

**‘To eke out the vocabulary of old age’: Literary representations of ageing in
transitional and post-transitional South Africa**

by

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

D. Litt.

in the Department of English at the

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

SUPERVISOR: Professor David Medalie

September 2014

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the depiction of ageing and old age in several key works of South African literature of the transitional and post-transitional period. The study covers texts set both in the transitional period prior to the 1994 democratic elections and in the years following that historical watershed. I examine how the literary representation of the ageing individual operates within the rhetoric of transition and new beginnings that characterizes the contemporary political and ideological climate of South Africa. The study includes a close examination of two novels (*Age of Iron* by J.M. Coetzee, and *Agaat* by Marlene van Niekerk), a collection of short stories (*The Mistress's Dog* by David Medalie), and a volume of poetry (*Body Bereft* by Antjie Krog). My reading of these texts centres on exploring how the authors depict their ageing protagonists in relation to ideas of time, place and the body. Using Julia Kristeva's theories on abjection, I analyse whether or not a degree of agency can be found in the abject depiction of older age. Similarly, I examine the ways in which reading older age through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque allows for a liberation from reductive understandings of the embodiment of ageing individuals. Because both *Agaat* and *Body Bereft* are translated from Afrikaans, I also explore the ways in which translation intersects with the socio-political ideologies of the periods in which these texts are set, as well as how this may have an impact upon the representation of older age. Through examining the tension between the nostalgic, backward-looking perspective usually attributed to old age, and the progressive, forward-looking sentiment of modern South Africa, I investigate the ways in which these writers – Coetzee and Van Niekerk in particular – associate the ageing body with political concerns. I also show how, in their different ways, all four writers counteract stereotypes associated with senescence.

Key words

Older age; senescence; South African literature; abjection; the grotesque; embodiment; J.M. Coetzee; *Age of Iron*; Marlene van Niekerk; *Agaat*; Antjie Krog; *Body Bereft*; David Medalie; *The Mistress's Dog*; transition; post-transitionality.

Acknowledgements

I dedicate this thesis to my grandfather, Louis Pretorius, and my grandmothers, Nellie Pretorius and Antoinette Roets. Their unconditional love for me stimulated the idea behind this study, and their belief in me aided in its completion.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor David Medalie, whose intellectual rigour and kindness continue to inspire me as an academic and as a person. Writing this thesis would have been an arduous task indeed without his encouragement and enthusiasm for my work.

Thank you to my mother, Elmien le Roux, for teaching me to love stories, and to Willem le Roux, for loving me as though I were his own daughter. I would also like to thank my father, Jopie Pretorius, whose academic career is something to emulate and envy, and Jackie Heaton, for her infinite compassion and love. Thank you, as well, to Johannes Pretorius for always reminding me to be subversive.

I would like to thank Retha Knoetze, Georg Nöffke, Stephen Steyn and Farah Ismail, for putting up with my endless rants and doubts, and for reminding me that being an academic can be fun.

And finally, thank you to Mario Garcia, whose love is the foundation on which all my dreams are built.

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Introduction: Mapping the contours of older age

In her seminal work on gender, Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote in 1949 that '[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (1949:267). Similarly, and almost too obviously, one might say that we as humans are not born old, but that we become old. This implies that ageing is an unfamiliar and unexplored experience that each individual has to undergo in his or her lifetime. What becoming old means, however, is a complex issue, as there are as many ways of growing older as there are older people. I would argue that in the same way that gender is taught, the construction of old age takes place in and is mediated by very specific socio-cultural contexts. To speak of older age means to speak of an immensely disparate variety of individuals, as this 'stage of life [...] encompasses a greater variety than any other' and includes 'people aged from their fifties to past one hundred; those possessing the greatest wealth and power, and those the least; those at a peak of physical fitness and the most frail' (Thane:193). For all who do not die young, however, senescence is an unavoidable reality.

Coined in 1903 by Élie Metchnikoff, the term 'gerontology' derives from 'the Greek word *geront* meaning "old man" and "logos" meaning "study"' (Harris:1988, emphasis in original). The most simplistic definition of gerontology is that it involves the 'scientific study of the biological and social aspects of aging' (Harris:1988). Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs explain that old age 'can be viewed from two conceptually distinct perspectives' (2005:i). The first focuses on 'ageing as a process or processes of biological change occurring after reproductive maturity has been attained', while the second sees ageing from 'the social and cultural position that later life and ageing occupy within society' (2005:i). The first perspective

dominated earlier gerontological research as the earliest research into ageing focused primarily on the medical aspects of older age, while the second is a relatively new field of inquiry. As Michel Philibert (1982:321-322) explains:

Gerontology was dominated in the first stage of its brief history by the doctors and the biologists. In a second stage a place was created for the psychologists and the sociologists, flanked by some economists and demographers. Now gerontology is at the threshold of a third stage, and a period of renewal, based upon the gathering of geographers, historians, linguists, exegetes, hermeneuticists, and semiologists around the problems of aging.

This multidisciplinary spread of the field could possibly be attributed to the fact that older age in modern society has come to be associated with a greater variety of complex sociocultural factors than ever before. As Gilleard and Higgs (2005:149) explain, 'Later life seems to have become more diffuse, its parameters less easily demarcated and its social position too contradictory to pin down'. However, I would argue (as will become evident over the course of this study) that the social aspects of ageing are dependent on the biological process of growing older. This is because the physical manifestations of older age have a profound impact on the social position that an ageing individual occupies.

It is possible to identify specific theoretical approaches in sociological research to understanding the formation of old age. One such approach is termed 'disengagement theory' and it 'postulates that all people disengage from society as they become older' (Gelfand:1). Disengagement theorists believe that in preparing for death, older individuals naturally withdraw from society and that this withdrawal makes death more acceptable and manageable for both the older person and society as a whole. In contrast, 'activity theory' holds that 'older individuals who are involved in a variety of activities are more successful in

their ageing' (Gelfand:2). Both of these approaches are highly problematic, in terms of the identity formation in older age which is the focus of this study. It seems almost too self-evident to point out that disengagement theory denies the older individual any opportunity for positive growth in older age, as it is based on a rhetoric of decline and loss. There are countless examples of older adults still occupying a vital social role and making the decision not to succumb to this rhetoric of deterioration. One such example would be a group of grandmothers in North America who call themselves the 'Raging Grannies'. Dana Sawchuk (2009:171) explains this social phenomenon:

The Raging Grannies are one of North America's most innovative and colorful social movements. Composed primarily of older women in their 60s, 70s, and beyond, the Grannies mobilize on a variety of peace, environmental, feminist, and region-specific social justice issues. Grannies dress in flamboyant costumes of skirts, shawls, and decorated hats while they flaunt their identities as feisty grandmothers instead of "nice little old ladies". At their "rages", as their organized protests are called, they show up – invited or not – to city halls, shopping malls, nuclear power plants, armed forces recruiting centers, and anti-war and antiglobalization demonstrations to sing out their political messages to the tunes of songs from days gone by.

While the Raging Grannies might be an extreme example, they nonetheless serve as proof that old age does not necessarily have to be a time of social disengagement and loss. In contrast, activity theory with its relentless pursuit of 'successful ageing' is equally problematic, as it posits the aged as a homogeneous group with identical needs, and ignores specific personality differences that might be found among older individuals. Furthermore, it advances the idea that an ageing individual has to conform to set criteria to be viewed as ageing successfully. This potentially increases the ostracization of the elderly, as it involves younger generations prescribing to older individuals their ideas of what ageing *should* involve. Harold Wershow (1981:233) has pointed out 'the struggle between gerontology as a

field of scientific endeavour and gerontology as a cause'. In most branches of gerontological research, the distinction between study and cause is not always clear, and this has a profound impact upon the approach adopted by many gerontologists. Despite good intentions, this may lead to the increasing marginalization of the elderly as well as to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes surrounding older age, as is evident in the activity theory approach.

Further sociological models used to study older age are the 'social environmental approach' and 'continuity theory'. The social environmental approach 'emphasises the functional context surrounding the daily lives of the elderly' and asserts that 'the values and beliefs generated in particular situations exert an undeniable degree of control over individuals insofar as they constitute the cultural backdrop in which the elderly test their adaptability and personal worth' (Hendricks & Hendricks:104). This implies that older age is dependent on the cultural, ideological and social context in which it is enacted. Continuity theorists hold that '[r]ather than seeing later years as separate from other stages of life, [...] aging is seen as a continuation of earlier stages of an individual's life' and not only as a 'unique period' (Gelfand:2). As will be made clear further on in this introduction, all of these ideas are particularly pertinent to my exploration of older age as they question the possibility of an individual's agency in old age.

It is no coincidence that De Beauvoir, considered by many to be the foremother of feminism, should have turned her attention to gerontological concerns in *The Coming of Age*, her sociological account of old age, published in 1973. The connections between feminism and age studies have increasingly been highlighted by contemporary gender and age scholars in

order to point out the alarming absence of gerontological work within feminist research. Leni Marshall (2003:vii) comments on this neglect:

Since the 1973 publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age*, reviewers have greeted feminist books on aging with words that emphasise the importance of the topic—and that reflect the larger social amnesia. A few examples: *The Coming of Age* was hailed as a text that “confronts a subject of universal public anguish and universal public silence” (“Five Significant Books” 1972). The back cover of Barbara Macdonald and Cynthia Rich’s own text, *Look Me in the Eye: Women, Aging, and Ageism* (1983), shows that May Sarton welcomed it as “extremely rare,” while Robin Morgan called it “courageous.” The label of “pioneering” was bestowed upon Kathleen Woodward’s 1991 *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* on its back cover. Margaret Gullette’s 1997 analysis of middle-ageism, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, was described as “original,” a book that “establishes a new domain for research” (Woodward 1997). A reviewer saluted one of the most recent feminist texts on aging, Margaret Cruikshank’s 2003 text *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging*, as “important” and “pioneering” (Gillispie 2003). Thirty years and we’re still “pioneering.” This must be a rough country indeed! How many publications does it take to move groundbreaking to an official—*ism*?

As gerontologists began to realise the need for a more nuanced exploration of senescence, works on the representation of ageing came to the fore. However, similar to earlier feminist research, this centred on uncovering and critiquing negative, and praising positive, portrayals. Sylvia Henneberg (2006:107) explains that ‘just as feminism has had to move beyond simply praising positive and indicting negative representations of feminist ideals to bring about its monumental paradigm shift, so age studies must find more complex ways of applying the lens of age to its areas of inquiry’. She advocates the conjoining of gerontology and literary analysis as a possible space in which these inquiries can be made, suggesting that ‘[l]iterature has much to offer age studies, just as the lens of age opens up new ground on which to explore literature’ (126). A literary work is the product of a specific time and place in society, its meaning mediated by both authorial intention and reader interpretation. Because

of this, exploring older age from within literary studies may allow for a more nuanced exploration of the relationship between the lived experience of older age, its textual representation and its perception in public consciousness. Through the tool of literary analysis, gerontologists may be able to move away from the reductiveness involved in working with pre-existing categories that delimit an ageing individual's experience of senescence as being defined by either 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' ageing, and instead attempt to deconstruct why such distinctions are seemingly necessary.

According to research done by Kinsella and Ferreira (1997:1), South Africa has the proportionally highest older population in Africa. However, in a country with a population as racially diverse and economically disparate as South Africa's, defining and understanding what it means to become old pose great difficulty. While some studies have been done on ageing within the South African context,¹ these studies primarily focus on the economic and social welfare of the South African elderly. Even though studies such as these do serve an undeniably useful purpose, they do not elucidate the cultural construction of the ageing identity in South Africa. There has not been any research done into the representation of old age in South African literature, nor have there been any attempts to investigate the ways in which the political changes at the advent of democracy may or may not have had an impact upon this representation. This study thus attempts to fill this lacuna by examining the representation of ageing identity in a number of significant South African literary works. Given the magnitude of the parameters surrounding the broad topic of old age in South Africa, it is necessary to delimit the scope of this investigation to focus solely on the

¹ See Kimuna & Makiwane (2008); Makiwane, Ndinda & Botsis (2012); Peltzer & Phaswana-Mayufa (2012); Sadie (1994) and Sagner (2000).

representation of white ageing, and to use the period of democratization as a timeframe. This transitional and post-transitional focus is particularly apposite to the cultural construction of old age in South Africa, as the birth of democracy was characterised by an ideological climate that favoured ideas of youthfulness and new beginnings, and attempted to rewrite and redress everything associated with the past. Since older age seems to be inevitably connected to the past, the instability of cultural identity caused by the social changes of this time period allows for an investigation into how this rhetoric of newness caused a shift in the construction of identity in older age. This is particularly relevant to an investigation of white ageing, since these changes in identity would be felt more forcibly by the white protagonists analysed in this study, as they previously held a political advantage. Furthermore, this focus allows for an investigation into how the loss of bodily power is related to the loss of political power in the representation of these individuals.

