

## CHAPTER FOUR

**‘It was my ... hanslam’: *Agaat* as a pastoral evocation of guilt and (possibly) forgiveness.**

And last, the rending pain of re-enactment  
of all that you have done or been; the shame  
of motives late revealed, and the awareness  
of things ill done and done to others’ harm  
which once you took for exercise of virtue.

(T S Eliot, *Little Gidding*)

The exceptionally fine translation of Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat* (2004; English translation 2006) by Michiel Heyns<sup>54</sup> has made this *plaasroman* accessible to readers worldwide. The story of a rich white woman who adopts a coloured child, only to relegate her to servanthood when her own child is to be born, has been read by some as an analogy of colonialism. Though the novel resists reductionist readings, the relationship between the two protagonists, Milla de Wet and Agaat Laurier, does reflect elements of South African history. Forty years later, as power relations shift in the country, relations between the women are also reversed, and the coloured servant’s ascendancy is inversely proportionate to her mistress’s loss of control – which eventually takes the form of complete paralysis from motor neuron disease. On Milla’s death the farm will go to Agaat, her spurned foster child. While nursing her erstwhile mistress, Agaat reads from Milla’s earlier diaries to confront her with the damage she has done and the denial of her true motives. Milla dies in 1996, two years after the advent of democracy, on the Day of Reconciliation (16 December), but whether the two women are reconciled, whether Agaat can forgive the irreparable harm done to her, remains uncertain. I will argue that, though the narrative is always unreliable, the novel does suggest the possibility of an ‘impossible’ forgiveness.

Derrida’s description of forgiveness as a ‘madness of the impossible’, pure because unconditional, is tantamount to Jesus’ injunction to turn the other cheek – as suggested earlier, this is an injunction which is said to be humanly impossible because

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<sup>54</sup> Published in the U.K. as *The Way of the Women* (Little, Brown, 2007); published in the U. S. A. as *Agaat* (Tin Roof, 2010).

it requires no remorse on the part of the offender, and even opens the self to a repeated violation. Agaat does this literally when Milla, frustrated by the loss of her son's confidence, strikes the younger woman in the face, and on her breasts and shoulders: 'She stood stock-still absorbing the blows without moving a muscle, without retreating a single step, without any retort' (551). But Agaat's thoughts and feelings remain unknown.

The novel to some extent dramatises Ricoeur's exposition of forgiveness, which for him is a form of labour – almost of travail – that 'begins in the sphere of memory and proceeds into that of forgetting' (Ricoeur, 2000: 13; my translation). He draws first on Freud's labour of 'working through' (*Durcharbeitung*) which entails the courage to dredge up suppressed memory and its own hurt or sickness. This is possible in the act of telling: 'memory becomes language in telling' (15). For her part, Milla is completely speechless (though the narrative belongs to her), and the 'speech acts' of dredging up the past, confession and forgiveness are closed off to her until a semblance of speech is briefly restored by Agaat. But Agaat does engage in *Durcharbeitung*, recovering the past, perhaps unwittingly, when she returns to it through Milla's diaries. Ricoeur argues that learning to tell the story from the position of the other facilitates communal memory, and this seems to occur between the women. What is more significant is Ricoeur's description of the retroactive activity of the change that may occur in the interpretation and moral burden of the past (and blame in particular), in the course of this process. This may indeed happen when Agaat reads Milla's diaries aloud, so telling the story from Milla's perspective. Yet whether she can eventually do so without bitterness is not clear. There are certainly indications that Agaat reaches a point of mourning – the phase Ricoeur places after the labour of forgiveness – and of letting go of the one who is both loved and hated: Milla, her mother, mistress, oppressor, and now her patient.

Questions of guilt and forgiveness are woven into the pastoral fabric of *Agaat*, which draws on the biblical pastoral. A *plaasroman* set in the Overberg, on the farm Grootmoedersdrift, the novel lyrically celebrates the beauty of the mountains, rivers, fauna and flora, and realistically depicts Milla de Wet's mixed farming ventures. Milla is a good farmer, with respect for the soil, one who gently brings calves to birth and mourns cattle which die of botulism, remembering them and their mothers by

name. The novel's pastoral strain is reinforced by repeated references to the twenty-third psalm (though these are often undercut by ironic contexts).

Set in Milla's last year (she is seventy) and leading up to her death, the narrative has four strands, all from Milla's point of view. One, in the present tense, details her thoughts as she lies paralysed and is nursed by Agaat. Another, in the past tense and second person, records Milla's memories, while a third, consisting of italicised inserts, tracks the course of the disease that has gradually robbed her of all control and agency. The last strand is made up of entries from Milla's diary, selected and read to her by Agaat. These and Milla's memories re-create the intertwined lives of Milla, her husband Jak and son Jakkie – and Agaat Laurier, adopted and raised by Milla, now a servant and effectively Milla's farm manager and full-time caregiver.

Milla, seven years childless, rescues – and takes by force – the cast-off coloured child of her former nanny, and has her christened Agaat. Insofar as the novel has been read as an analogy of colonialism, the overtones of the arrogant paternalism which claimed to civilise and Christianise Africa's 'children' are complicated by the fact that in this particular instance Agaat is a child, and a wild, neglected child at that. When Milla finds her curled up in the fireplace of her squalid home, her fist in her mouth, she has no name (unless her nickname Asgat serves) and cannot speak. She is filthy, undersized and undernourished, and shows signs of physical and sexual abuse. Milla gives her a stiff dose of tranquillisers, much as one would a wild animal which has to be caught and transported. Milla's adoption of the child is only partly self-serving – though she is seldom honest about her motives – as she sees herself as called, commissioned by God for this task of upliftment. (This ironic echo of apartheid propaganda cannot completely annul an element of sincerity in Milla's motives, though she denies her need for a child and her will to power – nothing less than megalomania in her husband's eyes [623].)

If Asgat (ashen-bottom) is Cinderella, then Milla has the power, as an educated rich white woman, to play the fairy godmother and transform the child's life. She sets about her mission, sometimes with intuitive understanding and kindness, but also with a bloody-minded determination to enforce her will. When she locks up the little girl in a windowless room for three days and nights until she is prepared to speak face to

face, Milla falls equally into the fairytale type of the wicked stepmother. When the child finally complies, and asks for jelly and custard, she is given a crust of dry bread. This ambiguity characterises the relationship throughout.

In fact Milla is playing God, forming the girl-child in her own image. Yet, while the novel often suggests parables, there are no crude analogies in *Agaat*. Milla reflects on her efforts to get Agaat to breathe out as she speaks: ‘The Lord is my witness, I’m thoroughly exhausted with trying to breathe life into the child’ (528). This is reminiscent of the Creator’s breathing *ruagh* (breath, spirit) into Adam to make of him a living being. At first Agaat is reluctant to speak at all (‘as if she’s scared that I’m going to take something from her if she opens her mouth’ [518]); later she refuses to speak on exhaling, ‘as if she’s scared I’ll steal her breath’ (524). This, then, suggests a reversal of divine creation. And the child is right. Milla, in putting her language into Agaat’s mouth, is simultaneously empowering her and robbing her of the possibility of developing her own language, her own identity. She will become Milla’s creature. Much later, in contemplating the woman Agaat has become, ‘invisibly inscribed, from the moment you took her in, with your and Jak’s pronouncements’ (554), Milla asks herself:

What must it feel like to be Agaat? How could you ever find that out?  
Would you be able to figure out what she was saying if she could explain it?  
She would have to explicate it in a language other than the one you had  
taught her.  
How would you understand her then? Who would interpret for her?  
(554)

Childless Milla sets herself up as mother (*même*), repudiating her society’s efforts to make her conform to racist ideology by constantly questioning her relationship with a coloured child. Her egotism and hypocrisy are revealed in her indignation that the hard work she has put into this project of upliftment should be so ill-appreciated, and that by the dominee’s wife and her sanctimonious neighbour. But she is also a creature of her time and society, and reminds herself constantly to keep some distance. On one occasion she records, ‘I wanted to press her to me. But that’s against the rules’ (519). Milla, who has reminded others that she comes from the ‘house of reason’ (238) (her maiden name is Redelinguys), has come to live in the house of De

Wet – the law. Both the law in 1954 South Africa and social taboo forbid physical intimacy between ‘races’.

Only at the end of the novel is the tenderness of the early relationship revealed, in Milla’s diary entries recounting times spent together, in the veld or beside the river, or poring over books, when she is sometimes moved to tears by the child’s responses. When Milla is beaten by Jak, she slips into Agaat’s bed; when sadness overcomes her, she finds the child’s hand slipped into hers for comfort.

Milla records her reply to Agaat’s question, ‘What is holy?’

I say everything that’s wild everything that’s free, everything that we didn’t make ourselves, everything that we can’t cling to & tie down. Your soul is holy. Wouldn’t she just gaze at me: But you caught me & tamed me. So I just pressed her close to me, shame. (627)

Though it is hard to conceive that the child would have been better off if left unclaimed, Milla’s enforcement of her will on the life of another, her capture of the human soul, matches Derrida’s description of the crime against humanity as ‘a crime against what is most sacred in the living, and thus... against the divine in man’ (2001:31). (The novel’s emblem for the soul appears to be the rare and fragile, magnificent Emperor butterfly.) And so the crime perpetrated on a larger scale is evoked in particular interpersonal relations. Even Milla’s naming of Agaat is an exercise in power, and ‘Good’, the meaning of Agaat’s name, comes to mean ‘obedient’ in the house of De Wet.

Yet Milla’s guilt lies less in her adoption of Agaat than in her subsequent betrayal of the relationship. After another seven years, when she is about to give birth to her own first child, she banishes Agaat from the back room of her own home to an outside room and relegates her to the role of a servant. She sets about her new project with careful planning, her suppressed guilt evident in that she works alone, at night, to prepare the room, hanging curtains, bringing in crude furniture made from apple crates, until 12 July, 1960 – Agaat’s forgotten twelfth birthday.

