to capture the will of black people. In another passage, late in the narrative, it becomes clear that this proclivity is part and parcel of Milla's pathology: she acknowledges the parasitic dependency she has on Agaat – who she plots to control further – saying: "Perhaps I'll manage to usurp her will on the sly, and keep it warm in me, without her even noticing that I have it, meld it with mine so that we can have one will for these last days."<sup>35</sup>

Taking the aforementioned quotation into consideration, it is not only the capturing of Agaat's will, or Milla's perception of Agaat as her archive that are important, but also that Agaat cannot participate in the situation or condition that determines her everyday life for as long as the violence of apartheid, manifested in Milla-the-mistress, persists. Milla is therefore a definitive constraint on Agaat's capabilities to decide how to live her life, and who to be. Constraints on decision or action are what Bitzer calls an exigence, which he describes as an organising principle for the audience to be addressed in rhetoric, and for the change to be effected.<sup>36</sup> Bitzer argues that it is an exigence that can set the scene for a rhetorical situation to exist, though not all forms of exigence are rhetorical.<sup>37</sup> A non-rhetorical exigence functions to deem the person capable of being influenced by discourse, incapable of mediating change with another – unequal and therefore unrecognised.<sup>38</sup> The exigence that renders Agaat capable of being influenced by discourse, but incapable of mediating change in her own life, is Milla's discourse of abusive violence. Violence of the kind that persists in the discourse between Milla and Agaat is not a rhetorical exigence, for it functions to sustain the dehumanising inequality between speakers,<sup>39</sup> and therefore closes the possibility of the realm of the rhetorical from existing. At the level of allegory, *Agaat* is a novel of apartheid as the constitutive erosion, if not erasure, of the conditions of possibility of the rhetorical exigence.

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<sup>33</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 554.

<sup>34</sup> Tracy Symmonds, "Mourning, Linguistic Improvisation and Shared histories in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*", M.A. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Faculty of Humanities, School of Language and Literature Studies (Modern and Contemporary Literature), 2013, p. 11. Retrieved from: <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/13129> [Accessed 19 October 2019].

<sup>35</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, p. 132.

<sup>36</sup> Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation", *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1(1), 1968, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), pp. 271-313 is pertinent here, because it outlines ideological and historical factors which function to obstruct those on the periphery from being heard. In South Africa, the system of apartheid was state-sanctioned ideological and historical obstruction to the voices of the non-white population being heard.

Megan Foley, writing about Aristotle's view of violence, argues that violence is a force of which rhetoric is a species if one conceives of rhetoric as a kind of force.<sup>40</sup> Foley argues that, for Aristotle, persuasion manifested in rhetoric, and coercion manifested in violence resemble one another, but that their fundamental difference is hinged on the question of necessity.<sup>41</sup> For Aristotle, the voluntary and persuasion are on one end, while necessity and violence are on another, because the former falls within the realm of deliberation while the latter does not.<sup>42</sup> Thus, while persuasion could be argued to resemble violence purely on the basis that they both contain elements of force, Foley stresses that the two are not identical precisely because necessity exists outside of deliberation.<sup>43</sup> The deliberation that Foley speaks of is in my view homologous with the mediation that Bitzer argues is a crucial component for the existence of a rhetorical situation.

Taking into account the views of both Bitzer and Foley in considering the relationship between Milla and Agaat, it is clear that there is no rhetorical situation to be found insofar as the violence, abuse and brutality persist. However, *Agaat* is written in such a way that the possibility of an emergence of discourse that allows for a rhetorical situation to arise, as the power dynamics shift between Milla and Agaat later in the novel, is never quite foreclosed. *Agaat* is, accordingly, not a novel of Apartheid as Total Domination or, to put it in the terms of late apartheid discourse, of Total Strategy.<sup>44</sup> The power shift between Milla and Agaat shall be addressed and critically unpacked below. For now, understanding that no rhetorical situation exists so long as violence and abuse dominate a discursive relationship is important when it comes to elaborating the discourse of violence's effects on the unequal subject from a psychoanalytic perspective.

### **Residual Rhetoric between Milla and Agaat *vis-à-vis* Jak**

While the nature of the relationship between Milla and Agaat is underpinned by a violence that shuts the realm of possibility for a rhetorical situation, rhetoric – and indeed the rhetorical selves of the two characters – rears its head in the kitchen while both characters perform “the work of women”: this work occurs through the deliberative efforts of Milla as the Mistress and Agaat as the Maid in relation to Milla's abusive husband, Jak, who is a representation of a patriarchy they must contend with as long as he lives.<sup>45</sup> Part of the novelistic brilliance of *Agaat* has to do with the way in which it articulates the complexity of the relationship between Milla and Agaat, never

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<sup>40</sup> Megan Foley, “Of Violence and Rhetoric: An Ethical Aporia”, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 99(2), 2013, p. 191.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 192.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 194.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 196.