This demarcation might initially appear to limit the possible avenues of inquiry, as it would omit equally valid and necessary stories about ageing from other racial groups as well as ageing in other time periods. However, as Pat Thane, a leading researcher on social gerontology, suggests, '[W]e are at an exciting, if incomplete, stage of assembling both small and large stories about different times and places in search for a more complete history of old age' (2003:93). Similarly, this 'small story' of what it means to be an elderly white individual in transitional South Africa will be shown to contribute to a more general understanding of issues surrounding old age. In a country with as many older citizens as South Africa, understanding old age more fully is crucial to creating a healthy social awareness of the needs of the elderly. As Thane (94) explains, 'Cultural representations of old age, whether drawn from philosophical or medical texts, literature, paintings, film, recorded

expressions of everyday opinion or any other source, shape individual imaginings of the life course and hence individual and collective action’.

The aim of this thesis is thus to investigate concerns surrounding the depiction of old age in South African literature. The study will cover literary works set both in the transitional period prior to the 1994 democratic elections and in the post-transitional years. It aims to elucidate the manner in which the literary representation of the ageing individual operates within the rhetoric of transition and new beginnings that characterises the contemporary political and ideological climate of South Africa. Subsequently, it may be possible to establish a “poetics of old age” specific to the current South African context. The study will include a close examination of two novels (*Age of Iron* by J.M. Coetzee, and *Agaat* by Marlene van Niekerk, translated by Michiel Heyns), a collection of short stories (*The Mistress’s Dog* by David Medalie), and a volume of poetry (*Body Bereft* by Antjie Krog, published simultaneously with its Afrikaans counterpart, *Verweerskrif*).

My investigation is informed by the field of narrative gerontology, which holds that the self and the individual experience of a life course may be recounted or read as a narrative. As Gary Kenyon and William Randall (2004:333-334) explain, ‘[M]aking stories is how we make meaning [...], which means that it is central to how we learn, how we interact with others, how we experience our gender and culture’ and most importantly for the purposes of this investigation, ‘how we grow old’. However, narratives are inevitably embedded in time. While the present is the only reality, it is temporal. Randall and Kenyon believe that to deal with this, ‘we form images of previous instants’ (334), which, once connected, become our perception of the past. Thus, they explain, we make the past present by ‘re-presenting’ or

're-imagin[ing]' (334) it. These representations are either explicit or implicit, and can be read as texts. In their study, they describe four effects of ageing on the human experience of time. They posit that some ageing individuals 'are oriented primarily towards the future and live with a continual sense of foreshadowing', which means that these individuals 'see death not as the destruction of their life so much as its culmination' (335), and others 'may be oriented primarily towards the past and live with a continual sense of backshadowing' (336), while others may experience a combination of these modes. The final experience of time they explore is that of 'sideshadowing' in which exists 'a *middle realm* of real possibilities that could have happened even if they did not' (336, emphasis in original).

These modes of experience constitute what the ageing individual perceives to be his or her life-story. Karen Hooker and Doug McAdams (2003:300) describe a life-story as 'the internalised and evolving self-narrative a person works on over the course of life, in order to give life meaning, unity and purpose'. In this process, the self can be 'author, narrator, character, [...] reader, [...] editor and critic' (Randall & Kenyon:338). This process takes place in the 'various narrative environments [...] in which our lives are set' which include the stories not only 'of our families, and immediate communities, but also the more encompassing communities of our gender, or culture, class, plus the master narratives, ideological or theological, in which we may believe' (338). Because self-stories resemble 'literary productions or works of fiction', they are open to 'embellishment and distortion' (336). This is crucial to understanding the poetics of old age, as it inscribes the ageing individual with the ability to construct his or her life-story from within the position of old age, and negates the perception of old age as merely being a passive time of remembering the past.

Randall and Kenyon go on to explain that because ‘there is no end of meaning that can be extracted from’ a life-story, successful ageing involves what they refer to as the construction of a ‘wisdom story’ within the ‘spiritual dimensions of aging’ (339). In this ‘post-mythic phase’ that occurs in ‘later adulthood’ the individual becomes preoccupied with writing his or her ‘generativity script’ (337). According to Hooker and McAdams (2003:143), this refers to the process in which people in this phase ‘recast, revise, and retell their own life-stories so that the past is seen as giving birth to the present and the future, so that beginning, middle, and ending make sense in terms of each other’. This idea is particularly pertinent to the construction of old age in transitional and post-transitional South Africa, since the process of construction here involves the reconfiguration and rewriting of previously stable ideologies. Furthermore, this reconfiguration places a unique pressure on the white subjects of the texts analysed by this study, since the ideological climate in which they construct their generativity script has shifted. While Randall and Kenyon are careful to specify that there are various kinds of ‘wisdom stories’ that can be told and that each of these is distinctly individual, it is nonetheless problematic to define the identity of an ageing individual as being wholly preoccupied with the attainment of wisdom. As Kathleen Woodward (2002:206) has elsewhere argued in relation to a similar point about the conflation of ageing identity with wisdom, ‘With its emphasis on detachment, wisdom justifies the disengagement theory of ageing, the theory that older people “naturally” withdraw from their social roles so as to make their ultimate disappearance – death – less difficult for the smooth functioning of society’. She argues that ‘[w]isdom carries the connotation of dignified behavior, hence the further difficulty of its association with a rhetoric of protest’ (206) and concludes that ‘the notion of wisdom as a developmental capacity that ideally characterises old age interferes with the crucial work that needs to be done to reclaim these years as meaningful in the

broadest sense' (205). While the idea of attempting in old age to give coherence and meaning to one's life as a whole does have undeniable value, it renders the ageing individual (to use Randall and Kenyon's own model), more of a 'narrator', 'editor', and 'critic' than a fully engaged 'character' in his or her own life. Despite the sense of agency involved in constructing this coherence and meaning, the period of older age should still have social relevance, as older individuals are inevitably still situated in a concrete social existence. As my analysis will show, since each of the protagonists in the texts analysed by this study is represented as being actively involved in the creation of his or her own life-story, wisdom is only a viable framework in which to read old age in so far as it prompts an active engagement with life. In each of these texts, the wisdom that the characters attain allow them to redefine their positions in relation to their societies, and it is this reconfiguration of the relationship between individual and society that allows for agency and development.

In light of the above, Randall and Kenyon's model of narrative gerontology is useful to this study only in relation to two points. Firstly, their reading of the temporality of old age provides a useful starting point from which to approach these texts. Secondly, while their study focuses on the narrative structure of life courses, their ideas may be related to the literary representation of ageing subjectivity in the narrative forms of the texts I will be discussing. To clarify both points: as stated above, Randall and Kenyon describe the effects of ageing on the human experience of time as being characterised by foreshadowing, backshadowing or sideshadowing. All of these modes, to varying degrees, suggest the linear and forward-moving progress of time. While the idea of sideshadowing to some extent disrupts this linear flow of time in that it allows for unrealised possibilities, it nonetheless supports the premise that the past is followed by the present. Furthermore, since each

ageing individual's experience of time is unique, it may be sensible to surmise that no one person will ever be fully engaged in only one of these modes of experience – it is much more plausible to suggest that the ageing experience of time is characterised by a combination of the above. In light of this, while it is problematic to associate the elderly only with interiority and spirituality, identity in older age inevitably does involve an engagement with the past. While the first democratic South African elections in 1994 heralded a period of cultural rebirth and renewal, this event, as has been pointed out, for some also impelled a profound rewriting of previously stable ideologies. Clearly, the impact of this would be felt much more forcibly by groups that previously held a political advantage, such as the white protagonists of the texts in this study. Given the fact that identity in older age is in part reliant on the creation of a coherent and meaningful life-story that revolves around an engagement with the past, this rewriting of the past implies that the democratization of South Africa may reconfigure the life-story an ageing individual can claim as his or her own, and places a unique pressure on the configuration of identity in these older people. This makes the analysis of ageing in this socio-political context particularly pertinent.

The effects of this can be seen in each of the texts discussed in this study. The setting of J.M. Coetzee's novel, *Age of Iron*, is the turbulent and violent period immediately prior to South African democratization. Its protagonist, Mrs Curren, an elderly white woman, is at the start of the novel diagnosed with terminal cancer. As her impending death becomes conflated with the death of the apartheid regime, it acts as the impetus that forces her into social awareness, and more importantly, demands her social re-engagement. Coetzee portrays this social re-engagement as being contingent on her re-engagement with her own past. The effect of senescence on her experience of time is depicted as being reconfigured because of

the political changes in the country. This has a profound implication on the meaning she attributes to her life-story. The narrative of *Age of Iron* is written in the form of an extended letter from Mrs Curren to her exiled daughter. Writing this letter forces Mrs Curren into an awareness of her own complicity with the apartheid regime. Through sifting through the story of her past in which she occupies a position of privilege, she comes to a realisation of the inescapable ethical duty she has towards those who are without power in her present. Thus, while her engagement with the past posits her as author, critic, narrator and editor of her life-story, it also renders her as a fully engaged character in her present. This engagement implies that despite her impending death, she still occupies a vital role in which she has the potential to alter the conditions of her future.

While it was written in 2004 (and translated into English in 2006), Marlene van Niekerk's novel, *Agaat*, is set immediately after the first democratic South African elections. Milla, the elderly, white protagonist of *Agaat*, is paralysed by Motor Neuron Disease. Her coloured former foster daughter, Agaat, acts as her nurse, performing for her the most basic and intimate acts of care. In the course of the novel, the reader learns that shortly after having been taken into Milla's home as a child, Agaat is relegated to the servants' quarters to become the household maid, and thus comes to inhabit a position of powerlessness. Thus, the reversal of power seen in Agaat's care of Milla in the present time of the story is conflated with the reversal of political power in South Africa. Because of her medical condition and her old age, Milla is forced to re-engage with her past in order to account and atone for the immorality of her actions and their effect on Agaat. The political dimensions of this reveal themselves through the reversal of personal and political power that has taken place. The novel seems to suggest that the way in which Milla, previously the sole authority in

Agaat's life, has been reduced to a state of subjection, may be related to the reversal of power seen in the death of apartheid, as well as in the concurrent ideological changes. The effects of old age on Milla's experience of time lead to the rewriting of her life-story against the backdrop of the changed ideological climate.

Despite her paralysis, Milla is actively involved in a process in which she engages with her past in order to construct her life-story. Each chapter in this novel is divided into four components: a first-person narrative set in 1996, detailing the daily life of the bed-ridden and paralysed Milla; a set of her chronologically jumbled diary entries, stretching back as far as her marriage to her husband; a second-person account (also jumbled) of her married life; and disconnected, almost unintelligible poetic sequences. Significantly, Randall and Kenyon make the point that '[f]or better or worse, self-authoring is always *co-authoring*' (2005:338, emphasis in original). Very often the only way we can understand our own life is through its intersection with the lives of others. This point is especially valid in relation to the way in which Milla attempts to make sense of her life. Because of the helplessness of her condition, and because she has lost her ability to speak as a result of her paralysis, it is her engagement with Agaat that ultimately provides her life-story with coherence and meaning. Significantly, this is not a passive process that unfolds through her natural interaction with the other woman. Instead, through Agaat's reading aloud Milla's old diaries and in doing so recalling unpleasant memories she has attempted to suppress, the older woman is deliberately prompted and provoked into a realisation of her former foster daughter's humanity and subjectivity. Ultimately, through this interaction she is elevated from simply being the author, critic, editor and narrator of her life-story to being a fully engaged character with the ability to alter her outlook on her life, even in the rapidly diminishing time remaining to her. While I

will be working predominantly with Michiel Heyns's creative translation of the Afrikaans original, I will where appropriate comment on the ways in which the two texts differ, as well as what this implies in relation to Van Niekerk's representation of Milla's older age.