And when the clock struck twelve,

Her dish was of enamel made,  
Her mug of tin, her knife her fork her spoon  
Hidden under the kitchen sink.  
Here, your things, in case of need,  
They have their place as you do now,  
You are of another breed. (582)

On the stroke of twelve the godmother's transformation of the Cinderella child into a princess has come to an abrupt end. In managing Agaat's move to the backyard on the day, Milla decides to 'take her mind off' its implications by keeping the child busy. In order to do this, she decides to teach Agaat to slaughter livestock. While this is realistically a part of livestock farming, it runs counter to the paradisiacal literary pastoral (in which 'they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain' [Is 11:9]). In a novel with many harsh scenes, this is the cruellest, with vivid descriptions of the frightened young ewe, the frozen girl, and the drawn-out, bloody process briskly overseen by Milla.

Milla rationalises her actions, without acknowledging her motives for taking the child or for abandoning the relationship. Forty-three years later, when the 'battle positions' are formed (405), Agaat reads from Milla's diaries and brings out an alphabet chart to restore language to Milla. When provoked, Agaat reveals another dimension to the cruelty perpetrated on that day, in the flat words, 'It was my own *hanslam*.'

Can it be? Milla wonders, as she remembers Agaat's *hanslam*:

Sweetflour. Discarded. One of a triplet. Full-milk Agaat fed her with extra cream and a teaspoon of clean slaked lime, from the bottle, eighteen times a day, at blood heat as her book says, reduced to six times a day, until she started eating oats and lucerne by herself. She was five months old and she came when Agaat called her. The one we slaughtered that day was a nursling wether with a fat belly. (446)

In the first book of Samuel, David, the shepherd-king, is confronted with his guilt in the form of a parable about a ewe lamb. Having taken the wife of one of his officers, and got her with child, David has Uriah killed in battle and marries Bathsheba, his widow. He gets away with murder. Accountable to no man, the king continues unassailable in apparent denial, until the prophet Nathan is sent to catch the king with a story:

‘There were two men in a certain town, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and with his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

Now a traveller came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveller who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man, and prepared it for the one who had come to him.’

David burned with anger against the man and he said to Nathan, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.’

Then Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man!’ (2 Sam 12: 1-7, NIV)

It is this story that cracks open David’s denial and guilt and leads to intense remorse, recorded in the fifty-first psalm, with its confession of sin and denial, and repeated desire for cleansing:

Have mercy on me, O God,  
According to thy steadfast love;  
according to thy abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity  
And cleanse me from my sin!  
For I know my transgressions  
And my sin is ever before me....  
Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward being;  
Therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.  
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. (vv. 1-7)

(The last words are echoed in the novel, which has its own long descriptions of ablutions.) But Milla is less honest than the chastened David, and initially resists and denies the accusation (‘You lie!’ [446]), then rationalises her guilt. Yet the biblical pastoral evoked by Agaath’s words, pertains. Rich and powerful Milla has robbed one much poorer of all that she had: the love of a surrogate mother, a home and a place – and even, literally, the trusting lamb she had raised, so forcing the child to echo her own crime and share in her guilt. Milla’s guilt is exacerbated by the fact that she has taken Agaath by force and set her up in a new position, a new relationship (‘You’re my only mother,’ the child tells her [633]), only to take everything away from her. ‘Oh, my little Agaath,’ she realises in her last days, ‘my child that I pushed away from me,

my child that I forsook after I'd appropriated her, that I caught without capturing her, that I locked up before I'd unlocked her!' (540). But though she finds 'truth in the inward being', these words, significantly, are never spoken: 'Why only now love you with this inexpressible regret? And how must I let you know this?' (540)

In Nathan's story, not only the poor man, but the ewe lamb, too, can be seen as a figure of Agaat. In fact we might ask whether Agaat is not in some ways Milla's *hanslam*, a source of comfort taken from her childhood home, the realm of her loveless mother and her erstwhile nanny. Like the poor man's lamb, Agaat is certainly 'like a daughter', though of 'another breed' in the eyes of the law and Milla's society. At times the two share a bed and fall asleep together. Initially Agaat is a member of the household, sharing their meals:

In the dining room of old, at the far end of the table, Abba, Father bless this food for our everlasting good, the little silver shovel in the little hand, the little blunt silver fork in the other. (581)

From here Agaat's meals move to the kitchen at Jak's insistence, but Milla sits with her, coaxing her to eat ('Stories and rhymes to make it go down' [581]). Then comes the abrupt end, and Milla paints an A on the underside of Agaat's plate and mug, so that they will not get mixed up with those of the 'other servants' (282).

This ewe lamb, too, is killed. When Milla moves Agaat, the child's belongings – the red dress and green dress Milla had made for her, her birds' eggs and stones, the moleskin she brought with her to Grootmoedersdrift – are packed into a brown suitcase and placed in the outside room. That night Agaat buries the suitcase. In her only account of her life, mediated as a children's story to Jakkie in the third person, she says:

And she took 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. (689)

Like the prophet, Agaat uses a pastoral parable to pierce Milla's denial of guilt. When Milla, with the help of the alphabet chart, tries to provoke a confrontation by asking questions about the past, Agaat replies with verbatim recitations from the books Milla left with her, to make her more useful. These are usually not without irony or accusation ('When meat is cooked for the kitchen-maid or kaffir, she sings, or even for the house, it's good to boil it in the bouillon pot for the first hour or so, to extract as much nutrition as possible into the water' [449]). Milla must reap what she has sown. But when she spells out questions about Agaat's relationship with Jakkie, the younger woman replies with another long recitation, probably from the *Farmer's Handbook* – but her song-like rendition transforms the prescription:

In the life of the sheep  
Weaning-time is the most critical time.  
You who are farmers of the future  
Must make every effort to see  
that the little lambs do not suffer over-much.  
That their first growth is good is essential  
Because once marred in their development,  
They never mend again. (491)

Agaat's mouth twists, as if weeping, and Milla closes her remaining good eye as she continues:

Therefore, before you banish the ewes,  
The lambs must walk for a while with their mothers  
Together in the best grazing  
To acquaint them with their new place.  
Although mourning can never be forestalled,  
They will then have to suffer much less sorrow. (491-492)

The ewe, she continues, must then be taken to graze far away from the bereaved lamb, out of earshot ('A child as is well known/ can tell its mother's voice from a thousand others,/ and from as far away as four miles') and must be succoured as she, too, is bereaved.

After this Agaat, who never cries, even as a child, rocks herself in Milla's wheelchair, making moaning, snuffling noises, as if allowing herself for the first time to mourn her loss, her double bereavement of her mother and her childhood self, as her second

bereavement approaches. While the recitation, the parable, may have been intended to puncture Milla's denial, it is her own buried grief, the truth of her own 'secret heart', that is unexpectedly brought into the open. She has 'worked through' to her past hurt and come to the work of mourning. It is after this that she begins to go out at night, eventually to produce the buried suitcase.

There is no doubt that these two strong-willed, manipulative, stubborn, battling women love each other, so that, even as Agaat uses Milla's own text to confront her with the irreparable damage she has done in abruptly, roughly cutting off her foster daughter, she is also confronted with her own grief at the loss. And Milla grieves for Agaat, pictures her, in her sorrow, facing loneliness, curling up once again in her fireplace for comfort. When she asks Agaat to pray for her, Agaat bites on her knuckles until she draws blood, begins a conventional prayer, then emits, like expletives or curses, a string of names of livestock diseases.

The *Farmer's Handbook* reveals the good shepherd's practice, the one who 'will gather the lambs in his arms...carry them in his bosom/ and gently lead those that are with young' (Is 40:11). The indictment is that Milla has shown more care for the wellbeing of her animals than for that of her adopted daughter; she is a better pastor than she is a parent. And though the prejudices of her husband and community, the 'rules' of apartheid law and practice, provide a context for her behaviour, she cannot evade imputability.

*Agaat* remains deeply ambiguous; the narrative, moreover, is presented as unreliable throughout. Milla's self-deception makes her perspective suspect, and later her illness and medication erode its trustworthiness further. It is never clear, for example, whether Jak, the abusive trophy husband, is as much of a liability on the farm as her memory suggests. Then – if one considers the weight of the spoken word in the 'speech acts', as Ricoeur (2004: 478) calls them, of confession and absolution (*vrijspraak*) – the absence of speech in this novel is remarkable. Agaat is not given a voice, and speaks to Milla in the idiom she has been taught, her utterances often opaque. Milla, to whom the narrative belongs, but for the first and last chapters, is completely speechless in the present relationship until Agaat restores language to her at a very late and fragile stage.

In this novel it is the events that are telling, their juxtaposition suggestive. When the often tender scenes in Milla's diary describing Agaat's childhood come into play, a number of similarities and, more importantly, reversals, become clear retrospectively. Milla began by washing the filthy child, repeatedly, and her own ablutions at Agaat's hands open the narrative of the two women. The eye contact with which the two initiated communication gives them a language when Milla is paralysed but for her eyes. The alphabet chart with which she taught Agaat to read is brought into her sickroom in the last days, enabling her, for the first time, to initiate conversation. Even Japie, the duster which was used to smack the child, is brought back for pointing at letters. The reversals are evident in the overturned roles and power relations. But it is the difference in content that is more significant: while Milla imposed her will, scrubbed, smacked, and demeaned the child, Agaat is at pains to honour her patient's will and guard her dignity. As though heaping burning coals on Milla's head,<sup>55</sup> she gives her the very best care possible.

Milla knows that she is facing an inquisition. In her mind Agaat's starched white cap grows higher and higher until it resembles a mitre – an emblem, with the shepherd's crook, of the shepherd of God's flock. Milla must give account of her pastoral care; she will be judged by the very values she has taught Agaat in farming. And so Agaat becomes like God in her mind – not God the Creator, the role she appropriated, but God the Judge.