<sup>44</sup> “Total Strategy” and “Total Domination” are outlined in volume 2 of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1998), pp. 26-700 and referred to the co-ordinated efforts of the P.W. Botha government and non-government agents to prevent the perceived “total onslaught” of communist revolution from being successful.

<sup>45</sup> This point is highlighted in a conversation Milla has with her mother where her mother says to her: “we women may be the weaker sex, but we're actually in charge, you know that as well as I. We just work in different ways. We needn't be scared. We've got a hold of [men] where it hurts most [...] a good housemaid [...] live[s] for their mistress [...] kitchen, co-op, consistory [...] a rumour in these regions [...] is the best way of keeping a man in his place [...] then you can set your terms.” Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, p. 145.

quite reducing it to crude narratological archetypes. An important aspect of this attention to complexity is that it enables Van Niekerk to make it clear that there remains an undeniably intimate bond between *Agaat* and Milla. The intermittent emergence of the rhetorical selves of the two characters is indicative of, on the one hand, the residual role of Milla the mother/Milla Redelinghuys; and, on the other, *Agaat*'s residual role as Milla's adopted child.

It is precisely because of this intermittent emergence of rhetorical selves between the two characters in relation to Jak that *Agaat* is neither a novel of total domination nor one of domination as a discursive totality. On one occasion, whilst fighting with Milla in the kitchen, with *Agaat* present, Jak himself picks up on the intimacy and care of Milla and *Agaat*'s relationship, and articulates his suspicion about it.<sup>46</sup> It is, for instance, impossible not to notice that *Agaat*, like Milla's mother before her, is perpetually looking out for Milla's well-being when Jak threatens it. For example, when Milla protests to Jak that Jakkie is too young to kill a lamb, Milla recalls that *Agaat* had: "plonked the coffee pot down hard in front of your nose. 'Not too much' she'd said to you, 'it's strong'. Her voice was direct. You were silent. She had silenced you. You knew the tone, for your own good you'd better not say another word, the message was clear."<sup>47</sup>

Subsequent to this intimate and deliberative form of communication, Milla and *Agaat* changed the conversation to cake, to which Jak, in frustration, responded by saying: "you two and your everlasting cake".<sup>48</sup> He then proceeded to get up and walk out of the kitchen: in this instance the rhetorical self of *Agaat* the child persuaded Milla the mother not to upset Jak to the extent that he would beat Milla, as he usually did.

On another occasion, Jak turns violent when Milla questions his spending habits.<sup>49</sup> As if *Agaat* had been listening to the exchange, she walks into the room before the violence escalates beyond what it already had, and she interrupts by speaking in what Milla describes as "her business like housekeeping voice", claiming that she walked in because she wanted to return the ash pan to the fireplace.<sup>50</sup> It appears that *Agaat*, perhaps still remembering the tenderness of Milla Redelinghuys's love, and her love for *Agaat* the child, comes to her rescue. Milla describes *Agaat* as having boldly stood in the room, the iron poker in her stronger hand, her gaze fixed on Milla – who had covered her face in shame at being seen by *Agaat* having just been struck by Jak – and she had said: "Sometimes [...] sometimes I wish I could ...."<sup>51</sup> In this moment, *Agaat* was referring to something she wanted to do to Jak, which Milla picked up on, as she often did when *Agaat* spoke in code to Milla about Jak. It appears that, like the aforementioned kitchen scene with Jak, his presence in any space determines their use of language, but that language also (co-)determines the space. In the scene in which *Agaat* had barged into the room, Milla tells *Agaat* to leave, and that

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<sup>46</sup> In an accusatorial manner, he asked: "what's to become of us [referring to Milla and himself]?" He continues to ask "is that what the two of you want to know? Well, all I can say is: please be patient, your curiosity will be rewarded. Otherwise do use your imagination in the meantime, between the two of you, you can calculate the precise degree of heat at which the earth will perish." Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, p. 360.

<sup>47</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, p. 323.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 459.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 460.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

it was not her business, and she recalls her disbelief as Agaat responded: "it is ... it is most certainly my business."<sup>52</sup> This is an insistence, then, of Agaat once more asserting her rhetorical self in relation to Milla and doing so in order to stave off the threat of Jak's abuse.