Centring on the representation of the menopausal body, the poems in Antjie Krog's volume *Body Bereft* were written well after the establishment of democracy. This volume displays, more so than *Age of Iron* and *Agaat*, an internalisation of the ideologies of newness that characterise post-apartheid South Africa. This can be seen in Krog's decision to translate her poems from Afrikaans to English, and to release both volumes simultaneously. Krog intimates in her writing elsewhere as well as in interviews that she views translation as a socially unifying force of great creative power, and believes that translation has the potential to prompt honest dialogue between the socially, linguistically and racially disparate population groups of South Africa. Unlike *Age of Iron* and *Agaat*, the speaking voice in this collection is not impelled by the certainty of a soon impending death. Without death as the destination towards which the narrative drives, this volume allows for the creation of a multiplicity of alternate futures. Through engaging with stereotypical and outdated representations of older age, Krog is able to explore possible modes of expression that capture a more honest depiction of female senescence. In light of this, this volume charts her personal journey in the search for a different way of inhabiting the experience of older age. This, in turn, has profound implications for the potential rewriting of the collective life-stories of menopausal women in a society that typically negates the value of older age.

The poems in *Body Bereft* are self-consciously aware of their own nature as literary objects. In these poems, Krog deliberately foregrounds language as the most important tool in the

construction of identity in older age. Furthermore, she comments on the way in which the literary canon is unaccommodating of the representation of the lived experience of senescence. Through including the intertextual sources for her poems in the 'Acknowledgements', she makes transparent the process involved in their writing. Her decision to publish the translated volumes simultaneously further contributes to the self-awareness that characterises the collection. She is thus deliberately involved in the construction of the life-story that speaks of her experience of older age. Not only is she her own author, critic, editor and narrator, but she is also an active character participating in creating the conditions in which her story will be told and received.

David Medalie's *The Mistress's Dog* presents the reader with a wide range of short stories that represent differing aspects of what it could mean to grow old in the transitional and post-apartheid South African contexts. While not all of the short stories in the collection exclusively feature elderly protagonists, Medalie's concern with older age emerges as a sustained preoccupation. Significantly, all his elderly characters are depicted as being involved in a process in which they are attempting to navigate the discontinuities that bridge their past, present and future. Medalie's nuanced portrayal of the complexities surrounding the experience of temporality in older age may be related to Randall and Kenyon's model of narrative gerontology, as each of his elderly protagonists is involved in a process in which he or she is creating a coherent life-story that attempts to reconcile past and present. The short story format will be shown to be particularly suited to reflecting the liminal nature of older age in general, as well as the ambiguity that underpins the representation of older age during the transitional and post-transitional periods in South Africa. Furthermore, I will argue that the text's composition as a collection of short stories mirrors the fragmented and

discontinuous condition which characterises the experience of growing old in these contexts. Significantly, this allows Medalie to focus on both the negative and the positive experiences that constitute older age, and in doing so his stories may be said to move away from representing older age solely as a politicized construct. Because most of the short stories in this collection are set after democratization has taken place, I will explore whether South Africa's transition to democracy allowed for an opening-up of the possibilities for the representation of older age in South African literature, and investigate whether this results in the liberation of this representation from the burden of apartheid.

In light of the above, this study attempts to analyse the ways in which the democratization of South Africa has had an impact upon the literary representation of the experience of temporality in older age. This is achieved by identifying and examining the representation of the elements that aid or hinder each protagonist's ability to construct a coherent life-story from within a senescent position. The first chapter details Mrs Curren's experience of old age in *Age of Iron*, in relation to the novel's portrayal of the intersection between the ageing body, language and politics, and establishes whether Coetzee depicts agency in older age as being possible within these parameters. The political imperative that informs Mrs Curren's position manifests in the novel's representation of the politicization of her experience of place, time and her body. The ways in which she inhabits the space of her home, how she makes sense of the past, present and future, and the meaning she attributes to her ageing, diseased body change as her preoccupation with the state of the nation intensifies. This chapter considers whether her changing perception sufficiently allows her to alter patterns of behaviour and thought that have become habitual over the course of her lifetime. Special

attention is paid to whether the novel represents ageing as a stable identity with fixed characteristics or whether identity in older age is represented as being fluid and in flux.

The second chapter continues this exploration into whether old age should be read as a monolithic and fixed marker of identity in relation to Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*. Because this novel's protagonist is fixed in a state of physical immobility, the manner in which she experiences time, place and her body has also altered. This chapter thus examines how it is possible for Milla to find new ways of embodying herself, occupying her space, organising her temporal understanding of her life, and communicating this as her life-story prior to her death. Furthermore, Milla is not depicted as sharing Mrs Curren's acute preoccupation with the political changes that are taking place around her; instead, her relationship with Agaat provides the novel's political dimension, as the narrative drives towards understanding whether their relationship allows for the possibility of forgiveness and redemption. In light of this, special attention is paid to Agaat's role as the co-author of Milla's life-story, as well as to the tactics and techniques demanded by this authorship.

The third chapter examines the representation of the menopausal body in Antjie Krog's *Body Bereft*, in order to establish the ways in which the body acts as an unstable marker of identity in older age. This allows for an exploration of how bodily changes lead to changes in identity in older age, as well as to how this changing identity requires new methods of expression and new modes of representation. The external forces that shape senescent identity will be examined, as well as whether literature in general, and poetry specifically, have the capacity to accommodate such a representation. This chapter elucidates the ways in which the ageing body may be read as being politicized, and suggests that Krog views the translation of poetry

as a crucial tool in redefining the state of ageing, in order to liberate it from being understood in binary terms that reduce it to something either to bemoan or to celebrate.

The final chapter attempts to chart the emerging possibilities for the representation of older age which were heralded by the transition to democracy, as seen in Medalie's collection of short stories. My reading of these stories will centre on Medalie's nuanced depiction of the tension between the private and the political, and the ways in which this may be related to the older individual's experience of the past, the present and the future. I will explore this through examining his interrogation of how ideas like desire, memory, reconciliation and nostalgia shape the representation of the experience of senescence in the South African context. As with my reading of the other texts, I will investigate the possibility of agency in older age, and will here relate this to Medalie's depiction of the potential personal enjoyment to be found in older age. This will further be related to post-apartheid concerns such as crime and emigration.

My analysis of these texts will be supported by drawing on Julia Kristeva's theories on abjection, and Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on the grotesque. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva builds on the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, particularly on his idea of the 'mirror stage' of infant development. Because the child's mirror image in this stage constitutes psychologically and physically 'the threshold of the [child's] visible world' (Lacan:5), this image becomes how the child differentiates itself from the rest of the external world. This unified image of identity is threatened later in life by the abject, which can be described as '[n]either subject nor object' (Kristeva:10). Elizabeth Grosz, in reading Kristeva's theories of abjection, explains that the abject is 'the subject's reaction to the failure of the

subject/object opposition to express adequately the subject's corporeality and its tenuous bodily boundaries' (1989:70). Kristeva (1982:1) writes that the 'abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I'. By this she is referring to everything which exists outside of the symbolic order of meaning through its necessary relation to filth and death. Examples of this would be blood, urine, faeces, vomit and the corpse. Exposure to these physical manifestations of human mortality causes a potential collapse of meaning resulting from the breakdown between subject and object, or between self and other. Kristeva cites as example of this the reaction to touching the skin on warm milk (2-3):

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. [...] During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in the symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects.

Because the abject forces the subject into a concrete realisation of the inevitability of human mortality, it simultaneously reaffirms the bodily existence of the subject: the abject is the 'border' from which the 'body extricates itself, as being alive' (11). This 'vortex of summons and repulsion' (1) concurrently defines and undoes identity, and thus 'disrupts identity, system, order' and 'does not respect borders, positions, rules' (4).

These ideas are particularly pertinent to understanding old age, since the loss of control that occurs as a person grows older (loss of memory, decreased physical mobility, loss of control

over bodily functions), arises from changes that happen in the body. The previously stable corporeal identity a person claims as his or her own changes and mutates. While physical changes take place over the whole life-course, the changes that occur in older age catapult a person into closer proximity to mortality, because of his or her awareness that visible signs of senescence such as grey hairs, wrinkles and mottled veins signify the approach of death. The new bodily identity created by these exterior manifestations of growing older may be related to Kristeva's description of the subject 'find[ing] the impossible within' and thus realising that 'the impossible constitutes its very *being*' and is 'none other than abject' (5, emphasis in original). The awareness that these physical signs of senescence signify death and mortality is concomitant with her statement that the 'abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being' (5, emphasis in original).

If older age can be likened to an experience in which the subject suffers abjection, the implication is that in addition to being repelled by the breakdown of identity caused by the physical manifestations of ageing, the subject should also experience a sense of summons, in which the experience of abjection allows for a simultaneous affirmation of identity. Woodward posits that a second 'mirror stage' of identification occurs in later adulthood, when older adults begin to feel disconnected from their mirror image. She describes this experience as devastating and traumatic, and suggests that it may be 'part of the process of accommodating death in the aging body' (Woodward:70). Leni Marshall, however, expands upon Woodward's ideas and attempts to inscribe this experience (which she terms *méconnaissance*) with positive as well as negative meaning. Marshall (2012:63) explains that the 'recognised old body does not offer a possibility for transformation, whereas the

misrecognised old body, because it can be a thing separate from the social or the lived self, contains the potential for each individual to transform the lived self'. Because of the potential for recreation inherent in the misrecognition of one's self, it is possible that instead of 'succumbing to invisibility, one could literally come to a *re-vision* of the lived self' (63, emphasis in original). Thus, while older age is an experience in which the subject is repelled by its abjection, it also offers the potential for transformation.

This idea is crucial to understanding the representation of old age in the texts analysed in this study: in *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren's cancer is an external force that invades the interiority of her body, changing the meaning she attributes to her bodily existence and propelling her into closer proximity to her mortality. However, this abjection also forces her into a social awareness and an acceptance of social responsibility, recreating her sense of identity in the process. Because Milla in *Agaat* has lost control completely over her bodily processes and Agaat has to assist her with basic acts like urination, defecation and eating, her experience of older age is underpinned by constant reminders of the materiality of her existence and the relation of this materiality to death. However, it is also through Agaat's involvement in this experience in which her body suffers abjection that Milla is able to recognise and atone for her past regrets. The poems in *Body Bereft* describe the speaking subject's disgust at the ways in which her older body has ceased to be familiar, but also inscribe the ageing body with the potential to create new meanings, echoing Kristeva's sentiment that the abject becomes both 'a vortex of summons and repulsion' (1982:10). Relating Kristeva's work on abjection to the representation of the protagonists in these texts thus allows for a more nuanced exploration of the tension between the resigned acceptance of old age and its potential power for a re-imagining of the self.

It is not possible, however, to relate *The Mistress's Dog* as fully to the idea of abjection. This could perhaps be because these short stories move away from the preoccupation with the ageing and morbidly ill body that dominates *Age of Iron*, *Agaat* and *Body Bereft*. Instead of reading older age primarily through the body, Medalie focuses on the ways in which his elderly characters are situated in the socio-political networks that govern their lives. I will, however, briefly comment on how Kristeva's ideas may be seen in relation to Medalie's depiction of the youth as a category posing a threat to the conceptualisation of older age.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin's study of Francois Rabelais's work, he theorises the potential rejuvenating power in both the carnival trope and the grotesque body as seen in medieval society. Bakhtin (1965:196, italics in original) describes the specific rites, rituals and customs that occur during a medieval carnival celebration:

Besides carnivals proper, with their long and complex pageants and processions, there was the 'feast of fools' (*fešta stultorum*) and the 'feast of the ass'; there was a special free 'Easter laughter' (*risus paschalis*), consecrated by tradition. Moreover, nearly every Church feast had its comic folk aspect, which was also traditionally recognised. Such, for instance, were the parish feasts, usually marked by fairs and varied open-air amusements, with the participation of giants, dwarfs, monsters and trained animals. A carnival atmosphere reigned on days when mysteries and *soties* were produced. This atmosphere also pervaded such agricultural feasts as the harvesting of grapes (*vendange*) which was celebrated also in the city. Civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals such as the tribute rendered to the victors at tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights, or the initiation of a knight. Minor occasions were also marked by comic protocol, as for instance the election of a king and queen to preside at a banquet 'for laughter's sake' (*roi pour rire*).

He posits that these social gatherings offer 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order' (199) through laughter, mockery, parody and debasement. Carnival brings together people from all social classes, and thus flattens differences of class and social hierarchy. This allows for the creation of a special space in which the traditionally accepted order of life may be overthrown temporarily. For Bakhtin, this spirit of the carnival finds its expression through communication and language. He explains that it 'led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times' (199-200). Because of this, carnival destroys 'traditional connections and abolishes idealised strata, bringing out the crude, unmediated links between words and concepts that are normally kept very separate' (Hoy: 770).