How will Agaat judge? Milla wonders. When Agaat has the 'meaning of everything' carved on her headstone, will it be a 'last curse or blessing'? (423). 'Her name is Good. Would it be good to forgive me? ... Would it be good to take revenge? ... How can I help her?' (439) Atonement, Milla knows, is impossible: 'How does one compensate somebody for the fact that she allowed herself to be taken away and taken

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<sup>55</sup> This biblical notion seems to be a particularly graceless form of rapprochement, in that it involves doing the right thing for the wrong reason:

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat;  
And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;  
For you will heap coals on his head...(Prov 25: 21, 22)

Yet Paul quotes it approvingly in the context of love for enemies – the way of grace – as a way of not being overcome by evil, but overcoming evil with good (Rom 12: 19-21)

in and then cast out again? And to be made and unmade and remade? Not that she had a choice' (215).

Agaat reads Milla's thoughts uncannily well. While having her ears cleaned, for example, Milla signals with her eyes: 'just let me be please... you don't need clean ears to die', and Agaat replies, 'Oh yes... you do. St Peter sticks in his key to check' (339). Yet immediately after this she seems to become deliberately obtuse:

Forgive me.  
How's that?  
Forgive me.  
I didn't say anything!  
...Forgive me.  
Give you what? Arsenic or arsenite or arsenate? Don't be silly. (340)

When the alphabet is brought into the sickroom, Milla, knowing that she can lose the limited power to communicate at any moment, realises that this is her 'last chance' (438). Agaat is not malleable; she repeats Milla's sentences but also misunderstands or adds to them to turn Milla's self-justification to an indictment of her racism:

*Do something for your fellow humans? Or do something with your fellow humans or to your fellow humans? Fellow human – or super human? Or half human? Less human than yourself?* (438)

And Milla struggles to form sentences when Agaat fails to repeat them aloud, so that the most important words remain unspoken: 'Sorry. Powerless. Guilty. I am. I shall be. But. How am I to. Die?' (438)

Insofar as Milla comes to a realisation of guilt and is able to ask for forgiveness, the words remain unspoken and seem not to be received. Whether Agaat forgives or not is not entirely clear; she remains the unknowable Other and the novel resists closure. I wish to argue, nevertheless, that the notion of forgiveness suggested by Agaat's actions speaks of grace, a free gift, or Derrida's concept of forgiveness as unconditional, needing neither repentance nor confession.

To forgive a repentant offender, Derrida argues, is already to forgive another, a changed person, whereas, in the Abrahamic tradition, ‘the *unconditional*, gracious, infinite, aneconomic forgiveness [is] granted to *the guilty as guilty*’ (2001: 34; author’s emphasis). Seen in this light, Milla’s hope that she can make Agaat understand that she is no longer the person she was, is beside the point.

Again, it is the events and their juxtaposition that must speak. Agaat’s generosity is evident in the garden she maintains for Milla, in the careful positioning of mirrors before the open window so that Milla, on awakening, is surprised by the glory of the garden the two women first designed and made together, thus creating the pastoral paradise Milla wanted. Once Milla wakes to find that Agaat has fallen asleep at her feet, her arm draped over the cold feet. And though Agaat wakes with some embarrassment, she returns before leaving to press Milla’s feet against her breast, against her forehead (373).

Then, just before Milla dies, Agaat digs up the suitcase she buried ‘on the moonlit night of the burial of the heart’ (495), the night of her twelfth birthday, so symbolically reversing some of the damage done to her that day by resurrecting the child. Excitedly, she brings its contents to Milla’s bed. Milla can no longer see, but she is given items to touch, including the soft mole pelt Agaat had taken with her when she was first brought to Grootmoedersdrift. After Milla’s death this is left lying on her pillow, seemingly as a gift from the feral child, as though to exorcise even the earlier guilt, the capture of the soul.

Van Niekerk inscribes the possibility of forgiveness in other ways as well. Both Agaat’s capture and Milla’s death take place on 16 December. For Milla, it is significant that she finds the child on what is, for her, the Day of the Covenant – and she sees her task as a divine commission, writing it out in a text that will later sicken her son. A day that was supposed to be a reminder of God’s grace to embattled Trekkers soon became for the Nationalists a means of justifying the appropriation of power. For many other South Africans, Dingaan’s Day, as it was also known, was a reminder of conquest. It was an act of the grace on the part of the Mandela government to retain 16 December as a public holiday and, with exquisite tact, to

rename it the Day of Reconciliation. And so it is that Milla dies two years after the advent of democracy, on what has become the Day of Reconciliation.

And then the representation of Milla's death suggests another parallel, another reversal. When Milla first 'catches' Agaat, the child runs away with Milla scrambling in pursuit, finally falling on top of her and holding her down tightly. Now that Milla is to be released in death, and the power relations are also reversed, the opposite might be expected: Agaat in the superior position – but no:

*whose are the hands here around my belly squeezing my breath in and out? whose warm weight supporting me from behind and from below?... who is a buoy beneath me so that I should not sink from my own weight not perish? in what body am I sustained as in a crib? tilted as in a cradle? who breathes beneath me...*

*where are you agaat?  
here I am  
a voice speaking for me a riddle where there is rest  
a candle being lit for me in a mirror  
my rod and my staff my whirling wheel  
a mouth that with mine mists the glass on the valley of the shadow  
of death  
where you go there I shall go  
your house is my house... (673)*

In this impossible, moving evocation of death, beautifully and freely translated, Agaat is the cradle of the mother become infant; she is Ruth the despised Moabitess, who proved a faithful daughter. Most of all, she is the Good Shepherd of the twenty-third psalm whose goodness and mercy follow Milla to the end, 'through the eye of the needle' (191). As before her betrayal of the child, Milla, in dying, receives this comfort: '*in my hand the hand of the small Agaat*' (674).<sup>56</sup> The shroud Agaat has made and embroidered (and tried on, lying in Milla's coffin) is filled with pastoral images of birth, of generations, of farming: 'Genesis and Grootmoedersdrift in one'

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<sup>56</sup> This is more explicit in the original Afrikaans:

in my overberg  
liefhebbend  
in my hand die hand van klein Agaat (Van Niekerk 2004, 699)  
[in my Overberg/ lovingly/ in my hand the hand of little Agaat]

The references to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm are also added in the English translation of *Agaat*.

(677). The tombstone she erects identifies Milla by her maiden name and proclaims Agaat's judgement on her life:

And then God saw that it was Good. (681)

'What is impossible with men is possible with God,' says Jesus of the divine grace that will allow a rich man through the 'eye of the needle' (Lk 18:24). Derrida argues, quoting Hegel, that the unforgivable, 'the crime against the spirit' or the divine in the human, militates against the very capacity to forgive which is the human divine (2001: 34). In *Agaat* the capture of the child's soul and its subsequent destruction imply a loss of that gift for forgiveness. It is only when Agaat digs up her grief, then her suitcase, to recover the child destroyed by Milla's cruelty and her own defence against it, that she seems to recover her divine capacity for grace. This is not forgiveness owed; it is not even forgiveness asked for – it is independent of the perpetrator. If indeed Agaat forgives, it is the free gift of a free woman.

## CHAPTER 5

### **‘Mercy! You sound like a woman’: Mark Behr’s *Kings of the Water***

For his third novel, *Kings of the Water* (2009), Mark Behr also chooses the *plaasroman* genre and pays tribute in it to Coetzee’s *Disgrace*<sup>57</sup>, building in parallels and departures from the benchmark earlier novel, which itself had used the genre to mark similarities and departures from the past. While *Disgrace* is set in British settler territory, and *Agaat* in the Cape, *Kings of the Water* follows the more moderate Trekkers north to the rural heartland of the Orange Free State, now the Free State, close to the Lesotho border. Set in September 2001, during Mbeki’s presidency, and spanning two days, the novel traces the ‘machinations of transition... on this plot of earth’ (124). *Kings of the Water* also contains echoes of and departures from Alan Paton’s *Too Late the Phalarope* (1955) in its exploration of a father-son relationship against the background of a rural Afrikaner community in transition.

*Disgrace* is present yet again, but it is guilt which is relentlessly foregrounded, and denial in its many forms – omission, euphemism, erasure and forgetfulness – that is exposed. Michiel Steyn, having fled South Africa in guilt and shame in the 80s, finds his compatriots have no such burdens: ‘No one ever, black or white, had supported, been complicit in or privileged by apartheid or any other kind of exploitation. By its own magnificent volition, a system existed without human agency. South Africans he bumped into overseas seemed to believe that they had, one and all, slipped from their mothers’ wombs with cries of *Amandla!* And their mothers had answered *Ngawethu!*’ (134).<sup>58</sup> He concludes that, ‘As no one, ever, had been offside, it was best – easiest – to live as if he, too, hadn’t’ (134). But where no one has ever been wrong, no change or growth is possible.

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<sup>57</sup> There may well be a sly reference to *Agaat* as well, in the name of a local farm, Oumoedersdrif (12).

<sup>58</sup> Behr confessed at a conference to having spied for the state on fellow members of NUSAS, a left-wing student organization, while he was at Stellenbosch University, and elicited more widespread condemnation than he seems to have expected. (Discussed in interview with Van der Vlies, 2010.) Here he seems to be satirising the many whose guilt may not have been as dramatically exposed, but who were nevertheless complicit in sustaining the apartheid government, resorting to a convenient amnesia.