Indeed, this scene, and the exchange between Milla and Agaat as if Jak was not in the room, is one of the many intimate moments that Milla and Agaat share through linguistic coding, reminiscent of a different context in which the rhetorical selves of Milla the mother and Agaat the child respected, if not loved, one another. Thus, this scene is a continuation of the pattern in which Agaat looks out for Milla. The irony here is that Agaat's rhetorical self – itself severely diminished by Milla's abuse of her – comes in aid of Milla's rhetorical self, because the violence Milla is currently experiencing is killing off any remnants of the rhetorical self of Milla Redelinghuys that may remain. It is worth noting that this pattern of looking out for one another is usually reciprocated, for indeed in this scene Milla too is looking out for Agaat, for fear that Jak may very well turn violent towards her, which is why she tells Agaat to leave the room. What is abundantly clear is that, regardless of the abuse and violence that Agaat has been subjected to at the hands of Milla de Wet (as the mistress of Grootmoedersdrift) throughout most of her adult life, and the violence that Milla herself is experiencing in her marriage to Jak, whatever small semblance of Agaat the child that remains still remembers and perhaps loves the semblance of Milla Redelinghuys that may be getting systematically extinguished by Jak's beatings.

Stated differently, in the discourse between Milla and Agaat, there remain the residues of rhetorical selves in relation to each other, indeed in alliance with each other. The rhetorical situation that arises, arises itself for the sake of what remains of the rhetorical selves of each of them. It is a rhetorical situation that arises, as it were, in a state of emergency, when Jak's superior violence threatens to annihilate these residual rhetorical selves altogether. Perhaps Agaat ultimately intervenes only for the sake of whatever remains of her own rhetorical self, because she knows that, if she does not intervene in the way that she does, and Milla's rhetorical self undergoes even further regression, she, her rhetorical self, will ultimately bear the brunt of it. Even if this is the case, Milla, as I have shown, reciprocates Agaat's rhetorical intervention. In other words, in these instances, and in these instances of rhetoric alone, Milla treats Agaat as though she is an equal, an equally worthy rhetorical self.

### **Forgiveness and / or Reconciliation?**

Bearing in mind the discussions about the fundamentally abusive nature of the relationship between Milla and Agaat, the novel eventually evokes the question whether it can be said that, despite everything, Agaat forgives Milla. The question is textually foregrounded by way of Van Niekerk setting the date of Milla's death as 16 December 1996 – the official public holiday known as the Day of Reconciliation in South Africa.

The literature on transitional justice in "post"-apartheid South Africa routinely considers forgiveness as inextricably linked to reconciliation. Indeed, the TRC continues to be criticised for the way in which it Christianised the language of political

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

reconciliation by introducing forgiveness into it.<sup>53</sup> By introducing this intertextuality via the date of Milla's death, Van Niekerk forces the reader to consider not only whether forgiveness *takes place* in *Agaat*, but indeed to consider this question in the context of reconciliation, prompting the reader, as it were, to consider the differences between forgiveness and reconciliation. One question that I will consider by way of the discussion below is whether the date points to reconciliation rather than to forgiveness in the novel, or whether it points to forgiveness as a pre-condition for reconciliation.

In *Agaat*, on the exact date many years back, Milla had found and captured Agaat. For all intents and purposes, Milla accordingly dies on *Agaat's* "birth" day. And yet, Van Niekerk never quite spells it out that the dying (out) of the old is a precondition for the new to be born. For this reason, Van Niekerk also leaves it to the reader to decide whether forgiveness has indeed occurred. She requires her reader actively to engage their mind, taking into account the sum total of events in the novel. Due to the pervasiveness of the discourse of abuse, however, it is difficult to say with sufficient certainty whether forgiveness is possible after so much violence and violation.

My sense is that in spelling out this date as the day that Milla dies, Van Niekerk carves out a space in the novel for thinking about the differences between reconciliation and forgiveness. In order to engage meaningfully the question of reconciliation and / or forgiveness in *Agaat*, it is necessary to engage Jacques Derrida's thought on forgiveness in the context of transitional justice processes that took place all over the world in the early and mid-nineties. The primary focus of the discussion here will be Derrida's short book *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2001), and the essay therein titled "On Forgiveness".<sup>54</sup>

Derrida takes issue with forgiveness in service of finality, regardless of whether or not the forgiveness is "noble".<sup>55</sup> Alex Thomson recalls Derrida's view of his homeland of Algeria in the context of President Bouteflika's inappropriate use of forgiveness for political purposes under the guise of national reconciliation.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Algeria is the quintessential example to show how forgiveness in service of finality is manifested, and why it is problematic. Thomson argues that it is clear that Derrida believes in the Algerian reconciliatory agenda, and makes it clear that he desires peace for Algeria, because peace is crucial for the Algerian nation to survive. However, Derrida is troubled by a peace that would appear to come only at the cost of destroying ethics.<sup>57</sup> For Derrida, the issue with the idea of political reconciliation, and the kind of forgiveness it proposes, is that it can impose an amnesiac effect in relation to injustice.