For the purposes of this study, I will be focussing mainly on Bakhtin's ideas surrounding corporeality. In carnivalesque literature, the grotesque body is described in exaggerated terms as being monstrous, with the 'boundary marking the division between the body's insides and outside [being] suspended through the two movements of protruding and penetrating' (Lachmann et al:151). The description of the grotesque body thus focuses on the orifices and convexities, such as the phallus, the nose, the mouth, and the womb, that allow the body to escape its limited individual dimensions, as well as on the bodily processes that allow this transgression of bodily borders. Because of this, the grotesque body is continually eating, drinking, defecating, urinating, menstruating, dying, and giving birth. This means that this body is never represented as being complete or in stasis. Instead, it actively creates and destroys new meanings, and is constantly becoming something different. Leading to an inversion of the meanings attached to the body, these representations 'thrust down, turn

over, push headfirst, transfer top to bottom, and bottom to top, both in the literal sense of space, and in the metaphorical meaning of the image' (Bakhtin:238). The implication of this is that the grotesque body as seen in carnivalesque representation is not a personal body, and is rather connected to ideas of social rebirth and rejuvenation. This means that this mode of representation 'digs a bodily grave for a new birth' because it aims 'to bury, to sow and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better' (213).

Bakhtin's theories on carnival and the grotesque body may be related to old age in general, but are specifically pertinent to understanding old age in the context of this study. The exaggeration of the grotesque body can be seen in both Coetzee's representation of Mrs Curren, and Van Niekerk's depiction of Milla. Furthermore, both Mrs Curren's and Milla's ageing corporeal identities are represented as being directly connected to the period of political transformation in which the novels are set: as has been suggested, Mrs Curren's cancer is conflated with the death of the apartheid regime, and the paralysis of Milla's body is inscribed as the site on which the political ramifications of her relationship with Agaat are played out. Because their bodies are described in grotesque terms, the manner in which their bodies overreach individual meaning and extend towards social meaning allows for a collapse between the personal and the political. The premise I follow is that the period of democratization in South Africa can in itself be read as a time characterised by the carnivalesque, as here the existing social order is overthrown and turned on its head. The special temporal space in which this spirit of transformation exists temporarily liberates both Mrs Curren and Milla from the established patterns of behaviour that they have enacted throughout their lives, and allows them to recreate their identities in new ways. However, just as Bakhtin explains that the liberation from existing order brought about by the carnival

is temporary in nature, so Mrs Curren's and Milla's liberation is also temporary. The grotesque signification of their bodies hinges on their older age. As will be discussed in the body of this thesis, both Mrs Curren's and Milla's ageing and changing personal bodies come to represent the political changes occurring in the body of the nation. In both texts, there is a conflation of the aged body with the diseased body, perhaps reflecting the instability and the violence of the transitional period in which Mrs Curren's and Milla's old age is enacted, and contributing to the grotesque nature of the representation of their ageing. However, each woman dies at the end of the respective novels. Because their ageing allows them to become associated with the grotesque they are liberated from the prevailing social order, but their advanced age and illnesses are additionally those factors which ultimately result in their deaths. In light of this, both of these novels are read in relation to Bakhtin's theory, in order to establish what degree of liberation from established truth can be found in the grotesque representation of older age.

Because both *Agaat* and *Body Bereft* are texts translated from Afrikaans to English, special attention is paid to the ways in which linguistic translation allows for a fuller representation of older age in these two chapters. While I primarily work with the English texts, where appropriate, I point out differences between the two versions, and attempt to account for these alterations in relation to how they have an impact upon the texts' depiction of senescence within the transitional and post-transitional contexts of South Africa. Furthermore, in the third chapter, I examine how Krog's belief in the unity brought about by translation has an impact upon her representation of older age. Hennie van Coller and Bernard Odendaal (2007:95) make the point that '[a]lthough literary systems are primarily self-defining, circumstances external to purely literary systems, such as politico-ideological

change in a society, may undoubtedly influence co-existing, hitherto mutually independent literary systems, and coax them towards each other'. Because of this, the democratization of South Africa highlighted for Krog the necessity for a democratization of language, hence her decision to publish *Body Bereft* and its Afrikaans edition, *Verweerskrif*, simultaneously. As Helize Van Vuuren (2009:233) has argued, 'the ideological basis' of Krog's interest in translation 'lies in a striving towards transformation of the South African society as one where racial, cultural, linguistic and class barriers might be broken down, where a new communal identity might emerge'. In light of this, I will examine how her project of exploring the literary construction of older age is made possible by the ways in which political transformation opens up the potential for translation.

In conclusion: the purpose of this study is to attempt to establish whether it is possible to identify a 'poetics of old age' specific to the South African context of transformation. This will be done by examining the linguistic, socio-cultural, political and literary aspects that govern the representation of older age in these texts. In doing so, I hope to contribute to 'the crucial work that needs to be done to reclaim [the later] years as meaningful in the broadest sense' (Woodward:205).

‘Giving birth to one’s death without anaesthetic’: *Age of Iron*, senescence and political transition

In *Age of Iron* Coetzee leads us to an understanding of the ageing body and the ageing subjectivity as mediated by a focused representation of an inescapable ethical duty to the Other. This is enacted within the political specificity of apartheid South Africa in the late 1980s. Indeed, it would be difficult to read Mrs Curren’s experience of old age as divorced from the political events of the period. Her ageing subjectivity is further inscribed as something that is inherently and self-reflexively textual, as is evidenced by the epistolary nature of the text: the novel takes the form of an extended letter to her exiled daughter, and documents both her growing political awareness and her recognition of, and reconciliation with, her impending death. The locus of ideas at work here involves the conflation of the ageing body with textuality and politics, and questions the possibility of the subject’s agency within these parameters.

Above all, Coetzee’s representation of Mrs Curren’s ageing highlights the liminal nature of older age in general, and the way in which this may be related to the in-between-ness associated with South Africa’s transition to democracy. Her relationship with Vercueil (the vagrant she invites into her home), the ways in which she experiences time, how she perceives the idea of place, and how she inhabits her ageing and diseased body, point to the ambiguity of her position, and may be directly related to the political changes occurring in the country. This indicates that her ageing subjectivity cannot and should not be understood as something fixed and static. Instead, it should be read as a subjective process of becoming. This process does not end with her death, but rather extends beyond it, as is exemplified by

the wager she makes with herself in trusting the untrustworthy Vercueil to deliver the package containing her letter to the post office after her death. The fact that she will never know whether or not Vercueil fulfils his promise furthers the ambiguity of her condition. Significantly, the trust she extends to Vercueil inscribes her experience of older age with political ramifications, as it emphasises her knowledge of the ethical duty she believes she owes the disenfranchised and Othered man. This idea will be discussed in greater detail further on in this chapter. Through representing Mrs Curren's experience of older age as a period of liminality, Coetzee questions the role that older age can play in the face of changing political ideologies.

Mrs Curren's perception of place reinforces the ambiguity of her position. In the broader political milieu of the novel, and indeed of apartheid South Africa as a whole, place can be read as an ideological tool used to further the agenda of the white ruling party through the division of races into separate physical spaces. However, Coetzee inscribes the idea of place in the novel as something that also has the power to undermine the ruling party's political agenda, through its connection to the private and the individual. This can be seen in the way in which the representation of Mrs Curren's house changes over the course of the novel. From the beginning of the novel, Coetzee establishes the fact that Mrs Curren and her house are intrinsically related. While she does leave her house on various occasions in the novel, these excursions are represented as problematic and dangerous, as will be discussed later.

When we first encounter her, she has just returned from the doctor after finding out that she has terminal cancer. This news is intertwined with the first description we have of her domestic sphere: it is a 'dead place' and is 'without use' (Coetzee:1). The correlation between

this and the physical condition of her ageing (and her disease) is clear. She continues to discuss the age and decrepitude of her house (14-15):

This house is tired of waiting for the day, tired of holding itself together. The floorboards have lost their spring. The insulation of the wiring is dry, friable, the pipes clogged with grit. The gutters sag where screws have rusted away or pulled loose from the rotted wood. The tiles are heavy with moss. A house built solidly but without love, cold, inert now, ready to die. Whose walls the sun, even the African sun, has never succeeded in warming, as though the very bricks, made by the hands of convicts, radiate an intractable sullenness.

The personification of the house in this passage has a humanising effect that serves to highlight Mrs Curren's relation to it. Because the primary focus here is to indicate that the house itself embodies her old age, the implication is that the same historical burden of political guilt that surrounds the house extends to Mrs Curren. Both she and the house are the products of an unjust and skewed political system. The reference to the 'African sun' (15) not being able to warm the house suggests that it is out of place in Africa, in the same way that Mrs Curren herself feels out of place. This idea is reinforced later on in the novel, as her house is described as a 'late bourgeois tomb' (150), a 'mausoleum' (33) and a 'museum' (190). She describes workmen in the process of 'relaying the drains' and digging up 'rusty iron' (15) from beneath the house. This anticipates her referring later to the militant black youth as '[c]hildren of iron' (50). The 'rusty iron' (15) foreshadows the textual connection between Mrs Curren and the '[c]hildren of iron' (50). This idea will be discussed in greater depth further in the chapter.

Early on in the novel, Coetzee politicizes the idea of place, specifically of Mrs Curren's home, by having Bheki, her housekeeper's son, ask her whether they 'must have a pass' (47) to be

on the property, after she stops him and his friend John from attacking Vercueil. Mrs Curren believes that 'Vercueil is their elder' (48) and that they should not think that 'they can raise their hands against their elders with impunity' (48). It is significant that their response to this is a political one. Their response to her intervention is to read her intention in chastising them as something that is defined not by her old age but rather by her race. While Mrs Curren might be making a point about the necessity of respect towards elders, Bheki and John seem to believe that old age has lost its meaning in the face of the political imperative demanded by the fight against apartheid. Through their asking her whether they 'must have a pass' (47), they undermine the authority of her ownership of the house because they ascribe to her racist ideas that she herself does not uphold, as her questioning their right to be on her property has nothing to do with their race but rather with their lack of respect towards elders such as herself and Vercueil.

Mrs Curren attempts to reclaim the authority of ownership over her house (and thereby the authority of her old age) by saying that she 'cannot turn [her] home into a haven for all the children running away from the townships' (54). Vercueil too suggests to Mrs Curren that she 'turn [her house] into a boarding house' (11). She responds by telling him that 'there are better things [she] could do with it. [She] could turn it into a haven for beggars. [She] could run a soup kitchen and a dormitory' (22). Her reason for not doing this is because 'the spirit of charity has perished' (22) in the country. The use of the word 'perished' is significant as it implies that charity itself is also something capable of dying in the same way that she herself is soon to die. However, as the novel progresses Mrs Curren's actions contradict this, as Bheki and John, as well as Vercueil, and even on one occasion a decrepit female friend of his, all seek refuge in her home. She writes that the 'house that was once her home and [her

daughter's] becomes a house of refuge, a house of transit' (136). The idea of her house's becoming a sanctuary is in direct contrast to her earlier description of it as being old and decrepit, as it now serves a purpose. In the same way, despite her old age, she is able to serve a purpose in providing the sanctuary. The use of the word 'transit' is significant, as it alludes to the political changes that are to come, as well as to Mrs Curren's own ambiguous and liminal position in relation to them.

While most of Mrs Curren's trips outside her home are represented as problematic, near the beginning of the novel in a drive to Fish Hoek she describes her almost rapturous love for the physical world around her. She refers to it as a 'hunger of the eyes' so strong that she is 'loath even to blink' (18). She wants 'to burn' the sight of the 'seas' and the 'mountains' on her sight 'so deeply that, no matter where [she goes], they will always be before [her]' (18). She describes herself as 'hungry with love of this world' (18). While this passage resonates with bittersweet longing, Coetzee foreshadows elements of the danger that is to come. Firstly, he does this through the words 'to burn' (18) and the later associations of this with her longing to set herself on fire in front of the parliament building. Secondly, he does this through her intense desire not to blink. This is in contrast to her later saying, after seeing Bheki's dead body in Guguletu, that her 'eyes are [now] open and [she] can never close them again' (103). A great deal can be said about the significance of eyes in *Age of Iron*. However, this specific reference to eyes in relation to place and how this informs an understanding of Mrs Curren's old age hinges on the idea of death as being a final closing of one's eyes. Here, Mrs Curren's eyes are what allow her to experience her very personal 'hunger' (18) for the world around her. Here, she can afford not to want 'to blink' (18), as her experience of the world is mediated only by her personal feelings towards her impending death. As the novel

progresses, and as her eyes are being forced open, her initially rapturous love for the physical world becomes dangerous and problematic, as will be discussed below.