During his army conscription the teenage Steyn witnesses an act of torture when he sees an officer interrogating an ‘LP’ or member of the local population. Later he will tell his partner: ‘I wish I could tell you I was kicked out of the army for calling someone to account, that I left for reasons of conscience’ (106). Instead he goes AWOL after having been caught in his first homosexual encounter with an Indian officer on a whites-only beach. In this act, the political context clearly plays a part: it is a triple offence which would cease to be an offence at all under the new constitution, yet in the 1980s it constitutes a public disgrace. He is publicly deranked and shamed, but this guilt is not the cause of his regret (though entry into the military, participation in the border war and his thoughtless attitude towards the fate of the Indian officer, who loses his rank and is expelled from the army, are raised). Michiel’s greater guilt lies in the abandonment of his girlfriend, Karien, who has fallen pregnant. Though he offers to marry her, she rejects him, knowing of his unfaithfulness and now public homosexuality, and refuses to join him in London when he chooses to leave the country rather than return to the army. Karien’s clandestine abortion goes wrong and she takes refuge with Michiel’s parents. It is for this abandonment more than anything that Michiel’s father Dawid (Oubaas) holds him responsible (34) when he returns fifteen years later for his mother’s funeral.

Carli Coetzee has commented: ‘In a number of recent works by white South Africans, a similar trope is used: the return to the childhood farm, which serves as a way of focusing the adult narrator’s sense of the loss of a way of being. These are more than simply stories about loss of innocence.’ (One is reminded that the farm, in Behr’s novel, is called *Paradys*.) Coetzee continues: ‘they are narratives of a dramatic severance from the world and values of the Afrikaner ancestors, in which the narrator chooses not to continue the lineage and values of the fathers’ (2001:689). This is certainly true of Behr’s novel, in which the relationship and conflict between father and son are central.

The novel uses and complicates the motif of the prodigal son’s return. In Richard Holloway’s reading of the parable, which is usually read as ‘an example of conditional forgiveness at work’ (2002:60), the central act is not the repentant son’s return, but ‘the running of the father to greet the returning sinner’ (2002:80; see also the discussion of this in Chapter 1). In the parable, which to Holloway is emblematic

of ‘creative forgiveness’ – unconditional, independent of repentance – the father is moved by pity (Lk 15:20) to embrace his son and forestall his condemnation.<sup>59</sup> Only in this spontaneous grace (the gift) is Derrida’s ‘pure’ forgiveness to be found for Holloway (pure because unconditional). Hannah Arendt also emphasises the importance of the restoration of a future to the forgiven: ‘The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility – of being unable to undo what one has done – is the faculty of forgiving’ (1989:237). Like Holloway, she sees forgiveness as a creative act: while revenge is a predictable re-action, forgiveness, its ‘exact opposite’, ‘acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven’ (240-241) – a notion which is dramatised conversely in the parable of the unforgiving servant, which depicts as imprisonment the psycho-spiritual effects of unforgiveness for both the unforgiving and the unforgiven.

In *Kings of the Water* it is not the father, but the farm worker Mamparra, to whom Michiel also owes a burden of guilt, who rushes with open arms to meet him on his return. She and Karien, especially, demonstrate pure or creative forgiveness. Returning to face the pain he caused fifteen years earlier, it is Karien whom Michiel most dreads facing, but he is surprised by her lack of recrimination, by the fact that the burden he has carried is no longer a weight upon her: she has already forgiven him, and has told herself that it is up to Michiel to ‘pluck up the courage to find [his] way back’ (196). Karien’s statement, ‘In the end, our petty righteousness cannot stand up to imagination’ (202), reveals imaginative empathy as the key to her creative forgiveness. Her parting words to Michiel are: ‘We can always make it easier for ourselves, you know, by resorting to the mutual forgiveness of each vice that opens the doors of paradise’ (225). Forgiveness, mutual and unconditional, will make homecoming possible, the wordplay suggests, as well as a state of grace.

The motif of the prodigal son’s return is complicated in the novel by the fact that neither Michiel nor his father seems to want to be reconciled. It is for his mother’s sake that Michiel returns, and for her sake that Oubaas asks him to come to the farm, Paradys. It is his mother Beth (Ounooi) who would have killed the fatted calf, as his

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<sup>59</sup> ‘But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.’

father points out, on his arrival (17). A further complication is the fact that guilt is not one-sided: Michiel also needs to forgive his father, whose recalcitrance remains with him in 'each of a million memories and thousands of dollars to [his therapist] Glassman' (19). He comes to realise that his father's anxiety about the softness he detected in his youngest son had bred in him a constant vigilance (32) which made him see his elder brother Peet's gentleness as a 'fatal flaw' (75), should it be detected in himself. It is not difficult to see that the act which disgraces him publicly, and that with a man of colour, coming shortly after Peet's death, is one of defying finally the 'goddamn father' (138) and everything he stands for.

There are moments of grace in the novel, beginning with the surprising 'fugitive moment' of intimacy between father and son. Michiel is shocked to see his father's condition: wheelchair-bound, weak, and wracked by Parkinson's disease. But the old man is as fierce as ever, and insists that his son, who has just walked in after an absence of fifteen years and a long journey, will bath him. Michiel suspects that this is done to humiliate him, and is unprepared for his father's sudden vulnerability and the softness in his eyes and manner. (It is also possible that Oubaas is unprepared for his son's gentle good sense in caring for him, now that Michiel towers over him and power relations are reversed.) As he takes his mother's place in bathing his father, Michiel wonders, 'Might this fugitive moment contain something of what the religious call grace?' (31). But the moment passes all too soon as Oubaas slides unexpectedly from chuckling at a comment, into unmitigated grief, terrible to behold, so that Michiel sinks to the bathroom floor, head bowed, until it passes, and the old man reverts to recrimination and to bellowing out orders.

Within this brief opening Michiel is able, when prompted, to tell his father that there were times 'I wished you a taste of your own medicine....Some kind of revenge' but that that desire has left him (34) – not only, he thinks but does not say, because revenge would lose its sweetness on so pitiful a figure, but also because 'at heart, old man, I always loved you' (35). Yet when he asks his father, 'Is there no mercy in you?' Oubaas answers:

Mercy! You sound like a woman, for Christ's sake. If you must be this thing you are, can't you at least pretend to have balls? (35)

The association of mercy with the effeminate (together with the ironic imprecation of the name of Christ) is part of the country's sickness, as Behr shows. When Michiel tries to explain to Glassman his father's gratuitous violence, he says, 'Whatever it is is mixed in with the delusions of raw white South African male power. You have to have grown up there to know what I mean' (31). His eldest brother Peet sidestepped the white male rugby-army script which the middle brother Benjamin took to naturally and Michiel submitted to for fear of his father's disapproval. Yet he confesses that he felt 'an impostor in the army and the scrum' as 'someone was always being hurt' (181).<sup>60</sup> The exclusion of gentleness and mercy from the white male role in turn excludes the vulnerable Peet, 'gentle and undefended' (75), as well as Michiel. Peet destroys himself rather than bring shame to his family, and Michiel is expelled from Paradys when he refuses to return to the army:

'Then you will not set foot on this farm again. That's life, Michiel,' says his father. 'You play by the rules or else you don't play at all.' (58)

'I am the rule the game depends upon,' Michiel is able to counter in his mind years later, when he has the 'knowledge of the machinations of good and evil' (58, 59) and is able to see the patriarchal rule that governed his life as being far more arbitrary than it appeared at the time, its warped nature part of the evil of society.

Peet, the embodiment of *agape*<sup>61</sup>, is the antithesis of this model: 'When Peet looked at you, you felt as though he was observing a thing of infinite wonder, maybe holy, something you never saw in the mirror' (75). It is this quality which Michiel, in his 'hyper vigilance' (77), with that other, more 'powerful gaze' of the father upon him (174), feels would be a weakness in himself – and this is Behr's greatest indictment of the evil of the 'delusions of... white South African male power': the equation of

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<sup>60</sup> Du Pisani (2001) devotes a subsection ('Warriors and sportsmen', 165) to the influence of military service and sport, especially rugby, in the formation of boys for hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity.

<sup>61</sup> *Agape*, Greek for the highest form of love, 'which sees something infinitely precious in its object' (*The New Bible Dictionary*, 1974: 752), is used in the New Testament for divine love. It is also used in the commandment which lies at the basis of the ethics concerning the other: derived from Leviticus 19:18, the commandment to love one's neighbour is applied more widely by Jesus (notably in the parable of the Good Samaritan) to include even one's enemies.

gentleness, kindness – and mercy – with weakness and non-masculinity. ‘What he loved in his brother Michiel feared in himself. The capacity for kindness and the love that drew him to Peet, the gaze that made the beholden feel almost beloved, was what frightened Michiel if it was seen in himself’ (75). The novel follows on Paton’s *Too Late the Phalarope* in its examination through a father-son relationship of the harshness of white South African patriarchy, with its deep unspoken fear of weakness entrenched in an unyielding exertion of power.<sup>62</sup>

Not surprisingly, since mercy and kindness are permitted for women, they are indeed the novel’s bearers of mercy; they are generous-spirited and able to forgive when wronged. Rachel, the mother of Michiel’s partner Kamil, a Jewish communist whose Palestinian husband is a serial philanderer, teaches her son unsentimentally that love is a verb – it is expressed in doing. She and her husband call the one in need *Habibti*: beloved.