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<sup>53</sup> Anglican Archbishop, Desmond Tutu, was elected as the chairperson of the TRC, and was quoted by T.A. Borer, "Reconciling South Africa or South Africans? Cautionary Notes from the TRC", *African Studies Quarterly*, 8(1), 2004, p. 24, as saying: "the key concepts of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation are central to the message of this report". Indeed, P.G.J Meiring "Pastors or Lawyers? The Role of Religion in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Process", *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 58(1), 2002, pp. 328-339, observed that the proceedings were excessively Christian, with hymns being sung at the majority of hearings, and with an opening prayer and a closing prayer by Tutu.

<sup>54</sup> Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness", in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. M. Dooley and M. Hughes, preface S. Critchley and R. Kearney, (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 27-58; Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness", *Studies in Practical Philosophy*, 2(2), 2000, pp. 81-102.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, "On Forgiveness", 2001, p. 32.

<sup>56</sup> Alex Thomson, "Derrida's 'Indecent Objection'", *Journal for Cultural Research*, 10(4), 2006, p. 296.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 297.

For Derrida, it is this amnesiac effect that destroys ethics. Referring to a 2006 *New York Times* article by Craig R. Smith, Thomson confirms Derrida's concerns when he refers to an Algerian woman who was quoted as saying: "We don't have the right to talk about these things anymore [...] they want people to forget."<sup>58</sup>

For Derrida, the consequence of forgetting is that it functions to cause further injury to victims: by requiring forgetting, a scene is set for further violence to be inflicted on the victims in the name of reducing violence.<sup>59</sup> As Thomson highlights, for Derrida, where reconciliation functions in a manner that requires forgetting, one has a right to make an "indecent" objection to such a form of reconciliation.<sup>60</sup> What makes the objection "indecent" is the fact that, as Derrida himself remarks, "of course no one would decently dare to object to the imperative of reconciliation",<sup>61</sup> but it is nevertheless an important objection if it requires victims to forget injustice. It is clear, then, that for Derrida remembering is a part of justice itself.

From the Derridean point of view, the indecent objection would occur where forgiveness is used in service of finality. To this effect, Derrida highlights the case of the Japanese Prime Minister making an apology and asking forgiveness from Korean and Chinese people for acts Japan committed against their countries in the past.<sup>62</sup> His contention here is two-fold; on the one hand, Derrida argues that the rhetoric of forgiveness is foreign to the traditions of Japan and even Korea, and on the other hand, he finds the incongruity of the Prime Minister's apology as existing within a context of what he refers to as the globalisation of forgiveness, which he describes as "[a]n immense scene of confession in progress, thus virtually a Christian convulsion-conversion-confession, a process of Christianization which has no more need for the Christian Church."<sup>63</sup>

He argues that this globalised forgiveness is also spectacle-oriented, and is thus "hollow, void, [and] attenuated".<sup>64</sup> This spectacle-orientated forgiveness has its roots in the Abrahamic religious tradition, and has been reshaped to contain elements of political calculation and strategy.<sup>65</sup> For Derrida, forgiveness cannot be used as a manipulative political instrument. He therefore argues that where forgiveness is used as a tool in service of a political agenda and thus in service of finality, especially through the law, such instances of manipulation render this forgiveness obscure in its limits and fragile in its foundations.<sup>66</sup> Derrida warns that generous gestures of offering amnesty or reconciliation, both of which are quintessential to a spectacle-orientated form of forgiveness, have nothing to do with true forgiveness for he argues "forgiveness does not [...] should never, amount to a therapy of reconciliation".<sup>67</sup> In other words, in the Derridean taxonomy, forgiveness is more than reconciliation.

Indeed, it is on this surplus quality of forgiveness that Derrida bases his distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. He notes that the reason why

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 296.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 297.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 298.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Derrida, "On Forgiveness", 2001, p. 31.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Derrida, "On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida", pp. 54 and 57.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, "On Forgiveness", 2001, p. 40-41.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 30.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 40.

reconciliation is not forgiveness is because, unlike forgiveness, reconciliation requires the victim to speak and to understand and even agree with the offender.<sup>68</sup> Derrida argues that this does not produce pure forgiveness. He points out that the function of reconciliation can help us understand why it cannot produce forgiveness, for he notes that "it seeks to re-establish normality – whether political, social, psychological or national – by means of ecology of memory, mourning, or therapy that produces neither true forgiveness nor its concept".<sup>69</sup> Derrida takes issue with this forgiveness being used for political necessity because he believes that this form of "forgiveness" sacrifices true forgiveness because the former type is intended to provide a degree of security.<sup>70</sup> This is the quintessential example of forgiveness in service of finality.