As the novel progresses, Mrs Curren's intense love for the physical world is informed by her exposure to a political reality of which she was previously largely unaware. In turn, her exposure to these ideologies informs the way in which she views her own ageing and death. She describes the 'shock of pain' as a 'vision overtakes [her] of this house, empty, with sunlight pouring through the windows onto an empty bed, or of False Bay under blue skies, pristine, deserted' (26). She explains that her 'existence day to day has become a matter of averting [her] eyes, of cringing' (26). This is in direct contrast to her previously not even wanting to blink, and suggests that the shame she experiences is part of her existence. While this shame does refer to the 'unsavoury spectacle' (54) of the process of her dying, it also alludes to a politically originating sense of shame she is beginning to feel as a result of her privileged position in an unjust political system. Her vision of False Bay as being 'pristine' (26) is later undermined when she refers to it as the 'bay of false hope' (118) and as 'the bleak winter waters of the most neglected of oceans' (118). Here, she articulates the relationship between the beauty of the physical world that has to her become false and her sense of shame (119):

Sitting here amongst all this beauty, or even sitting at home among my own things, it seems hardly possible to believe that there is a zone of killing and degradation all around me. It seems like a bad dream. Something presses, nudges inside me. I try to take no notice but it insists. I yield an inch; it presses harder. With relief I give in, and life is suddenly ordinary again. With relief I give myself back to the ordinary. I wallow in it. I lose my sense of shame, become shameless as a child. The shameful of that shamelessness: that is what I cannot forget, that is what I cannot bear afterward.

This passage suggests that Mrs Curren does not feel entitled to enjoy the beauty of the world around her because of the political consequences of the apartheid regime. On the one hand, her impending death causes her to want to savour the beauty of Cape Town, but on the other hand, her approaching death forces her to acknowledge an understanding of why this desire is problematic. The ambiguity of her relation to the world around her thus points to the liminal position an ageing individual may occupy within transitional South Africa.

In a similar manner, Coetzee's representation of the way in which Mrs Curren experiences the idea of time is something that furthers this sense of liminality. This is achieved by the representation of how her sense of temporality is both shrunk and stretched out, as a result of the fact that she knows the limit of the time left to her. This relates to the ways in which her increasing physical disability alters her experience of time. Furthermore, her relationship to the past changes over the course of the novel: at the beginning of the novel, she views the past nostalgically, but as the novel progresses and as her eyes are opened to the political reality of her times, she becomes distrustful of the past and is forced to live in the present.

Mrs Curren describes listening to international radio stations late at night (23):

Fading in, fading out, I heard last night – from where? Helsinki? the Cook Islands? – anthems of all nations, celestial music, music that left us years ago and now comes back from the stars, transfigured, gentle, as evidence that all that is given forth will at length return. A closed universe, curved like an egg, enclosing us.

There I lay in the dark, listening to the music of the stars and the crackling and humming that accompanied it like the dust of meteors, smiling, my heart filled with gratitude for this good news from afar. The one border they cannot close, I thought: the border upward, between the Republic of

South Africa and the empire of the sky. Where I am due to travel. Where no passport is called for.

Here, it is music that transports her beyond the confines of her ageing and her sickness. She refers to this music of the past as ‘anthems of all nations’, implying a rupture of rigid political boundaries. Her understanding of the music as something which comes both from the stars and from the past is ironic, as while the stars represent permanence, they are simultaneously an anachronism, as any star’s light takes time to reach the earth. The stars we see are thus always behind time. This reflects Mrs Curren’s feelings about her own death, as it implies that her meaning too is derived from the past, and yet she is simultaneously alive but approaching death, again indicating the ambiguity and liminality of her position. She politicizes this sentiment through suggesting that the afterlife requires no passports, signifying that her death will allow her to rejoin the boundless past and escape from the narrow and restrictive nationalism which marks societies such as apartheid South Africa. In this passage, past, present and future are conflated into a paradoxical moment of permanence ‘fading in’ and ‘fading out’ (23) into impermanence, implying that to her time is simultaneously present and absent.

The next afternoon she plays the piano. She describes how she plays ‘badly as ever, misreading the same chords as half a century ago, repeating fingering mistakes grown by now into the bone, never to be corrected’ (23). This relates to her process of metamorphosis in the novel, as it raises the question whether any change is possible, after a lifetime of set patterns of behaviour and thought. The use of the word ‘bone’ (23) is significant, as she later refers to her sickness as ‘[g]nawing at [her] bones’ (112). This implies that there is a connection between mistakes of the past, and the changes brought on by her illness, as well

as her growing political awareness. Coetzee, however, inscribes this connection as something positive, as Mrs Curren remembers that the ‘bones prized above all by archaeologists [...] are those gnarled with disease or splintered by an arrowhead: bones marked with a history from a time before history’ (23). Here, her playing the music of her past with the same mistakes relates to the way in which she is beginning to realise the broader mistakes of belief and thought of her life, and hints at her desire to correct these before her death. This inscribes her diseased bones as valuable but it also ruptures the unity of her physicality by reducing her to bones. However, this seen in relation to the concretisation suggested by the description of her ‘fingering mistakes’ as ‘grown by now into the bone’ (23) indicates her concern that these ‘mistakes’ (23) will be what the ‘archaeologists’ (23) find, and implicitly poses the question of whether it is still possible to correct them.

Here, the music acts as that which triggers her nostalgic feelings towards the past. She speaks of ‘a time [...] when, passing down the street on a hot Saturday afternoon, you might hear, faint but dogged from a front parlour, the maiden of the household groping among the keys for that yearned-for, elusive resonance’ (24). She describes those days as days of ‘charm and sorrow and mystery too’ (24), and adds that they were days of ‘innocence’ (24). After discovering that Vercueil is standing outside the window listening to her, she wonders whether their ‘two hearts, [their] organs of love, [have] been tied for this brief while by a cord of sound’ (24). The play on the word ‘cord’ (24) refers to the ‘heart’s chord’ that she imagines as tying her and Vercueil together. It is music that allows her to traverse time: through it, she no longer is a ‘crone’ (64) but rather a ‘maiden’ searching for the ‘heart’s chord’ (24). Vercueil no longer is the vagrant tramp living in her garage, but rather an entity capable of possessing an organ ‘of love’. This also anticipates Mrs Curren’s saying later that

had she been 'younger [she] might have given [herself] to him bodily' (131). Both of these examples demonstrate the extent of the distance between herself and Vercueil, as well as her intense longing to cross the divide and reach him. Through blurring the distinctions between the past and the present, Coetzee ruptures Mrs Curren's rigid identity as an elderly woman, and allows her to imagine herself as becoming younger and reaching out to Vercueil. However, Coetzee simultaneously undermines this idea through having 'a woman from the flats across the road' (24) telephone Mrs Curren to warn her of a 'vagrant she had spied on [her] property' (24). This warning serves as a reminder to her of the current political ideology and fixes time in the uncongenial present, instead of its being 'curved like an egg' (23). Through this, Coetzee depicts the liminality that governs Mrs Curren's sense of temporality in her older age.

While her nostalgia is depicted as positive and enabling in this section at the start of the novel, as the novel progresses and as her eyes become open to the current political reality, nostalgia is shown to be debilitating, as she realises that that about which she is nostalgic is false. This is most evident in the section where she is looking at an old photograph of her mother, her brother and herself, and concludes that she has lived a 'doll's life' (109). In a bleak moment after seeing Bheki's body, Mrs Curren explains that she is happy that 'everything is coming to an end at the same time' (104). In this, she refers both to her own life and the almost apocalyptic political chaos she sees around her. The implication is that with her death, this political chaos will end, as she will no longer be forced to witness it.

While Mrs Curren's relationship to the past is depicted as being ambiguous, her relationship to the future is presented as crucial and urgent. Her awareness of the political situation is

suggested by her comment that if she ‘get[s] over it this time [she] will never have another chance *not* to get over it. For the sake of [her] own resurrection [she] cannot get over it this time’ (126, emphasis in original). Because of her imminent death, she feels that the present is the only time remaining to her in which she can make what she sees as ethically laudable choices. She explains that she is ‘trying to keep up a sense of urgency’ (119) and that she does not have ‘time for patience’ (180). These ideas allude to the fact that time literally is running out for her; the future and the present are thus merged into an immediately important reality from which she increasingly cannot escape.

When Mrs Curren describes the relationship between her physical pain and time, she compares the pain to a lightning strike that makes her disappear ‘in an instant’ (182) and brings her back ‘in another instant’ (182). She explains that between ‘these instants an hour may have passed or the blink of an eye’ (182) and that in these instants she is ‘absent, gone, struggling with something thick and rubbery that invades the mouth and grips the tongue at its root, something that comes from the depths of the sea’ (182). This hints at the breakdown of communication which results from the pain she experiences. Clearly, the pain too confuses and disrupts her sense of time as being linear. Because of this, Coetzee’s representation of the past, the present and the future as merging because of Mrs Curren’s illness and old age allows her to escape to some extent the confines of her condition, as seen in her playing the piano and listening to the radio late at night. Additionally, it provides her with the sense of urgency she needs to trigger her spiritual metamorphosis. However, her temporal experience is also characterised by confusion, pain and the breakdown of communication. This ambiguity places her in a liminal position, and means that while her illness may allow her to transport

herself beyond the present, into the past and the future, it paradoxically and simultaneously locks her in the dismal and painful present.

Similarly, the manner in which Coetzee represents Mrs Curren's physical ageing body is underpinned by ambivalence. In his representation of her ageing body, Coetzee inscribes it as something that simultaneously has the power to grant her agency, but also as something that stops up the passage to this authority. This may be related to Julia Kristeva's work on abjection. In 'Approaching Abjection', Kristeva builds on the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in order to analyse those states of bodily existence that undermine the subjective identity of the individual. As indicated in the earlier discussion of Kristeva's theories, this is particularly pertinent to an examination of older age, since the loss of control that occurs as a person grows older is experienced through the body. A person's corporeal identity deviates from what was known, and transforms into something different. While human bodies are constantly growing and changing, the changes that occur in older age coincide with a keener awareness of the inevitability of death. In the case of Mrs Curren, the natural movement towards older age and death is hastened because of her cancer. This liminal state of being can be seen throughout Coetzee's representation of Mrs Curren's ageing and sickening physicality, and may be related further to the ambiguous socio-political position she as an ageing individual occupies in transitional South Africa, as will be illustrated below.

Kristeva (1982:10) describes the abject as that which is '[n]either subject nor object'. It 'disturbs identity, system, order' and is '[w]hat does not respect borders, positions, rules' (10). It is the 'in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (12). In light of this, the

representation of Mrs Curren's physical ageing body could be said to be a site of abjection, in that the cancer rapidly spreading through her body posits her as both inside and outside homogeneous discourse. Kristeva (20, my emphasis) continues her discussion of abjection by likening it to 'a language that gives up, a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a *cancer*'. This, of course, may be related to Mrs Curren's cancer. She describes how her 'true attention is all inward, upon the thing, the word, the word for the thing inching through [her] body' (Coetzee:39). Here, cancer is personified as an external entity invading the unified interiority of her physicality. Significantly, her attention is not only held by 'the thing' itself but also by the unutterable 'word for the thing', indicating the simultaneous importance and collapse of language at work in the abject representation.

Mrs Curren describes her disease as something that 'eats' her out 'from inside' (112). Again unable to write the word, she associates her cancer with a 'crab', and describes what 'they would find', should she be 'opened up' (112). Her body would be 'hollow as a doll', except for the 'crab sitting inside licking its lips' (112). This description lends itself to association with the abject in various ways. Firstly, she imagines herself being cleaved apart to be witnessed and inspected by an unnamed 'they'. This disrupts the integrity of her physical unity and shatters the boundaries between inside/outside and self/other, fragmenting her sense of embodiment. Additionally, the fact that her disease is described as consuming her smudges the distinctions between these categories further: the cancer (which is and is not part of her) is devouring her (and thereby itself). Because crabs are carrion eaters, the use of this image encapsulates the sense of decay that has invaded her previously stable embodiment. The reference to herself as a 'doll' recurs throughout the novel and relates to the way in which the burden of history has robbed her and those like her of their subjectivity. However, in

relation to this discussion, the hollowed out 'shell' of the 'doll' becomes a home for the 'crab'. Because a doll externally resembles a human yet lacks the internal flesh, blood and bone, as well as the consciousness, that constitute humanity, the 'doll's' emptiness allows the crab to take up residence within it. The fact that the crab is 'licking its lips' (112) furthers the abjection of the representation, as it implies that the act provides it with an almost gleeful sense of delight. The personification of the crab is taken further, in that she refers to it as a 'creature', and states that only it 'is faithful to the end' (112). This is deeply and obviously ironic, as it is the crab's faithfulness that will cause her death. The irony continues in her description of it, as she suggests endearment, in referring to it as '[her] pet, [her] pain' (112). It becomes, as described by Kristeva (1982:10), 'a vortex of summons and repulsion' that 'places the one haunted by it literally beside himself'²: the abjection of her cancer fascinates Mrs Curren as much as it repels her. As will be seen below, this fascination with her cancer derives from the paradoxical power it provides her. The rupture of binary understandings inherent in her condition allows her to disrupt her view of other externally imposed binary systems, particularly in relation to the mores that govern the political context of transitional South Africa.