Ounooi, the privileged lady of the manor, frustrates her son with the iron self-control of her generation, her genteel omission of all unpleasantness. Michiel finds it difficult to forgive her her submission to patriarchy at home and in the church, at the crucial point when his homosexuality is revealed (she herself is said to be ashamed of this complicity afterwards), and returns her regular letters to him, unopened. Yet at the first overture from her son she flies to America to stay with him and Kamil and, though she never refers to the missing years, is able to express her love for him even after he has, once again, deeply hurt her. Michiel, exasperated by Ounooi’s ability to dissociate herself from unpleasant incidents in the past, has insisted on telling her the truth about Peet: that he was homosexual, that he had contracted Aids, that his death

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<sup>62</sup> In the incident from which the novel takes its title, three boys man an inflated tractor tube on the farm dam, holding off two younger girls, who lack the power to contend successfully for a place. When the boys adapt the old chant (‘I’m the king of the castle’) to ‘We’re the kings of the water/ and you’re the henchman’s daughter’, two of the mothers take up the challenge, strip to their underwear and swim out to overturn the tube and let the girls have a turn. In this scene, patriarchy in the making receives its come-uppance from the new forces, probably reflecting changes that have occurred in the country. Michiel, who is watching, does not help the boys keep or regain their power and privilege, much to his nephew’s chagrin – the boy suggests, in words unspoken, that Michiel was not ‘man enough’ to help them and, indeed, Michiel no longer subscribes to the machismo or the unfairness entailed. Yet the women who are now in power generously include the boys, and all come to share the tube, learning to move and steer it harmoniously together in what could have been a rather obvious parable, had it not been so deftly handled by Behr. Van der Vlies (2010) sees this episode as symbolically ‘at the centre’ of the novel.

was not an accident but a suicide. His desire to hurt is as effective as the truth he uses 'like a blade' (90): 'Within a few minutes she had shrunk to look as if everything that had never happened to her had happened now, all at once' (90). He apologises almost immediately, saying he was 'dead wrong' (91) and his mother's love covers the offence. Yet he will describe their reconciliation as 'shabby' (41), probably because so much has had to be left unspoken. At her funeral, however, Michiel discovers that his mother had gone into battle against the stigma surrounding Aids: 'Silence is killing our people,' this soul of discretion told the new mayor (93), channelling her grief into positive action.

Such acts of mercy are counted among the graces of the Holy Spirit. If Ounooi's kindness is the inspiration, a 'tiny ember of what was possible', as her protégée Lerato says, Karien, thoroughly rooted and grounded, swearing fluently in Afrikaans, is the novel's refreshing angel of mercy. Raised in a dysfunctional family, she is adopted as another protégée by Ounooi, who becomes her model and mentor, and who saves her life and protects her during her pregnancy. Though Ounooi is disappointed that Karien does not fulfil her potential to become a successful lawyer, Karien finds contentment in doing good in her rural community. ('There's work to be done here, in town, good work that doesn't require my being a lawyer' [153].) When she miscarries twice after her marriage to Dirk, the dominee, they adopt two Aids orphans and in so doing help their community deal with transition, as the intransigent Oubaas's acceptance of his godchildren shows. Michiel realises that what he had to learn while in exile, Karien has learnt by being part of the transition, 'right here, on the job in the manse and behind her easel' (153). Her conscious choice to remain 'here' (151) – she is constantly linked to place – has become an evolving, creative project, and will help facilitate Michiel's homecoming.

Michiel cannot believe Karien's capacity for forgiveness: 'He is unconvinced by her lack of regret or anger at him' (151) and tells her that he is astonished at her generosity (153). Having believed that he had permanently wounded her (as he had his mother), he has developed what Glassman calls a 'base need to beat up on yourself'. When Michiel blames this on the Christianity of his upbringing, Glassman replies, 'It may also be self-inflicted. What would be left of your feelings without the comforts of self-flagellation?' (152). The psycho-spiritual prison of the unforgiven

becomes a familiar space, difficult to leave when the door is opened. When Michiel and Karien ride out on the farm and stop to talk, it is she who reaches out, putting her hand into his pocket to touch his hand, still withdrawn – as indeed is he, held back by self-blame – in order to re-establish a relationship.

‘If you’re blaming yourself,’ Karien says, ‘please stop.... I could have knocked your head in with a hockey stick. I was humiliated. I was beside myself with hurt. But I never blamed you for the choices I made. We were kids, for god’s sake. I’m okay. It’s not blame I want to talk about’ (153). Yet Glassman has pointed out that his guilt lies in the fact that he deceived Karien about his ‘other desires’ (172). Michiel knows that ‘[h]is flight and the pain she must have endured alone were but the grand conclusion to countless smaller treacheries. At the heart of human relationship is language and the notion of solidarity, two things melded together to constitute what we call trust.... You need not plunge a blade into someone’s heart to lose trust. One may do so by keeping quiet about what you can almost not imagine to be true’ (172). Though the last words are self-exculpatory (with the distancing, furthermore, of the pronoun ‘you’, aggravated by the shift to the more impersonal ‘one’), the enormity of the betrayal of trust is not minimised.

So when Michiel tells his story to those gathered at table after Oubaas has retired, it is to Karien that he speaks throughout, and he apologises formally to her and to his brother for the pain he has caused. Her forgiveness may be related to Jaspers’ notion of existential guilt, which in Karien’s view would be specifically the collective guilt of apartheid: ‘Without generosity as vast as the heavens we would by now all have had our brains blown out. Like the Oberholzers’(153) she says, referring to neighbouring farmers who were murdered.

Karien is also honest about the ‘relief’ of giving up Michiel, her main link to Ounooi: ‘In herself she’d known that they were lovers through familiarity and fondness. Although it was subsumed by righteous anger the day she turned her back on him, she also had a sense of being set free, that he had made it possible for her to leave him, and thus also for her eventually to walk away from Ounooi’s spell. It was wonderfully terrifying’ (197). Although the freedom Karien experiences is not that borne from forgiveness, but rather from facing truth – and more immediately from anger – it still

reflects the terror of leaving the familiar, the known and loved. That Karien is able, at her most vulnerable, to take this step is a sign of her moral courage.

If in some ways the novel is about survival, mercy and creativity both seem to be key to the women's survival. Rachel, nursing her apparently dying son, 'has within her some fountain from which she draws strength and light' (179). Ounooi flourishes even as her husband weakens. Karien explains: 'Everyone in town was saying "poor Beth Steyn this" and "poor Beth Steyn that". In truth, she was soaring. She'd finished teaching and now it was going to be the farm and her project in the township. She did the house renovations' (174). Karien herself finds healing in painting and makes a name for herself as an artist, but it is especially in her work in the community that she finds fulfilment. Her ethics, faith and creativity converge in her statement, quoted earlier: 'In the end, our petty righteousness cannot stand up to imagination' (202).

Of all the women characters the one most wronged seems the least conscious of the fact. The farm worker Mamparra's nickname (idiot, conferred after a single mistake in her teens) has stuck to such an extent that Michiel cannot discover her real name, though he asks. She and Pietie, of all the workers, are the only ones to dispense with the titles conferred by inequality and white power (Oubaas, Kleinbaas) and call the Steyns by their names. Mamparra's forebears, the Mohlakwanas, are buried in the farm cemetery. Michiel, with his A for History in Matric, discovers the erased chapter of the 1913 Land Act and the 'legalised theft' (98) of land only when in London, and reads Sol Plaatje on its effect on black landowners in the Orange Free State. Many were forced to become servants on the land they had owned. And though he asks whether land cannot be restored to Mamparra when the children inherit the farm, Karien has already ascertained that she would have to be married to qualify. Though Pietie has courted her for years, Mamparra has remained unmarried. It is revealed that, as a young woman, she was raped by the Steyns' neighbouring landowner, Oberholzer. It seems no recourse was available to farm workers, for no action seems to have been taken – but the rape could be a factor in her refusal of marriage. Mamparra's son, Geel – the name an unflattering reference to his light skin, and again the only one available until Mamparra provides his correct name – has not had the opportunities given to the Steyn children, or even Paradys's 'black princess' (4),

Lerato, daughter of the family's housekeeper and Ounooi's protégée, who is now a successful corporate executive.

Mamparra is said to have led a religious revival among the Paradys workers. In a shameful episode from Michiel's childhood, a group of schoolboys summon her to demonstrate speaking in tongues: 'A posse of white teenagers on chairs, while the black woman stands with her hands as if in prayer on the polished red cement floor.' She offers to preach 'Jesus' infinite love and forgiveness'. '*No, kak, Mamparra, no preaching today. Just do the tongues. The boys guffaw...*' (80). The inequalities which permit this lack of respect for an elder, a woman, and her faith are self-evident. Mamparra, as the 'farm's clown' (80), the resident 'idiot', is considered fair game. Of love and forgiveness the boys learn nothing.

On two occasions Mamparra joins the family to take what might be regarded as her rightful place, but because she is still an employee, the 'shed worker' (99), the situation is awkward, and is presented almost comically. The first is during the funeral, when Michiel looks around to find that Mamparra has trailed the family to the front pew, possibly in the belief that she will be needed to help with Oubaas and his wheelchair – though he also wonders whether she has 'feigned absent-mindedness' (99). Because there is not enough room, Michiel ends up crushed between his niece and Mamparra, with the entire front row squeezed together. His father's words, 'astrante bleddie meid' (99) (cheeky bloody girl) come to his mind, but it is also during the service that Michiel becomes aware of his debt to Mamparra.

The second occasion is the family dinner after the funeral. The black people who form in some ways an extension to the family – the housekeeper Alida, and her sophisticated daughter Lerato, who has come to attend the funeral with her children – are not included because, as Lerato explains to Michiel, it is just too awkward with Oubaas, and so they eat separately in the guest rondavel. But when a storm breaks overhead, making it impossible for the guests to leave, places are hastily laid for them. Then Mamparra is heard, singing *Pie Jesu* in the kitchen.

‘Die hemel help ons,’ says Oubaas. ‘Is daai een ook nog hier?’<sup>63</sup> (126)

Karien invites Mamparra to the table, and she enters with a dishcloth over her shoulder, still wearing her worker’s hat, which Karien removes to the sideboard, while Lerato takes the dishcloth and places it alongside, ‘with the red hat perched like a surreal tortoise beside the hot-tray’ (127). Mamparra ‘smooths down her blouse and smiles nervously at the children’ while ‘Oubaas’s jaw is set; his eyes a smoky blue on the table’ (127).