This brings us to question the choice that Van Niekerk makes when she lets Milla die on the day that came to be known as one of reconciliation in a newly democratic South Africa. Does the name of the day on which Milla dies allude to a view that the only ethico-political possibility for Milla and Agaat, for all the Millas and all the Agaats of South Africa, is reconciliation? With forgiveness as a radical ethical surplus that remains of the order of the impossible? It is interesting that Derrida speaks of the "ecology" of memory and therapy that produces neither true forgiveness nor its concept in light of the fact that a substantial part of the novel consists of Agaat reading Milla's diary entries, once Milla is wholly dependent on Agaat as her degenerative condition renders her bedridden and unable to speak, walk or bath herself. In reading the diary entries, it is as if Agaat's reading is a form of therapy through the ecology of memory contained in the diary. It is as if, through this reading and also through the embroidery that she performs throughout the novel, perhaps even through the entire procedure of nursing Milla to her death, Agaat attempts to recuperate, or simply attempts to recollect, and perhaps also tries to remember the residues of her rhetorical self. Whether the therapy is for her alone, or for Milla, or indeed for both of them, is unclear, but what is clear from Derrida's point of view is that this ecology of memory on its own cannot produce true forgiveness.

What is, however, also clear is that in *Agaat* there is no sign of reconciliation as an institutionalised performance premised on the idea of forgiveness, while there is certainly (and finally) only the two singularities required for pure forgiveness: the guilty and the victim. Derrida argues that as soon as there is a third party who is present to bear witness, the scene is transformed from one with the potential to produce true forgiveness to one of either reconciliation, amnesty or reparation.<sup>71</sup> For Derrida, forgiveness exists outside the realm of the law, and he is accordingly of the view that any power in law that purports to offer forgiveness exceeds the bounds of the law.<sup>72</sup> Thus, the day of reconciliation as inscribed by law, if forgiveness is its intention, exceeds the law that purported to create it.

To make the above-mentioned point clear, Derrida refers to the case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), for the commission's power and formation, like the declaration of 16 December as the Day of Reconciliation by the democratically elected government of Nelson Mandela, were derived from

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 49.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

<sup>70</sup> Thomson, "Derrida's 'Indecent Objection'", p. 297.

<sup>71</sup> Derrida, "On Forgiveness", 2001, p. 43.

<sup>72</sup> Jacques Derrida, "To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible" in Caputo, Dooley and Scanlon (eds.), *Questioning God*, p. 32.

legislation. Here, Derrida cites the words of a witness whose testimony was given in one of the eleven official languages, and was translated into English by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chairperson of the commission. The witness said: “a commission or a government cannot forgive. Only I, eventually, could do it. And I am not ready to forgive.”<sup>73</sup>

What would make the “I forgive you” odious, sometimes unbearable, in this political setting, and even obscene in this spectacle-oriented show of forgiveness, is its affirmation by a sovereign (in this instance a commission authorised by law).<sup>74</sup>

In *An African Athens: Rhetoric and the Shaping of Democracy in South Africa*, Philippe-Joseph Salazar argues that in the South African context of the TRC, the purpose of presenting a report on the findings of the Commission was to mark the beginning of what he describes as a new social contract. This new social contract is one that was negotiated and sought to set the scene for the enactment of the Constitution as the symbol for the transition to a South Africa after apartheid.<sup>75</sup> In Derridean terms, the TRC is a body that could be described as “a scene of confession in progress [...] with no need for the Christian Church” as such, because its “Christianity” was self-generated and self-maintained.<sup>76</sup>

Salazar mentions that even the preamble of the South African Constitution – a preamble he argues takes the form of a syllogism – explicitly articulates that the past and present are reconcilable because of the constitutional agreement to create a nation for all who live in it.<sup>77</sup> This nation is one that includes the perpetrators who had previously meted out injustices against their victims in support of the apartheid regime, who now form part of the nation regardless of whether they have accounted before the law for the injustices that they perpetrated.<sup>78</sup> Salazar argues that the form of forgiveness that the commission purported to give perpetrators was politically motivated.<sup>79</sup> In Derrida’s meaning, this was not true forgiveness, but rather a shadow of forgiveness put forward in service of finality – finality manifested in the political agenda of nation-building at the cost of silencing victims and creating the scene for more violence than that which has already been inflicted.