An example of this may be found in a conversation Mrs Curren has with John, in which she iterates that he and his generation think that it is 'time to fight' and 'time to win or lose' (Coetzee:144). She questions the binary distinction between winning or losing through telling John that she has cancer (144-145, emphasis in original):

² Throughout her writing, Kristeva employs the masculine pronoun as a generic for both male and female. While I find this problematic from a feminist perspective, especially in a discussion of the female form, I have retained her use of it in my references.

“You say it is time to fight,” I said. “You say it is time to win or lose. Let me tell you something about that *win or lose*. Let me tell you something about that *or*. Listen to me.

“You know I am sick. Do you know what is wrong with me? I have cancer. I have cancer from the accumulation of shame I have endured over my life. That is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself”.

In the same way that the cancer is simultaneously a part of and apart from Mrs Curren, so too is she, as a white liberal living under apartheid, a part of and apart from the political regime. Kristeva (1982:25) states that the abject ‘neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts, uses them. It kills in the name of life [...]; it curbs the other’s suffering for its own profit’. This may be related to the fact that even though Mrs Curren does not support the ruling party’s ideology, she is forced to live under its rule, and the shame this causes her becomes the malignant embodiment of her cancer.

After John’s accident, Mrs Curren says that ‘[p]erhaps shame is nothing more than the name for the way [she] feels all the time. The name for the way in which people live who would prefer to be dead’ (Coetzee:86). She refers to it as ‘death in life’ (86). This reflects the manner in which cancer too represents ‘death in life’, again highlighting the destruction of boundaries that characterises her abject position. Later, in a confession to Vercueil, she suggests that ‘the use of shame’ is as a ‘touchstone’, and as a ‘guide’ to ‘private honour’ (165). As long as she feels ‘ashamed, [she] knew [she] had not wandered into dishonour’ (165). Following the conflation of the ideas of cancer and shame, the implication is that her cancer also acts as such a ‘touchstone’, rendering it as something that provides her with agency. Abjection thus acts as the ‘border’ from which the ‘body extricates itself, as being alive’ (Kristeva:11). ‘Cancer’ and ‘shame’ are both externally imposed forces that rupture Mrs

Curren's interiority; yet, abjectly, they become part of that which constitutes her subjectivity. As Fiona Probyn (1998: 214) comments, '[c]ancer in particular problematises the inside/outside, self/other distinction which constitutes or fortifies perceptions of a unified self'. Furthermore, Mrs Curren's cancer blurs the boundaries between the political and ideological, and the personal and physical, as will be discussed below.

If Mrs Curren's cancer represents a site of abjection, the excess inherent in this *physical* condition allows her to transgress the borders of what would normally be deemed *socially* acceptable. During the police confrontation with John, in which the police force invades Mrs Curren's house in much the same way that cancerous cells invade an organism, a policewoman is called to coax her out of her house. Firstly, it is significant that the police feel the need to summon a *female* officer to persuade her to leave her home. This is the first mark of their misguided deference to her condition as an ageing, sick woman that characterises the episode. They incorrectly believe that because of Mrs Curren's *age* a female officer will make her more pliable in allowing them to remove her forcefully from her home. The policewoman approaches her and begins talking to her in the brisk tone of voice she thinks will please Mrs Curren. Significantly, this is also the tone of voice one would use when speaking to a child, indirectly hinting at the imputed reversion to childhood in old age that will be discussed later. Next, she offers her a 'nice warm cup of tea' (155) in the hopes of winning her compliance. The police officer is under the delusion that Mrs Curren's being offered a 'nice warm cup of tea' will compensate for her being forced to leave her home and being forced to abandon John to an armed squad of police officers. The police officer in doing so undermines Mrs Curren's agency by pandering to what she does not realise is a *stereotype* of old age, namely that old people can be soothed by a 'nice warm cup of tea'. However, Mrs

Curren simply repeats that she refuses to leave. The response of the police to this is to carry her from her house, unintentionally parodying the forced removals that occurred in the apartheid era. Utterly helpless and at their mercy, she uses the only weapon left to her. She yells at them that they must 'put [her] down' because she has 'cancer', and describes it as a 'pleasure to fling the word at them' (155), quite literally concretising the interiority of her condition into something that has a tangible external effect. In this she makes use of the ways in which her cancer may be related to abjection. Here, the rupture of inside/outside and personal/political binaries that characterise this abjection provides her with agency and informs her subjectivity. This allows her to disrupt their treatment of her as a stereotypical old woman.

However, despite the fact that a reading of the representation of Mrs Curren's ageing body must necessarily take account of her medical condition, cancer is not something that is limited to the elderly. The representation of the abjection in her having cancer might inform our understanding of the representation of her ageing body, but it is not the determining factor in the representation. Because of this, it is necessary to examine whether or not Mrs Curren's ageing body itself may be described as a site of abjection.

On explaining why she initially gives food to Vercueil, Mrs Curren states that '[o]ut of their withered bodies, even the old try to squeeze one last drop' and that this signifies a 'stubborn will to give, to nourish' (8). The use of the word 'withered' indicates an intrinsic feeling of repugnance toward the ageing body. The metaphorical 'one last drop' that is 'squeeze[d]' (8) out of the ageing body represents in corporeal terms a disintegration of bodily borders: '[m]atter issuing from the orifices of the body is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind.

Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body' (Douglas:121). Coetzee evidences the abjection that forms part of this ageing will 'to give, to nourish' (8) by demonstrating a rejection on the part of the recipients of Mrs Curren's nurturing impulse. She gives Vercueil a mug of coffee. Feeling revulsion at 'the lassitude, the letting go, the welcoming of dissolution' in Vercueil's lifestyle, she tells him that he is 'wasting [his] life' (8); thereafter he spits a 'gob of spit, thick, yellow, streaked with brown from the coffee, onto the concrete' (8) beside her foot. She interprets this as a 'his kind of word [...] from his own mouth' in a 'language before language', for her to 'inspect [...] and think about' (8). Again, this indicates the dissolution of language that forms part of the abject encounter. Vercueil's abject (but also defiant) spittle of rejection mirrors ironically the 'last drop' of nourishment Mrs Curren attempts to offer. This foreshadows the 'lassitude' and 'dissolution' of her own disintegrating corporality that will mark the process of her sickening and ageing. Similarly, her cats 'disdain' and 'spurn' the food she gives them. The diction here indicates a willful act of rejection on the part of the cats. Even when she commands them to '[e]at' (12) they shrink away from her touch. Touching and feeding are maternal acts of care, and the rejection of these acts undermines the value of Mrs Curren's nurturing or maternal impulse. This relates to what she refers to as 'motherhood [...] parodying itself' (64), as she calls herself 'the last of the dodos, old, past egg-laying' (28). The implication here is that without being able to lay eggs, the dodo has no purpose.

Her response to this is to tell the cats that she is 'sick to death of feeding them' and that they can 'go to hell' (12). She flings a fork 'wildly in their direction' (12). In her voice, she hears a 'new, mad edge' in which she 'exult[s]' (12). Kristeva (1982:17, emphasis in original) describes 'the one by whom the abject exists' as a 'deject' that '*separates* himself, [...] and

therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging or refusing'. The abject nature of Mrs Curren's parodied nurturing impulse allows her to 'stray' and thereby reinforces the very abjection that has given her the power to do so. Kristeva (17) states that the 'more [the deject] strays, the more he is saved'. Significantly, throughout the novel, the more Mrs Curren 'strays' from the subjectivity externally imposed on her by the political regime, and the more she embraces the abjection that forms part of old age, the less likely she is to die 'in a state of ugliness' (Coetzee:136). Ugliness is usually a *physical* characteristic and its use in this context highlights the paradoxical power of the abject body. Here, realising that she has had '[e]nough of being nice to people' and 'enough of being nice to cats' (12), Mrs Curren displays the first stirrings of the knowledge that 'more might be called for than to be good' (165) and that 'personal honour' might not be enough to atone for a 'crime [...] committed in [her] name' (164). The abject representation of her older age thus grants her power as an ageing individual in transitional South Africa. This agency should, however, be seen as paradoxical, because while her older age might provide her with temporary liberation, it will also inevitably lead to her death.

After chasing away the cats, Mrs Curren states that in her current mood she is 'capable of putting a hand on the breadboard and chopping it off without a second thought' (12). Firstly, chopping one's own hand off is an act of ultimate abjection, as it signifies the 'essentially divisible [...] and catastrophic' (Kristeva:17) state of the deject, in which the boundaries between body and self begin to disintegrate. Secondly, the 'breadboard' on which Mrs Curren imagines chopping off her hand is the site of her rejection by Vercueil and the cats, as it is connected with ideas of feeding and nurturing. Furthermore, one feeds, touches and nurtures with one's hands, and through wanting to chop her hand off, Mrs Curren is in fact

rejecting their rejection of her. She continues to disassociate herself from the ‘body that has betrayed’ her. Through referring to her body as an entity capable of betrayal, Mrs Curren is inscribing it as a site of abjection. Her ‘hand’ becomes a ‘tool, a hook, a thing for gripping other things’ and her ‘legs’ become ‘clumsy, ugly stilts’ (12). She questions the necessity of the ‘dead gurglings’ of her ‘abdomen’ and the ‘beating’ of her ‘heart’ (13). In effect, she rejects the body that has rejected her.

Mrs Curren explains it to herself: ‘We sicken before we die so that we will be weaned from our body’ (13). Continuing the maternal metaphor, she describes how the ‘milk that nourished us grows thin and sour’ and that ‘turning away from the breast, we begin to be restless for a separate life’ (13). This mirrors the early developmental stages of an infant’s being weaned from its mother. However, here the ageing body is represented as both mother and child: it is the maternal body from which the child is being weaned, and it is the child that is being weaned from the maternal body. This blurring of boundaries inscribes this description as a site of abjection. The ‘separate life’ is what comes after ‘this life [...] on the body of earth’ (13) is over. The implication is that Mrs Curren’s ageing body becomes childlike when seen in relation to a time frame grander and more extensive than the limits of representation. This mirrors her desire to extend herself beyond the limitations of her old age and death. The non-specific nature of her description of this futurity indicates the paradoxical and impossible condition of the desire, and relates to the manner in which Coetzee represents Mrs Curren’s experience of older age as being ambiguous and liminal. However, her reference to ‘this earth’ as having a ‘body’ (13) foregrounds the importance of *her* body in both allowing and limiting the scope of this transcendental desire, as will be elaborated upon below.

In the same way that Kristeva believes the abject refers to that which disrupts boundaries, Mikhail Bakhtin (1965:199) describes the 'grotesque' as that which offers 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order'. The exaggeration inherent in the grotesque body can be seen throughout Coetzee's representation of Mrs Curren's ageing and sickening body. While Kristeva discusses the *potential* for growth in abjection, Bakhtin (205) inscribes the grotesque as something 'deeply positive', and as something that has social ramifications. His writing on the grotesque is particularly pertinent to understanding Coetzee's representation of Mrs Curren's senescent embodiment because of the potential for regeneration in the grotesque, and the relation this has to her position in the South African context of political transition. If this transition is viewed as a period in which the existing social order is overthrown and turned on its head, it may be seen as a time characterised by the carnivalesque. In carnivalesque literature, as discussed earlier, the grotesque body is described in exaggerated terms as being monstrous, with the 'boundary marking the division between the body's insides and outside [being] suspended through the two movements of protruding and penetrating' (Lachmann et al:151). The description of the grotesque body thus focuses on the orifices and convexities, such as the phallus, the nose, the mouth, and the womb, that allow the body to escape its limited individual dimensions, as well as on the bodily processes, such as eating, drinking or menstruating, that make this transgression of bodily borders possible. This means that this body is never represented as being complete or in stasis. Instead, it is involved in the creation and destruction of meaning, and is constantly changing. The implication of this is that the grotesque body as seen in carnivalesque representation is not a personal body, and is rather connected to ideas of social rebirth and rejuvenation. Reading Coetzee's representation of Mrs Curren's body as

grotesque thus points to the ways in which her older age liberates her from the dominant social codes of apartheid South Africa and allows her to respond to what she sees as a political imperative. However, this sense of liberation can only ever be temporary: as noted earlier, while her older age might be that which liberates her, it is simultaneously also that which will lead to her death.