The comical awkwardness of this disputable progress in relations is captured in Karien’s wink at Michiel: ‘Unbelievable, I know. Ounooi, are you here... to witness this? Face to face, side by side, yesterday today and tomorrow’ (127). Behr captures both the interconnectedness of ethnic groups and the anomalies of transition, seen, for instance, in the fact that Oubaas still refers to Lerato’s children as ‘piccanins’ but is godfather to Karien’s black adopted children, who will inherit, through her, a third of the farm. While there is some justice in land returning to black ownership, if only because the children are incorporated into the elite, this does not constitute justice for Mamparra. Though both Karien and Michiel would like to see the workers gain a share in the farm, questions remain about whether the new laws of tenure will indeed work for the benefit of those for whom they are intended. The new elite, represented by the mayor, Sam Thabane, who may well have appropriated money collected for a public swimming pool, is not likely to help her.

‘Mamparra Mohlakwana,’ says Karien, ‘doesn’t stand a chance’ (164).

Mamparra is disadvantaged by colour, class and gender and her unmarried state – as well as in her personal capacity, as her nickname testifies. In the comical edge to the scenes above, it seems the narrator, too, colludes in making fun of her – yet she retains a dignity which is ultimately supported by the text. And, where the other female characters survive and overcome pain through acts of mercy and through creativity, Mamparra has – besides her success as an evangelist and her constant singing – another secret: she dances.

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<sup>63</sup> Heaven help us, is that one *also* still here?

Before Michiel leaves, she insists he admire her ballgown. The following scene occurs after an interlude:

He is writing... when he hears singing.... He goes through the sliding doors. The sun is netted behind a haze of cirrus, the afternoon cold overlaid by tones of gray. She is on the footpath, passing beneath the bare fruit trees. Like decorations, single white blossoms cling to branches along her way. The disappeared sun makes the red of the dress seem even brighter between the stark black stems and the matt green of the ragged fig hedge. One arm is covered in a red mesh sleeve from shoulder to wrist and she carries red pumps in her hands. The blood-red bodice is held up by one thin strap across her left shoulder and whatever suspension is hidden in the fabric. A wide skirt swishes in folds around her calves, above her bare feet, her stride confident and unhurried.

‘What do you think?’ she says, stopping at the base of the stairs to slip on the shoes. Before he can respond she has come on to the cement stoep and spins on the shining cement floor, making the skirt flare like a magnificent bell. She has on light-cerise lipstick; a suggestion of rouge on her cheeks. Her hair is pulled back tightly by a silver comb with a red ostrich feather.

‘Beautiful,’ he says. ‘Is it chiffon?’

‘Charmeuse,’ she answers, lifting the skirts and swaying on the balls of her shoes. (219-220)

Mamparra is not named throughout this description, nor initially in the following dialogue, one of Michiel’s last encounters on the farm, so that the reader is not at first aware who the subject of this vision might be. And indeed, the derogatory nickname would be out of place in the glowing description in which the sunset and the storm-wracked farm conspire to add glamour to the description of a woman confident in her womanhood. (She also graces and reclaims, it seems, the same cement stoep which was the scene of her earlier denigration.) And, though she confides that the material came from ‘the koelie in town’ and that the whole package represents ‘two years of my savings’ (220), the effect is not spoiled, not even by the dyed ostrich feather, no doubt deemed appropriate for the artificial glitz of the ballroom dancing milieu. She and Pietie came third in the tango in the Free State Nationals, she tells Michiel. The encounter ends with Michiel wishing her well for the next competition. ‘Half looking back, she has re-entered the orchard, again singing, the ostrich feather pertly bobbing as she nods: “We will be the champions.”’ (221)

It is immediately after this triumphant, hopeful exit that Michiel asks Alida for Mamparra's real name.

‘Her name? Mamparra, till her deathbed. No red dress ... will change that. Give a monkey a golden ring, it's still an ugly thing. You're too behep [preoccupied] with names' (221).

Of this mean-spirited derogation by a co-worker with superior status, a last reminder of her demeaning context, Mamparra is unaware. The reader's last view of her remains a joyous one.

To read this scene as a final description of the ‘happy worker’, duped by the opium of the people and simple, childlike pleasures into disregarding injustice and oppression, is to misread both this scene and the novel as a whole, which makes no concessions about farm workers' conditions. To my mind it is a tribute to the human spirit which can rise above degrading conditions, retain dignity and beauty, and hope. Mamparra refuses to be downtrodden; she, more than any character, celebrates life. (‘Resistance, Kamil teaches his students, is the secret of joy’ [99].) Because this is one of the final scenes it is given particular significance and Mamparra, with a flourish of her red ostrich feather, has the last word. Her creative forgiveness, in her reaching out to Michiel without any acknowledgement of guilt on his part, is not denigrated but celebrated.

Yet it must be added that Behr, in creating, as it were, the character of the ‘forgiving servant’, provides a form of self-absolution for his alter-ego, Michiel, or, in the words of Carli Coetzee, ‘self-consolation’: ‘Narratives of conversion can too easily be self-referential in the sense that they perform the author's self-absolution’ (2001:691).

Seen in this light, *Kings of the Water* is more glib in its consideration of the possibilities of atonement for white guilt than *Disgrace*.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Carli Coetzee quotes Sandile Dikeni (in an interview published in the *Mail and Guardian*) on Mark Behr's earlier work, as well as that of Rian Malan: ‘The Europeans love it. It pushes the moral high ground back to white people, forces me to accept that they're not entirely bad. They feel sorry, man. We'll kill you if you don't forgive. They'll hug you to death, and you don't have an option’ (2001:691). Clearly it is the ease of the ‘sorriness’, the expectation that forgiveness *must* follow - that it would be morally wrong to withhold it – that is the problem.

Though a newspaper headline reminds Michiel that '[w]omen can change the world' (207), it is to Michiel that the novel belongs, and his pilgrimage that is central. He knows that Oubaas 'had wanted him to come to Paradys not because the father had seen his son from a long way off and was moved by pity and tenderness, not to embrace and kiss him, but only because he imagined that's what the son's mother might have wanted' (148). And so Ounooi becomes the catalyst for a partial reconciliation between father and son.

Kamil, who defines forgiveness early in the novel as 'accepting the distance between how we would have wanted things to be and the way they are', also reminds Michiel that '[p]arents don't redeem themselves. Rarely to their children, anyway' (9). As Psyche to Michiel's Eros (199), Kamil has played his part in the equilibrium the latter has found since the dissolute years after he left home. Now Michiel is on his own, and he can expect little help from his father.

At first Michiel resolves not to call his father Oubaas, as before, but to use the paradoxically less intimate 'Pa'. It is perhaps his own capacity to be moved by 'pity and tenderness' that leads to a moment of rapprochement when he is bathing his father, and which makes it possible for Oubaas to speak to him openly about his grief ('I haven't slept since the night your mother died' [187]) and his wish to die. Before Michiel's departure, the two were unable to speak to each other.

Since Michiel's visit is restricted to a day and a half, which includes the funeral and its aftermath, there is little opportunity for closure and, indeed, the novel ends with deliberate inconclusiveness: Michiel is left beside the road to the airport, all flights to the USA having been cancelled, not knowing whether he will continue on the road or return.

On his only night at the farm, sleeping in his old room, Michiel wakes, screaming, from a nightmare in which he sees his father hanging by his tie from a burning tree. 'He tries to free himself: if he can prevent the body from falling before the flames burn through the tie it will not be dead. He calls *Habibti*, *Habibti* but the branch is engulfed and he hears the crack as it separates from the huge trunk and he dives,

yelling, trying to catch the body before it can strike the ground.’ (183) Michiel then goes to his father’s room and the old man wakes.

‘It’s me, Oubaas,’ Michiel tells him, switching on the light to make sure the tie from the dream is still there, confiscating it on leaving as he says, ‘Goodnight, Oubaas.’ (183)

This ‘rescue’ is one Oubaas will never know about. In the dream it is involuntary, the cry ‘Habibti’ restoring the old man, through his need, as the beloved. This is reinforced by the now conscious use of ‘Oubaas’ in their subsequent encounter and Michiel’s removal of the tie, potential instrument of suicide.

But Michiel has tried in another way, too, to save his father. When Oubaas retires and Michiel goes to say goodnight, the old man confesses, ‘I can’t go on without your mother.... I can’t see tomorrow without her’ (142). Michiel stretches across the bed from his mother’s side, to touch his father’s hand. Oubaas asks his son about religious belief and confesses that, for him, faith is ‘the only way I know I’ll see her again’ (145).

‘You *will*, Pa,’ Michiel assures him. What follows is a beautiful evocation of regeneration, drawn from the life of the farm: ‘In the morning you’ll wake with the piet-my-vrou.... It must be the tenth generation after the one that was here when I left.... There’ll be the hum of bees, as if the world is vibrating. If even one of the blossoms is still on the trees you’ll see Ounooi in that’ (145). Paradys, even or perhaps particularly after the storm, must teach the desolate man that life continues. ‘Nothing lives unless something dies.... That’s what I believe god is,’ Michiel says. ‘The energy that connects everything’ (145). By trying to enable his father to recognise grace that is ‘new every morning’ (Lam 3:23) when he wakes, Michiel might make it possible for him to face each ‘tomorrow’ as it comes.

When Michiel first enters his parents’ bedroom, he sees a copy of *Disgrace* on his mother’s bedside table, the story of the ‘disgraced father’ on his daughter’s farm (144). Now it is the disgraced son, on his father’s farm, who reaches out in compassion, literally and figuratively, to the father. In some ways, as in *Disgrace*, the

child becomes parent to the father, and here the parable of the prodigal son is reversed.