Taking both the discussions of Derrida and Salazar into account, if Marlene van Niekerk expects her reader to infer forgiveness from the date of Milla’s death and the legislated name of the public holiday, that kind of forgiveness is merely a shadow of forgiveness because it is inscribed by law, and requires a third party spectator; it is a forgiveness in service of finality, and is hollow and attenuated in comparison to true forgiveness. This conclusion leaves the question of forgiveness as such as “true”, and, specifically, the question of when the process of true forgiveness can be argued to begin. I propose below that the process towards true forgiveness begins at the very moment when the injustice occurs.

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<sup>73</sup> Derrida, “On Forgiveness”, 2001, p. 43.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 58.

<sup>75</sup> Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *An African Athens: Rhetoric and the Shaping of Democracy in South Africa*, (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), p. 79.

<sup>76</sup> Jacques Derrida, “On Forgiveness”, 2001, p. 31.

<sup>77</sup> Salazar, *An African Athens*, p. 79.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 85.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

### The Remains of Injustice and "True" Forgiveness in *Agaat*

Looking at the three considerably diverse democracies of Ancient Greece, France and South Africa, Barbara Cassin provides insight into the ways in which truth and deliberative politics are linked.<sup>80</sup> She notes that the amnesty decree promulgated in the Constitution of Athens post-civil war in 403BC demanded that one must "not remember" or "recall" the civil war, whereas under South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the imperative was one of full disclosure.<sup>81</sup> The importance of full disclosure at the TRC was that it was a condition of the possibility for membership of a deliberative community manifested in "the rainbow nation".<sup>82</sup> Cassin argues that what counted as full disclosure for the TRC was not that a person declared their *injustice*, but that they *declare* their injustice.<sup>83</sup> At the TRC, Cassin writes, there was no search for truth (disclosure) for truth, but for reconciliation instead,<sup>84</sup> thus highlighting that the TRC was engaged in performative discourse.<sup>85</sup>

At the TRC, anything that was the object of full disclosure received amnesty.<sup>86</sup> Reconciliation, then, as it related to amnesty, allowed for the transformation of evil into a common good.<sup>87</sup> Cassin notes that such a transformation was achieved through speech, for the reassurance of speech produces a common language that allows for the passage from the "I" to the "we".<sup>88</sup> If the *declaration* of injustice allows for the "we" to emerge, then that declaration – a recognition of fact – belongs not to the realm of the ethical, but to that of the political.<sup>89</sup> Amnesty in the context of reconciliation, therefore, functions to construct a community and its institutions on a shared amnesia after disclosure.<sup>90</sup> To this end, Cassin, referring to Hanna Arendt's Sophistic-Aristotelian commentary, says that to consider truth in the political is to step outside the domain of the political.<sup>91</sup> This is to say, truth (disclosure) for truth's sake exists neither in a political setting nor in view of a political objective. History, therefore, if it is to be conceived of as a product of politics, is not the seeking of truth but rather a *declaration* of injustice.

Indeed, Thomson notes that for Derrida history is not reconciliation, but rather an infinite passage of violence in which the affirmation of violence allows for a lesser amount of violence.<sup>92</sup> According to this argument, the acknowledgement of the initial violence and injustice produces a mitigation of the possibility of worse violence and injustice occurring, *rather than* that there shall be no more violence at all. For *Agaat*, the recognition of being cast out of the house by Milla as the violence of an injustice occurs on the night she decides to bury the suitcase containing not only her childhood belongings, but also the rhetorical self of *Agaat* that is materially manifested in and

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<sup>80</sup> Barbara Cassin, "Politics of Memory on the Treatments of Hate", *Javnost – The Public*, 8(3), 2001, p. 9.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 20.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* 12-13.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

<sup>92</sup> Thomson, "Derrida's 'Indecent Objection'", p. 297.

through those belongings.<sup>93</sup> The burial of the suitcase thus *marks* the incident as violent and unjust.

It is, perhaps, the recognition of the initial violence that sets the scene for the possibility of forgiveness, for even when she is subjected to more and more violence subsequent to her eviction from the house, she had already recognised the “original” violence and the subsequent violence and injustice are thereby deemed incomparable. If this line of thinking is pursued, it may also prove helpful in explaining why, when Milla strikes Agaat for Jakkie’s loss of confidence in himself over a girl, she stands stock-still and absorbs all the blows<sup>94</sup> – indeed, perhaps no subsequent violence can match the violence of being cast out of the house by Milla.

The recognition of the initial violence and injustice tangibly manifests for Agaat when she decides to create the gravesite, a rhetorical yet heterotopic space that would be the resting place of her rhetorical self, who died on the day she was cast out by a woman about whom she had once proclaimed “Même you’re my only mother.”<sup>95</sup> As readers, we would assume that Agaat as she once was is dead and buried, but I argue that this Agaat was held in residual form by the mere existence of that grave, and was therefore diminished but not extinguished. The grave contains the remains and it is from the “place” of those very remains that Agaat is, at times, however briefly, able to speak rhetorically, in her own voice. It is, moreover, from the place of those remains that the possibility of the impossible forgiveness, literally and figuratively, arises.