In literature characterised by the carnivalesque, the degradation of the grotesque body implies that it has the power 'to bury, to sow and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better' (Bakhtin:213). It 'digs a bodily grave for a new birth' and contains not only a 'destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one' (213). This may be related clearly to the way in which Coetzee renders ambiguous the possibility of Mrs Curren's agency in the novel. Bakhtin (217) describes 'death', as seen through the grotesque body, as a 'monster' that becomes 'pregnant'. He explains that '[v]arious deformities [...] are symptoms of pregnancy or of procreative power. [...] All unearthly objects [are] transformed into earth, the mother which swallows up in order to give birth to something larger that has been improved'. Such images of bodily destruction and rebirth recur throughout *Age of Iron*, as can be seen in the following passage (Coetzee:64):

To have fallen pregnant with these growths, these cold, obscene swellings; to have carried and carried this brood beyond any natural term, unable to bear them, unable to sate their hunger: children inside me eating more every day, not growing but bloating, toothed, clawed, forever cold and ravenous. Dry, dry: to feel them turning at night in my dry body, not stretching and kicking as a human child does but changing their angle, finding a new place to gnaw. Like insect eggs laid in the body of a host, now grown to grubs and eating their host away. My eggs, grown within me.

This passage may be related to Bakhtin's description of how, in the grotesque, '[d]eath and

death throes, labor and childbirth are interwoven' (219). Here, Mrs Curren's body may be related to the 'two-faced image' in which 'old age and youth [...] death and childbirth' are 'combined', as described by Bakhtin (239). She describes herself as a 'crone' and 'motherhood' as 'parodying itself' (64). This relates to the fact that she is no longer biologically capable of conceiving: '[f]or twenty years I have not bled' (64). Implying the abjection that forms part of the paradox, she states that this pregnancy 'does not bear thinking of' (64). The 'children' are described as 'obscene swellings' (64) and 'monstrous growths' (65). This mirrors the 'convexities', 'protrusions' and 'growths' (Bakhtin:241) that characterise the grotesque body. Mrs Curren is 'pregnant' with death and cancer: her ageing body simultaneously becomes the tomb of her death and the womb that makes new life possible, through her transcendence beyond death, and her redefinition of terms and identities in the face of death.

But because the 'grotesque body [...] is a body in the act of becoming', and because '[i]t is never finished, never completed' and is rather 'continually built, created' and continually 'builds and creates another body' (Bakhtin:240), it is appropriate that the growths described in *Age of Iron* are referred to as 'misbirths' (Coetzee:65). Mrs Curren herself provides the clue as to why the 'children' cannot be born: 'This country too: time for fire, time for an end, time for what grows out of ash to grow' (65). While 'the country smoulders' (39), she is trapped in a state of becoming. This is evidenced by the grub-cocoon-moth imagery that reflects her personal growth throughout the novel. In this passage, the cancerous cells are likened to 'insect eggs' that have 'grown to grubs' and that are 'eating their host away'. While Mrs Curren remains alive, the grubs cannot break free and become moths. The implication is that her death is the prerequisite that will allow her transcendence, in the same way that the

death of the apartheid regime will ensure the futurity of the country. Thus, while the grotesque pregnancy offers the possibility of rebirth, it simultaneously requires death for its conception. This illustrates the way in which Coetzee places Mrs Curren in a liminal yet paradoxically central position in relation to the changing ideologies surrounding the demise of apartheid.

Mrs Curren wants '[t]o walk into the fire' as she believes that it is 'the only decent death left' (65). The connection between her body and the country is evidenced by the fire, and reflects Bakhtin's statement that 'the grotesque body is cosmic and universal' and that it 'stresses elements common to the entire cosmos: earth, water, fire, air' (241). Similarly, this idea of the universality of the body and of life is reinforced by Mrs Curren's belief that 'blood is one: a pool of life dispersed among us in separate existences, but belonging by nature together' (63). Bakhtin (243-244) suggests that '[t]he events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at their points of intersection'. This can be seen in Coetzee's representation of Mrs Curren's physical body as being conflated with the body of the country, as this indicates similarity and intersection. However, because her old age problematically causes her to yearn to extend herself beyond the confines of 'this life [...] on the body of earth' (13), the representation also implies difference and boundaries. It is her ageing body that allows her to realise the connection between her physicality and the country, but it is also her ageing body that allows her to separate herself from it.

This 'endless chain of bodily life' (Bakhtin:241) is reflected through Coetzee's conflation of the physical body with body politics throughout the novel. Upon seeing John bleeding after

the accident, Mrs Curren thinks back to a time when she took her daughter to the emergency room, after she sliced her thumb in the bread machine. She remembers the '[b]lood on the floor' and the 'blood on the benches', and wondering what their 'timid thimbleful' of blood is worth beside the 'torrent of black blood' (63). This is indicative of the way in which the 'events of the grotesque sphere' (Bakhtin:243-244) are enacted both at the intersections between bodies (John's bleeding body melts into her daughter's bleeding body) and at the boundaries between bodies (her daughter's blood is 'timid' and can be stopped with '[j]ust a few stitches, just a few pricks' (Coetzee:62), whereas John's blood is 'so dark, so thick, so heavy' (62) and again 'so scarlet and so black' (63), that it overflows in torrents into the world around him). Her immediate next thought describes South Africa as a 'country prodigal of blood' (63), linking a private experience of blood to a politicized understanding of blood. Next, she imagines 'Florence's husband [...] wading through blood' (63), referring to his employment in a chicken slaughterhouse. According to Bakhtin (1965:235), the act of eating (reflected here through Florence's husband's slaughtering of chickens) represents 'the fusion of the devouring and the devoured body'. In Bakhtin's description, eating food implies mastering the external world. Bakhtin argues that 'human labour's encounter with the world and the struggle against it ended in food, in the swallowing of that which had been wrested from the world' (236). However, because of the political and economic injustices of the apartheid times, the chicken that Mrs Curren stuffs with 'breadcrumbs and egg-yolk, and sage' and rubs with 'olive oil and garlic' (Coetzee:44), is consumed in a position of privilege, whereas Florence's family's 'supper of chicken and rice' prepared on 'the paraffin stove' (42) is consumed in poverty. Because of the skewed political system, Florence's husband's labour results in *Mrs Curren's* triumph over the world. This grotesque encounter develops 'at [the] points of intersection' between bodies (the basic human need for food represents a point of

commonality) and on the 'boundary dividing one body from the other' (food becomes a point of difference due to political inequalities) (Bakhtin:243-244). Mrs Curren's mentioning of Florence's husband at this point of her meditation indicates her awareness of the skewed relationship between the body and the body politic. It is her conflation of *her* ageing body with the body politics of the country that allows her understanding of this unjust relationship. This intersection of body and politics culminates in her description of '[t]he dry earth soaking up the blood of its creatures' (63). South Africa is a 'land that drinks rivers of blood and is never sated' (63). The land is personified here, and may be related to Bakhtin's describing the 'earth' as an 'element that swallows up' but also as an 'element of birth, of renascence' (213). The body of the land itself becomes grotesque, as its hyperbolic bloodlust demands a blood tribute from its 'creatures'. This description refers to the countless and seemingly endless deaths demanded by the apartheid system. The physical body of the earth becomes the political imperative that requires blood and death in order to perpetuate itself. In the same way that Mrs Curren hopes to extend herself and find transcendence beyond her death, so the only possibility for political change and transcendence depends on the death of the apartheid regime.

Having traced the image of blood from John, to her daughter as a child, to Florence's husband, and to the blood demanded by the land itself, she returns 'the endless chain of bodily life' (Bakhtin:241) to her daughter, who bleeds 'every month into foreign soil' (Coetzee:64). Again, the physical body is represented in light of body politics. In this context, menstrual blood relates to ideas of growth and birth. If 'blood' is 'universal', Mrs Curren can transcend her ageing physical body through her generational continuation in her daughter. However, Coetzee renders this possibility ambiguous, as it is *foreign* soil into which her

daughter bleeds. Her daughter chose to exile herself to Canada because of her disgust at the apartheid system. As a result, her blood (and its possibility for Mrs Curren's transcendence) becomes something that no longer fits in the South African context. Because of Mrs Curren's conflation of her own body and the body politics of South Africa, the implication is that she cannot transcend her ageing physical body through living on in her daughter's biological reproduction (or even in her relationship with her daughter) because of the latter's decision to distance herself from South African politics.

Her daughter is her 'daughter life' but the 'children' inside her are her 'daughters death' (Coetzee:64). This comparison highlights the fact that she sees her own death as the prerequisite for her futurity. She describes how a sisterhood exists between them. Again, Mrs Curren describes her 'daughter' as her 'first child' (82), and states that she is her 'life' (83). The word 'life' in this context is not used in its colloquial sense: Mrs Curren is not merely trying to say that her daughter is the most important thing in her life. Instead, she is referring to the fact that '[o]nce upon a time [her daughter] lived in [her] as once upon a time [she] lived in [her] mother; as [her mother] still lives in [her], as [she] grows toward her, may [she] live in [her daughter]' (131). This locates her daughter's genealogical corporeality as that which defines *Mrs Curren* in the 'endless chain of bodily life' (Bakhtin: 241). The 'second one' is the 'afterbirth' (Coetzee:83), the child that 'cannot live outside' (82) her. Even if 'the second one' is 'the unwanted' (83), it too forms part of the universality of existence, as it is described as a 'sister' (64) and as a 'child' (82), implying biological connectivity.

Mrs Curren explains the inability to conceive that characterises her position as a 'crone' (64) by referring to her *lack* of blood. She describes her sickness as being 'sent by Saturn' (64).

Mike Marais (2009:98) explains that this is a reference to the 'archetypal Political Father', alluding to the fact that Saturn in Roman mythology is seen as the first god of the Capitol, and thus has a long association with the political workings of society. When relating Marais's description to Bakhtin's work on the grotesque, we find that the statement that Mrs Curren's sickness has been 'sent by Saturn' (Coetzee:64) may be read in a more nuanced light. While her sickness is 'dry, bloodless, slow and cold' (64), it has simultaneously impregnated her with the *possibility* of metamorphosis and of redemption through her realisation of the interconnectedness of life. 'Saturn' is thus both a reference to her growing political consciousness and an allusion to the Roman Saturnalias, which marked 'a true and full, though temporary return of Saturn's golden age upon earth' (Bakhtin:198). This was a 'carnival time of celebration' that had 'a universal spirit' marking 'the world's revival and renewal' (198). During this time, the only laws were the 'laws of its own freedom' (198). Similarly, Mrs Curren's ageing comes to represent to her a suspension of the normal codes of behaviour that guide the socio-political position that she inhabits. In the same way that the carnival signified 'a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitic aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations' (198), Mrs Curren, because of her condition, is able to cross the boundaries that separate her from individuals like Vercueil and John. In doing so, she is able to follow the instinct that will guide her to her 'own freedom'. She describes how '[i]n order not to be paralysed with shame' she has had 'to live a life of getting over the worst' (Coetzee:126). However, because of her impending death, she 'will never have another chance *not* to get over it. For the sake of [her] own resurrection [she] cannot get over it this time' (126, emphasis in original). Her old age thus acts as the impetus that thrusts her into political awareness. As has been discussed, it is significant that it is the turbulent period of South Africa's transition to democracy that forms the backdrop to this

process. This is because this time period is also one in which the existing social order is thrown on its head, as in the Roman Saturnalias.