Yet when Michiel rejoins the others at table, he will hear, in another reminder of the parable, that he has not been disowned as he thought, but is joint heir with Karien and Benjamin to the farm.<sup>65</sup> As he has, through Paradys, tried to restore life to his father, so has his father, through the farm, already reinstated Michiel as his son, symbolically restoring life to him. (In this the novel is directly opposed to Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope*, in which the implacable father disowns, and symbolically eliminates, his disgraced son.)

Michiel also has to deal with the dominee, now Karien's husband, who told him at nineteen that homosexuality was an 'abomination'. Dirk has changed and is able to say so with some diffidence: 'We look back. We can't believe. There is incredulity at how things were. How we were. How we lived, among ourselves, and in this country.... I think and act differently from the way I did then.' (195) He also recognises the source of his earlier teaching: he had been chaplain at Valhalla, the military centre of the regime. Michiel wishes afterwards that he could have been 'more magnanimous' (175) in his response, which is lukewarm – but Dirk's continued association with the hated church makes this impossible for him. Though Dirk's words do not constitute a full apology, he is one of the few characters to recognise his own fault, grow from the knowledge, and make a difference. (Rachel's words come to mind: 'And Rachel, with her arms wrapped around her husband's shoulders, whispers: *But which ways of knowing teach humility, my love?*' [188])

Finally, it is perhaps most with himself that Michiel needs to be reconciled, as the words on his therapist's wall point out. The aptly-named Glassman has on his wall a photograph of Derek Walcott with a print of 'Love after love'. These lines are quoted in the novel: *The time will come When, with elation, you will greet yourself arriving At your own door, in your own mirror, And each will smile at the other's welcome....* (82)

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<sup>65</sup> When Benjamin tells Michiel this, he is said to 'await the prodigal's response' (166).

Upon leaving the farm Michiel stops for a moment at the now-dilapidated farm stall, looking back, and ‘sees the structure as it would have been, back then’.

A bakkie is parked there with a boy looking back through the glass. Hello, he says, without thinking. No matter who passes here or what goes on in there, on photographs and bookshelves, in letters returned unopened to sender, on the linens and kindness of a thousand and one strangers. No matter where earth or water receive you into the great embrace, there you are: my boy, my man, my heart, my beloved. (228)

Having returned to the door he left in shame and guilt, Michiel has seen the many reflections of who he was and is, where he has come from, in the place itself and amidst the people he has loved and, upon leaving, he is finally able to meet and love himself. (The novel’s epigraph is from James Baldwin: ‘And love will have no choice but to go into battle with space and time and, furthermore, to win.’)

This is the meaning of homecoming in the novel. When Michiel first returns, the decision having been made without much forethought upon news of his mother’s death, the farm and homestead are familiar, but he is a stranger. ‘He knows, as he has for years, that his home – whatever a home is – is no longer here’ (50). During her visit to San Francisco his mother had expressed concern at the modern urbanites’ rootless culture (75), stressing the need for rituals to keep people together.

During the funeral service, where the family and community are gathered, Michiel finds that he has entered a ‘layer of disconsolation’ formerly unknown to him (81). Glassman has pointed out that Michiel had not mourned his other losses, those of Peet and of Karien and his family (58), so that he is overwhelmed by the prospect of losing Kamil when the latter becomes gravely ill. But Kamil recovers. Now, within the formal ritual of the church from which he is so deeply estranged, Michiel nevertheless asks himself, ‘Is the grief of all memory repeated in the superlative?’ as he mourns his mother (81), and it seems that deferred grieving is also made possible in this context.

Then thunder is heard, rain begins to fall, and Eugène Marais’ beautiful ‘Dance of the Rain’ (*Die Dans van die Reën*) comes involuntarily to Michiel’s mind: ‘*Our sister dances from the mountains of Moshoeshoe... she has unfurled her grey kaross, her bracelets flash and her beads glitter, the cattle and the big game look up, they flare*

*their nostrils as the voices of the smallest creatures sing: it is the dance of the rain, look, our sister, she has come...*' (84). This Afrikaans poem, set in the Free State, evokes the spirit of Africa as few others do, and draws together, for Michiel, the natural environment of his childhood, its people and their culture.

Michiel tells Karien of the effect of the landscape itself, 'of the season's shameless beauty: the redgrass that is still green, and sheep in the veld...Red and orange sandstone buildings and wind pumps rotating above cement dams against the blue. Poplars. Willows. Migrant swallows nesting beneath highway overpasses. Seduction in the eye – in the heart and the mind – of the beholder: someone else may find it banal' (147-148). And it seems that familiarity does inform Michiel's response to the beauty of an early South African spring.

On his last morning Karien persuades Michiel to ride on the farm with her, and dares him to gallop home – though he has not ridden since he left.

With the wind on his face his eyes water and his heart thuds in his contracted chest. He gets the feel of the animal beneath him. When he is one with the horse his body seems to swell and release. He feels tears coming off his cheeks and in the thrill of speed and fear he feels utterly alive, in his flesh an exhilaration that for a very long time – even without his feeling the absence – has not been there. (205)

In his extremity Michiel is conscious of his body, of touch, as he becomes one with the horse. Looking back on this experience at Peet's graveside brings a new awareness: 'During the ride with Karien he admitted to himself that rarely, if ever, has he known fulfilment – happiness? – as he has here. Like something suspended that is ignited again. A tiny window or crack opened....' (215). Karien, so fully present *here*, is the catalyst to a homecoming Michiel had not expected, a recovery of a part of himself that he did not know he had lost. 'Inside all he and she said to each other, her fingers finding his in the jacket pocket, was already the presupposition of knowledge and of lives shared, a language that cannot be had elsewhere. Oh, go on, allow yourself: the sense of belonging, almost; as close as there is to any belonging in life' (215). The place where you are known is home, and Michiel is able for the first time to claim that fully – in spite of his own initial resistance – not only through shared memory, but also through Karien's acceptance of him as he wants to be known

(something that is still difficult for his father). The epitaph on Peet's gravestone, in Afrikaans, ends, 'returned here to Paradys' (218). Michiel looks at the stone as he thinks, 'Whatever that little crack is... nowhere but here is it restored, does it remind you of what... you constantly live without' (215).

Nevertheless, in spite of the importance of the here, of presence, the homecoming that is permitted him is not bound, ultimately, to place, will not disappear 'at the first gate of Paradys or at the airport' (215), but will go with him. Paradys regained is a restoration of the person, the filling of an unconscious gap, restoration to a greater wholeness after the loss of being torn away from a place where you are known and belong. It is the ability to welcome yourself at your own door, wherever that may be. (Even after the goodbyes have been said and Michiel has left the farm, his brother telephones to tell him of the attacks on New York's Twin Towers, and gives him the options of driving on to Sandton, where he himself lives, or '[o]therwise,' he says, 'come home' [234].)

Ironically, the passage on homecoming is interwoven with a discussion Michiel has with Benjamin, in which his estrangement is foregrounded, an alienation that has nothing to do with place and everything with the injustice still perpetrated by its people. He feels unable to take up his inheritance, and so be part of it. During the funeral service he was conscious, wedged against Mamparra, 'melded' together, that 'the sweat of her labour is the calcium in his bones, in his powerful lungs... every step, every breath, what she has done most days of her life is in him' (97-98). Her labour sustained him; his privilege was grounded in her dispossession. Now, as he faces his brother, he asks him to face this injustice: 'Look, Benjamin... Look how we make people live so we may live like royalty.... I don't want that responsibility, cop out or not' (217).

Karien, too, is conscious not only of white debt to the disenfranchised, but of continued economic inequality. When Benjamin, now a Sandton businessman, expresses his enthusiasm for Mbeki's African Renaissance, she snorts, 'Renaissance, *my hol!*... And we're not witnesses, for god's sake. We're participants who are being further enriched' (163). When she expresses her belief that all whites might well have been murdered on their land like the Oberholzers, but for the generosity of ordinary

people, Lerato, who has joined the new elite, counters, ‘Generosity, my foot!... It’s the ten-foot wall around my house, with three strands of electric fence, that keeps the tsotsis out’ (153). It is clear that the line of division has changed but that the conditions of most remain largely unaltered. When Karien commends their ‘forgiving spirits’ in not avenging themselves, Lerato speaks instead of the ‘patience of being human’: ‘People believe their time *will* come.... How long the patience of some will last, *that’s* the question’ (154).

This question is left open in the novel, as indeed it must be. Michiel, who left during the worst years of apartheid, has returned to the ‘new’ democratic South Africa, witnessing the ‘new being born, dragging its afterbirth along with it, scratching its head to figure out a way to imbibe the past or otherwise see itself perish’ (94). He is aware of the progress of history, seeing in his father, brother, and the latter’s son, ‘the last three generations that will have it like this’ (118).

The *plaasroman* provides for the farm as microcosm, a small community in which generations have lived together within social structures reflecting the political and economic dispensation in the country. The genre lends itself to questions about land ownership and the correction of historic injustice, labour relations and economic justice. Both on the farm and in the country, the past must be dealt with or it will trip up the future. The reminder of farm murders underlines the precariousness of tenure. (Van Wyk Smith sees the farm novel, in this context, as an ‘icon of White South Africa’s fragile domicility and haunting complicity’, its potency as a trope dependent on nostalgia for that which is ‘always already in the past’ [2001: 20]). To presume that the ‘forgiving spirit’ of the poor will be sustained indefinitely would be to presume too much. Lerato sees this, the ‘honeymoon period’ of the new South Africa – which was, in 2001, already waning fast – as ‘borrowed time’ (154).

All three the novels discussed in detail in this study are written from a white point of view. In *Kings of the Water* the setting is post-apartheid, but forgiveness occurs largely amongst the white protagonists, and the broader notion of forgiveness for the sins of apartheid is merely introduced, and left open. Lerato and Sam Thabane are the only characters to speak on behalf of Black South Africans – and they are both part of the new elite, separated by wealth and power from the majority. We learn little of the

good work Ounooi and Karien are said to do among the poor, or of their circumstances, just as the apparently inadequate housing afforded the Paradys workers is described only from the outside. It seems Behr, who lives mainly outside South Africa, was confining himself to what he knew and, like Coetzee and Van Niekerk, not presuming to write on behalf of the other.