If, as suggested above, it should not be inferred merely from the date on which Milla dies that forgiveness has somehow taken place, and if the question of true forgiveness remains, then it is important to discuss what Derrida understands true forgiveness to be, in order to ascertain whether it can be inferred from the subsequent narrative sequence that Agaat forgave Milla.

For Derrida, there is a paradox to forgiveness, for in even thinking about forgiveness one must ask oneself whether you forgive the person who has done you wrong, or the act that constitutes the wrong, or even whether the person and the act are the same thing. As Derrida asks: “what do I forgive? And whom? What and whom? Something or someone?”<sup>96</sup> From this he proceeds to ask a rhetorical question, saying: “In order for there to be forgiveness, must one not ... forgive both the fault and the guilty *as such*?”<sup>97</sup>

When Milla casts Agaat out of the house, she is described as having taken her suitcase of childhood belongings to bury, but it is not clear whether she is angry at being cast out (the fault), or angry at Milla (the guilty), or both. What is, however, abundantly clear is that in burying her belongings, Agaat is also burying (parts of) herself. Indeed it can be said that the mountain on which Agaat buries her suitcase full of childhood belongings, and her rhetorical self too, is a cemetery and, as such, functions in the space of the novel as a heterotopia.<sup>98</sup> The heterotopic cemetery that

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<sup>93</sup> On the day in question, she “[t]ook the suitcase filled with the dresses and shoes of the child she’d been and went and buried it deep in a hole on the high blue mountain across the river. And piled black stones on top of it. And trampled it with her new black shoes and cocked her crooked shoulder and pointed with her snake’s head hand and said: Now, Good, you are dead.” Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, p. 689.

<sup>94</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, p. 551.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 483.

<sup>96</sup> Derrida, “On Forgiveness”, 2001, p. 38.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* 39.

<sup>98</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of other Spaces”, *Diacritics*, 16(1), 1986, p. 26.

Agaat fashions for herself is outside the confines of the farmhouse and its yard. As such, it exists as a peripheral outside of the discourse of abuse as it is practised in the centre of Grootmoedersdrift. Agaat chooses this site because it is remote, so remote that she could forget about it, and yet it is still accessible enough that she could return if she pleased.

As Foucault writes, part of the reason why the cemetery can be regarded as a heterotopia belonging outside of the spaces of the living is because of the contemporary idea that its presence and proximity to those who are living brings the "illness of death".<sup>99</sup> From this comes a notion that death infects the living, and so it needs to be kept as far away as possible. In view of this, perhaps the decision that Agaat makes on the night of the burial is precisely to locate her symbolic cemetery as far away from her as possible so that the death of "Good" does not infect Agaat the adult, the servant, and the caretaker.

Yet, the cemetery is not only the site where the remains can be encountered (again). It is precisely also the site from which the remains can be *retrieved* – and this is exactly what happens when, just as Milla is about to die, Agaat returns to the site and recovers the buried possessions.<sup>100</sup> Taking into account the theory of Bitzer in relation to the exigence, which allows for the discourse of a rhetorical situation to exist, perhaps Milla's imminent death is the purest equaliser of a long-standing grossly unequal relationship marred by violence and abuse. The recovery of the remains marks this transformation as the exigence out of which the rhetorical situation arises. Thus, the situation is transformed from one lacking in rhetorical discourse, to one imbued with rhetorical discourse. This manifests in Agaat regaining her ability to participate rhetorically in the condition or situation that determines her life.

The scene when Agaat returns to get the suitcase full of her childhood belongings is described as her returning to retrieve the suitcase that she buried "on the night of the burial of the heart".<sup>101</sup> What she does next is arguably one of the most peculiar occasions in the book, for she takes the belongings of her childhood and places them on Milla's bed for her to touch – Milla, at this point, is close to death and has lost her sight.<sup>102</sup> When Milla finally dies and her body is moved out of the room, the contents of the suitcase remain on her pillow in a rather ceremonious manner. This series of events suggests that Agaat, the rhetorically revived Agaat, rather than Agaat the violently abused servant and the caretaker, forgives both Milla Redelinghuys and Milla de Wet as guilty, *as well* as the fault. The placing of the objects that represent the fault *in the presence* of the perpetrator brings the guilty and the fault together, finally to be judged in the presence of the victim.