Behr extends the reach of this *plaasroman* beyond South Africa, from Michiel's arrival in his 'Nike Airs made in Cambodia' (4) to the sudden, unexpected intrusion of international events into this localised narration as he leaves. When Michiel has said his goodbyes and is on his way to the airport, cell phone messages alert him to a crisis in New York; the attack on the Twin Towers – the ultimate international act of revenge – and its aftermath are in progress as the novel ends, bringing to mind the bitterness of many towards the United States, with its citizens' 'abundance of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' (215). (We are reminded that the novel is set in the Bush era.)

Benjamin also reminds Michiel of injustice and the exploitation of the poor beyond the close quarters of the farm, beyond South Africa:

'Does the proximity make it intolerable, Michiel?... Seeing their lives so close? Because I know enough about California's economy to know who does the work there. You can hold this pose only because you don't see the hands picking the strawberries and lettuce you eat.... Go and look at the land around Salinas and tell me what distance between so-called fucking abstraction and sweat makes your life in America possible.... You want me to buy you out and use that money to build better houses for these people, I'll do it. Even if you want me to sell pieces of land or give it to them, I will.... Why don't you and your clever boyfriend lobby to give back the place you live in to whomever it was taken from?' (217-218)

This debate could obviously be taken further, its complications explored much more fully, but the novel leaves it there. Suffice to say that the appropriation of land, throughout the colonised world, has seldom been rectified, and that economic imperialism, exploitation, landlessness and inequality are not limited to pockets like South Africa. The struggle of the Palestinian people, for example, is voiced through Kamil's father Malik; class and other inequalities are foregrounded through constant debate amongst the members of Kamil's family.

Ways of ‘imbibing the past’ – whatever Behr’s rather innocuous term might mean – must take into account the inexorability of memory which defies the progress of time. Returning after a fifteen-year absence, Michiel muses on the evolution of the human race, and the fact that, in one life, every cell in the body changes: ‘Within a short time, we can no longer be said to be the same person. That’s the marvel of the postmodern moment: pissed, shat and sweated out of all responsibility’ (107) – as though mobility and constant change could absolve one from the burdens of the past. ‘But what of memory,’ the thought continues, ‘held in bones and teeth way beyond the I’s tenuous cohesion?’ The fanciful thought that remembrance is stored in surviving elements, in the bone, outlasting the vicissitudes of time and the instability of identity, is echoed, its scope broadened, later in the novel, when the future of Paradys is discussed. Michiel’s thoughts go to a *plaasroman* set thirty years earlier during apartheid’s heyday, Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist* (1974), with its ‘disgraced’ white man leaving the country, the Africans left to ‘lay to rest the one who has no name’.

A name rarely sticks to a map for long. But bones remain under the debris of fences, streets and pavements. In lava rock and seabeds, in sweeping winds, bones lie across what once was or may be in future a brief boundary, a foundation or a border post, to be read, chewed on, mined, used as a tool or ignored for ever. (165)

Behr’s accelerated aerial film of a changing land, changing map – at the mercy of the elements as well as of the human will – accentuates that which remains: the bones, hidden under the surface, as though memory resides forever in the land itself. Paradys, equally, has changed hands, from probable black ownership to that of English settlers, to Afrikaners – but the bones of the Mohlakwana ancestors lie buried there forever, reminiscent of the ‘buried giant’ in the first *plaasroman* in English, Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). And, while they may be ‘ignored for ever’, the novel includes a word on that too: ‘*Ignoring... differs from ignorance in that it is harder work*’ (79).

*Kings of the Water* pays tribute to *Disgrace* to the end but, just as Michiel, telling his niece a story, departs from the script of the Pied Piper, so Behr changes the outcome of his novel.

Michiel tells the story of the Pied Piper when his niece Bianca has woken during the night. She knows the story and corrects him as he goes, so that, to her amusement, he has to plead for narrative control. When the Piper has all the town's children following him, Bianca completes the story:

‘Back to the river, where they all drown,’ she murmurs, her voice now sleepy.

No, he says. No one drowns because of what grown-ups who always think they know better did or didn't do... (185)

In Michiel's version, the Piper leads the children to a cave, returns to town, and receives his just payment from the now contrite townspeople. ‘And slowly, all singing and dancing, the children come back into town with incredible stories of their journey and what they saw on the mountain’ (186).

Behr does not allow the sins of the fathers to damage the lives of the children (as they do in his first novel, *The Smell of Apples*, which was published in English in 1995), but turns the children's story into one resolved by both mercy and justice, in which the adults, ‘who always think they know better’, pay their own debts and no-one is sacrificed. This may be a reflection of Michiel's own return, fundamentally undamaged, as his capacity for kindness and mercy shows – and this is reflected not only in relation to his father, but also in relation to the children throughout the novel. (The exception may be Benjamin's son Thomas, who has become judgmental and so ‘thinks he knows better’.)

The concluding passages in *Disgrace* and *Kings of the Water* may be seen in a similar light. Where David Lurie, in disgrace, comes to Salem, Michiel Steyn, in disgrace, comes to Paradys – the Biblical overtones clear in both. At the end both leave. David Lurie gives up the crippled dog he has grown fond of and, in a last act of kindness, carries him to his death, giving the trajectory of his story an ethical dimension.

And Michiel, his journey to the airport and a defined future interrupted, is left beside the road for an encounter with an undernourished, neglected old horse of indefinite colour and sex. The horse follows him to a fence, but shies away when Michiel offers

him an apple, taken from the ‘padkos’ Alida had packed. He reaches as far as he can in offering the apple, and clucks his tongue.

The horse comes closer. He hears the breathing through the moving nostrils, receives the scent into his own. He feels the velvety muzzle on the skin of his open palm, the vibration of the crunch and chew. He touches with his free thumb the pus and drip from one scarred socket, sees the reflection of himself tiny in the pupil of each eye. The horse turns from the fence, seems to waver, then heads back into the veld. (236)

Using all the senses, Behr creates a complete encounter with the other, but this is one not of sacrifice, but of mercy, a gift. Michiel is not repelled by the horse’s age, ticks or sickness, but reaches out to touch without imposing his will on the horse. (And this time the animal survives, just as the children do in the fairy tale.)

‘As in water face answers to face, so the mind of man reflects the man’ (Prov 27:19). If it is in relation to the other that the self is known, Michiel has found his ‘own mirror’ (82) in his former home, in photographs and in relationships, and this is echoed in the ‘tiny’ reflection he sees of himself in the horse’s eyes. In this last, random encounter, his undefended openness to the other is reflected back to him in the giving and receiving of the gift.

## CONCLUSION

(WRITTEN BY DAVID MEDALIE)

The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility – of being unable to undo what one has done... – is the faculty of forgiving.... Without being forgiven, released from the consequence of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to a single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. (Arendt, 1989:237)

In the above passage (quoted in the first chapter of this thesis), Hannah Arendt emphasises the fact that forgiveness can only function in a situation in which an exacting logic of retribution is not imposed. The comparison she draws between the failure to forgive and 'the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell' is telling, since the reference to sorcery and magic reinforces her point that the enactment of forgiveness requires an acceptance of and entry into what is almost a different order of existence, a radically distinct moral environment.

Arendt describes the failure to forgive in terms which suggest stasis, being locked and confined, being imprisoned: she speaks of 'irreversibility', of being 'unable to undo what one has done', of being 'confined to a single deed from which we could never recover', of remaining 'the victims of its consequences forever', and of being 'unable to break the spell'. Forgiveness, by implication, has the potential to reverse the seemingly irreversible and to act as a meaningful alternative. In other words: the failure to forgive is associated with determinism, with an uncompromising consequentiality; with *impossibility*. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is associated with *possibility*.

In abstract terms, such concepts may be difficult to grasp. One of the advantages of narrative – fictional or non-fictional – is that it has the capacity to embed concepts or ideas in social contexts, and to dramatize (but also to problematize) them, as this thesis has demonstrated. Texts such as *A Human Being Died That Night*, *Disgrace*, *Agaat* and *Kings of the Water*, in their different ways, all dramatize the difficulties posed by the impulse towards forgiveness, but also the possibilities such a quest affords.

Two novels by the same author, written many years apart, exemplify the contrast Arendt draws between the closed circle of implacable retribution and the opening up of possibilities associated with forgiveness. In Mark Behr's first novel, *The Smell of Apples* (originally published in 1993 in Afrikaans as *Die Reuk van Appels*), the present is represented as deterministically damaged by the abuses of the past. In this work, published during the dying days of apartheid, the conclusion emphatically enacts a grim logic of remorseless consequentiality. There is no possibility of escape, as indicated by the adult Marnus, himself irretrievably damaged by his childhood, when he says that 'in life there is no escape from history' (Behr, 1995: 198).

However, in *Kings of the Water*, published seventeen years later, the situation – as we have seen – is very different. When Michiel returns to Paradys, he is filled with foreboding because he expects to find that there is indeed no escape from his history, that the past in all its retributive fervour will be there to accuse him in the present. But he is astonished to find instances of forgiveness, magnanimity and grace; and, even in his fraught relationship with his father, moments of tenderness and humaneness that he had not anticipated. The determinism of impossibility, of there being no escape, has been replaced by the openness of possibility.

This does not mean that forgiveness is easily granted or attained – in *Kings of the Water* or in any of the other texts included in this thesis. But there is a crucial difference between what is *impossible* and what is *difficult*. The former speaks of a society doomed to remain the victim of its history, while the latter suggests ways of trying to move forward by responding differently to the past. In seeking to distinguish between these two modes of conduct, this study finds its ethical value and its purpose.

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