There is a part in the novel in which Milla, in her characteristically unspoken moments of reflection and possibly remorse wonders: "How will Agaat judge ... when Agaat has the 'meaning of everything' carved on my headstone, will it be a 'last curse or blessing'?"<sup>103</sup> When Milla dies, it is Agaat who erects her tombstone. On it she inscribes Milla's name and maiden surname – an intentional decision that could be read to honour Milla's rhetorical self. On the tombstone, Agaat inscribes a judgment,

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* 25.

<sup>100</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, p. 647.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 495.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* 647.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* 423.

which reads: “and then God saw that it was good”.<sup>104</sup> This inscription is undoubtedly intentional considering the practical technicalities of choosing and erecting a tombstone, but is also important in that it is an explicit reference to the Book of Genesis in the Christian Bible, where God looks at his creation, and is satisfied.

Derrida concludes that “forgiveness is mad ... a madness of the impossible”.<sup>105</sup> To this effect, he invokes another example to highlight the madness of forgiveness: the victim of the worst, as I would argue Agaat is. The victim of the worst is for Derrida a person who has forgiven the perpetrator, and yet demands that they appear before a court to be tried for their crime. Agaat exhumes the original fault and casts one last judgement on Milla de Wet for what she had done to her. The trial of Milla de Wet occurs before she dies when Agaat places the belongings on Milla’s bed for her to touch, and to be judged for what she had done to another Agaat all those years ago.

The victim of the worst, while also demanding justice be seen to be done, can forgive. I argue that Agaat, as described by Jakkie at Milla’s funeral, is a victim of the worst who has demanded their trial, but has forgiven nonetheless. Jakkie observes her and describes her: “her cap was tighter, more densely embroidered than I remembered it, spectacles on her nose ... her steps energetic ....”<sup>106</sup> She sounds like the same Agaat of the novel, but she is different. Other than her description, the description of the funeral is important, not only because Jakkie describes Grootmoedersdrift as an abundance that never suffices – referring to the excess of food that was left over a week after the funeral – but related to that description of the farm, and more specifically represented in Milla’s funereal shroud.

First, the shroud is significant because its embroidery represents the painstaking process by Milla of not only giving Agaat her first embroidery lesson many years back, but also the manner in which Milla has moulded Agaat in her own image.<sup>107</sup> Secondly, in relation to the first point, the shroud’s weaving is metaphoric of the interwoven and “densely embroidered” nature of their lives, for it depicts significant events in *both* their lives.<sup>108</sup> Thirdly, the story woven on the shroud is as much their history as it is the history of South Africa,<sup>109</sup> that is why it is significant that, upon completion, after Agaat had painstakingly filled in, unpicked and redone patterns,<sup>110</sup> she proclaims to a dying Milla: “before I wash and starch it, I must first put it on and go and lie in your grave with it.”<sup>111</sup>

At Milla’s funeral, Jakkie describes the shroud as “Genesis and Grootmoedersdrift in one, a true work of art, must have taken a lifetime, every stitch in its place.”<sup>112</sup> Both shroud and food are presented under the sign of excess, of surplus, indeed of excessive surplus: Agaat has given Milla Redelinghuys the utopia she so badly wanted to create on the farm, even if but for a day. As such, these excesses tell the story of a forgiveness that has, however painfully, taken place, or, perhaps, is still taking place.

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* 681.

<sup>105</sup> Derrida, “On Forgiveness”, 2001, p. 39.

<sup>106</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, p. 677.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* 541.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* 487.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* 368.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* 584.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* 677.

It is therefore immaterial that *Agaat* never speaks, and says "I forgive you". For Derrida, whether the victim of the worst says that they forgive or do not forgive is a zone of experience that remains inaccessible to others, a secret to be respected.<sup>113</sup> *Agaat*'s forgiveness cannot help Milla to rest easy. Indeed one cannot, quite literally, forgive a dead person if one takes the view that forgiveness happens amongst the living. It is impossible to forgive the dead, and yet it happens that the living forgive the dead all the time.

For Derrida, forgiveness is an event; it is something of the order of the impossible that, all of a sudden, arrives on the scene of the possible. Nothing can predict it; nobody can calculate its coming. By saying it is impossible, Derrida does not mean that forgiveness does not and cannot happen, but rather that it is impossible until the very moment when it happens. Derrida makes this point clear in *On Forgiveness* when writing about what he perceives as Vladimir Jankélévitch's forgiveness of a German man, as a Jew, communicated implicitly by a lengthy exchange of letters after the Second World War ends, to which Derrida declares: "the uncrossable will remain uncrossable at the very same moment it will have been crossed over."<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Derrida, "On Forgiveness", 2001, p. 55.

<sup>114</sup> Jacques Derrida, "To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible" in Caputo, Dooley and Scanlon, *Questioning God*, p. 41.