As Mrs Curren simultaneously grows closer to Vercueil and closer to her own death, 'shaking [herself] loose from the dying envelope' as 'part of the metamorphosis' (129), this rebirth nascent in the physicality of death becomes clearer. Whereas previously Vercueil had been suspicious of her efforts to feed him, he now accepts bread and cheese from her, 'butter[ing] it thickly', his 'fingernails filthy' (82). The acceptance by Vercueil of Mrs Curren's nurturing impulse foreshadows her movement towards transcendence after death in her later trust of him. She describes her 'mind like a pool, which his finger enters and stirs' (82). Without it, there would be 'stillness' and 'stagnation' (82), indicating the necessary role Vercueil plays in her 'metamorphosis' (129). By concretising her mind into something that can be stirred, Coetzee highlights the connection between Mrs Curren's spiritual metamorphosis and her corporeal physicality. He emphasises this by referring to '[Vercueil's] dirty fingernail entering [her]' (82), the change of syntax implying an abject sexual encounter, made all the more grotesque by her old age. Mrs Curren explains that through 'indirection' she achieves 'direction' and again renders this as a bodily process by referring to it as a 'crab's walk' (82). This description is doubly physical: to 'walk' is a bodily function, while the 'crab', as suggested earlier, refers in part to her cancer, and very clearly highlights the renaissance abjectly imbedded in her terminal condition. Using 'indirection' to achieve 'direction' (82) is an idea that recurs throughout the novel. During a trip in her car, Vercueil tells Mrs Curren that she is 'pointing the wrong way' (18) and that she 'should be pointing downhill' (18). Her very old car can only start and move forwards when it is pointing the opposite way to what it should. Similarly, what agency may be found in Coetzee's depiction of Mrs Curren's old age relies on

the liminal position she occupies, as will be discussed later.

As the novel progresses and as Mrs Curren's 'soul read[ies] itself for further flight' (129), her articulation of the possibility of rebirth nascent in death becomes clearer. Speaking to John, she describes herself as being impregnated with 'words' (145) that stir inside her like 'life in the womb', like 'the very beginnings' of a 'child' (145). These words mirror the 'deep-down stirring of knowledge a woman has when she is pregnant' (145). Previously, she was pregnant with a 'brood' (64) of 'monstrous growths' (65). Now, her 'pregnancy' is described in more positive terms that form a locus of textuality, corporeality and the possibility of spiritual transcendence. She states that there is 'not only death inside' her but that there is 'life too' (145). She knows that the 'death is strong' and that 'the life is weak', but her 'duty is to the life' (145). The use of the word 'duty' is highly significant, as it does not refer to an externally imposed understanding of 'duty', but rather to a duty that is bound 'only to the laws of its own freedom' (Bakhtin:198). For Mrs Curren this 'freedom' implies the defiance of a politically ordained reality in exchange for redemption enacted through an inescapable ethical 'duty' to Vercueil, who is Other to her. The use of the word 'duty' extends the emphasis from her trust in Vercueil as simply a personal choice on the path of her own redemption, to a social duty that has ramifications for the redemption of South African society as a whole. It is the fact that her ageing body is described as containing both 'life' and 'death' that allows her to come to a realisation of this 'duty'.

However, Coetzee problematises the possibility of redemption inherent in Mrs Curren's dying through rendering the aesthetic component of her experience of ageing as something that can be regarded as a spectacle. While having a bath, Mrs Curren describes her legs as

'mottled, blue-veined, stuck out like sticks before' (54) her. Again, this highlights the way in which she becomes disassociated from her body, abjectly compartmentalising it into separate, inanimate parts; while paradoxically, the reference to her blue veins emphasises the fragility of her corporeal existence. She calls herself '[a]n old woman, sick and ugly, clawing on to what she has left' (54). In this description, the sickness and ugliness form part of her old age. Elsewhere, she describes '[u]gliness' as 'the soul showing through the flesh' (132). This inscribes the physical quality with metaphysical ramifications. This is evidenced in her description of the face of a woman in a passing car as 'not unattractive yet ugly' (127), and imagines that this is due to a 'thickening of the membrane between the world and the self inside' (127). She pictures 'eyes clouding over again, scales thickening on them, as the land explorers, the colonists, prepare to return to the deep' (127). Instead of the thrust of evolution moving forward, this seems to imply that living thoughtlessly in the apartheid context means that the politically ambivalent inhabitants of South Africa are regressing, rather than progressing. The woman's physical ugliness thus serves as a concretised representation of what Mrs Curren views as her spiritual poverty, and may be related to what Mrs Curren initially perceives as the ugliness of her own older age. However, this ugliness is not limited to 'the colonists', as she describes Mr Thabane's 'look' as growing 'uglier' (103) when he shows impatience and refuses to listen to her explain why she feels she has no right to cry beside Florence, Bheki's mother. She next refers to the process of her dying as '[a]n unsavoury spectacle' (54). The idea of death as being an unseemly and 'unsavoury spectacle' suggests something of the shame she encounters in the experience. Upon considering how her death could be a spectacle, Mrs Curren, in her vulnerable and exposed position in the bath, calls out to Florence. This is one of the many instances in the novel in which Florence is called upon to be the witness or judge of the 'spectacle' of Mrs Curren's ageing and death.

In one such instance, Mrs Curren explains that if ‘the life [she] live[s] is an examined life, it is because for ten years [she has] been under examination in the court of Florence’ (142). She dismisses her plan to ‘incinerate’ herself ‘in front of the parliament, or as she terms it, the ‘House of Lies’ (141) by examining what the act would signify to her housekeeper: Florence would dismiss her as ‘not a serious person’ and as a ‘ juggler, a clown, an entertainer’ (141). This would render the act a ‘spectacle’ by which Florence would not be ‘impressed’. The personal meaning Mrs Curren would derive from the political act of setting herself alight outside the parliament building cannot act as that which provides her with redemption and transcendence, because it would appear as a mere spectacle to Florence. Mrs Curren’s seeing herself through Florence’s eyes as a ‘ juggler, a clown, an entertainer’ may be related to Bakhtin’s conception of the carnivalesque, as such entertainers form an intrinsic part of the carnival. Mrs Curren wonders whether ‘it [would] be playing the game to swallow all the Diconal before turning the car down Government Avenue’ (141). She further questions whether ‘one [must] give birth to one’s death without anaesthetic’ (141). This idea of dying without an ‘anaesthetic’ refers to her growing realisation that she cannot allow herself to die in a state of ignorance, numb to the experiences of those around her. Instead, she realises that ‘dying in two minutes in a pillar of flame’ will not ‘save’ her any more than ‘dying in bed over weeks and months’ (141). The political ‘spectacle’ of such a death would achieve no social change, as the ‘lies’ will not stop ‘because a sick old woman kills herself’ (141). Because she is *already* ‘sick’ and ‘old’, such a death is robbed of its value. The only way in which Mrs Curren can ‘die in full knowledge, fully [her]self’ is by rejecting the spectacle and by keeping her own ‘soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul’ (130). This shifts the burden of redemption from something moderated by the external and the political, to something

informed by the internal and the personal.

Mrs Curren calls to Florence from the bath and her voice becomes a 'hollow sound' because of the 'bare pipes and white walls' (54) of the bathroom. She cannot call out to Florence and be heard because of the distortion of her voice, indicating that a failure of communication informs their encounter. This is reminiscent of Mr Thabane's telling Mrs Curren that her voice is 'very tiny, very tiny and very far away' (149). Mr Thabane can in fact hear her, but makes a point of saying that he is not able to. Similarly, Florence cannot or will not hear her, and thus paradoxically does and does not act as witness to the 'unsavoury spectacle' (54) of her death.

Instead, Mrs Curren calls on her mother to 'look down on' her and to 'stretch forth [her] hand' (54). However, her mother 'in her drab old person's clothes, her face hidden' (54) refuses to come to her, which mirrors Florence's refusal to hear her. Instead, her mother begins 'to ascend into the sky' (55) becoming 'younger'. 'Her hair' grows 'dark again' and 'her skin fresh' (55). She becomes Mrs Curren's 'earliest memory of her, from the time when the world was young and all things were possible' (55). Her mother, the 'old person', becomes middle aged, and Mrs Curren, in her anxious need for a witness, reverts to childhood. Her mother, however, has transgressed the limits of Mrs Curren's understanding as she 'soar[s], in the eternal perfection of youth, changeless, smiling, rapt, forgetful, to the rim of the heavenly sphere itself' (55). In death, her mother becomes a timeless memory and her ascent mirrors the way in which Mrs Curren's own 'soul read[ies] itself for further flight' (129). This reversion from old age to childhood and from old age to middle age disrupts the representation of old age itself, as it indicates that its boundaries are not fixed. Instead, it relates to the way in which memory shapes our perception of age. The dissolution of

boundaries associated with this experience furthers the liminality of Mrs Curren's position, and points to the unfixed nature of older age in general.

The most striking example of the manner in which Mrs Curren's ageing may be regarded as a spectacle occurs in the incident in which she leaves her home after the police shoot John. Disgusted at what has happened and at her own role in it, she 'began to walk down Schoonder Street' (157). When the policewoman attempts to call her back, she replies, 'It's not my home anymore' (157). Her house is no longer the sanctuary she retreats to after seeing Bheki's body. Instead, it has come to signify complicity with ideologies she abhors. This signifies the ultimate dissolution between the private and the political, as an atrocity committed in the name of apartheid breaches the confines of her private existence by playing out in the home she previously thought of as neutral to political events. By walking away from her home, she in effect rejects it as a site of violence from which she wishes to disassociate herself. Her walking away is thus an act of rebellion against the state and what it stands for. When the policewoman dismissively gives up trying to convince Mrs Curren to return with her, she says, significantly, '*Sy's van haar kop af*' (157, italics in original)³. Instead of reading Mrs Curren's walking away as a politically motivated act of defiance, she attributes it to what she sees as madness resulting from old age. The same dynamic shapes her earlier encounter with the police, when she tries to lay a charge against the police officers who cause the bicycle accident. Instead of taking her charge seriously, they tell her that they cannot do anything since she is not directly affected. She sums up their dismissive attitude towards her in the sentence, '*Die ou kruppel dame met die kaffertjies*' (86, italics in original)⁴.

Here too it is her age and physical impairment that prevent her political intentions from

³ This translates to: 'She's out of her mind' (my translation).

⁴ This translates to: 'The old cripple woman with the all the piccanins' (my translation).

being taken seriously. In both cases, Coetzee's representation of the ambivalence associated with Mrs Curren's old age both grants and denies her authority, as it simultaneously signifies something that allows her to transgress social boundaries to express a political ideal she believes in strongly and as something that hinders the communication of such an impulse, as it renders it negligible.

When Mrs Curren leaves her home after John is shot, she describes herself as a 'spectacle' with her 'wild hair and pink quilt' (157). However, as she leaves her neat, suburban area and enters the seedier area around Buitenkant Street (a name that mirrors the dislocation and disassociation she experiences, as it means "outside" or "on the other side" in Afrikaans), she notes that while within the context of Schoonder Street she might be seen as a spectacle, amid the 'rubble and filth' of the 'urban shadowland' she is not 'spared [...] a glance' (157). This draws the reader's attention to the fact that the grotesque and the abject require a context against which to be measured, suggesting the problematic nature of such a representation. Furthermore, in choosing to be amongst the 'rubble and filth' (157) she is actively aligning herself with 'everything indefinite, everything that gives when you press it' (146). Ironically, the 'lassitude' (8) and 'dissolution' (8) of old age that she so fears at the beginning of the novel finally catch up with her, but instead of being a result of the degeneration of old age, they are the consequence of a wilful act of defiance against an act of police brutality that she witnesses first hand.

However, the spatial dislocation that makes her defiance possible does not come without a price: she realises that she cannot survive without her pills, but that the 'pills were in the house, the house in other hands' (157). The point here is that Mrs Curren's active gesture of

defiance can never be described as triumphal, despite its significance to her in her spiritual transcendence or metamorphosis. Because she is old and because she is sick, this act of defiance places her in a position of extreme vulnerability, physically as well as emotionally. This is epitomised by her saying while in Buitenkant Street that she is 'beginning to feel the indifferent peace of an old animal that, sensing its time is near, creeps, cold and sluggish, into the hole in the ground where everything will contract to the slow thudding of a heart' (158). While this is in part a reaction to what she witnesses happening to John, Coetzee's choice of metaphor broadens the implications. The 'old animal' crawls into the 'hole in the ground' *because* it senses that 'its time is near'. Mrs Curren is able to embrace the 'welcoming of dissolution' (8) and enact her gesture of defiance by wilfully displacing herself spatially from Schoonder Street (representing homologous belief in the ruling ideology) to Buitenkant Street (representing, quite literally, the heterogeneous and displaced) because she too senses that her death is near. The personal nature of this act is broadened even further to have political ramifications when viewed in relation to her previous description of 'South Africa' as a 'bad-tempered old hound snoozing in the doorway, taking its time to die' (70). Both Mrs Curren and South Africa are being compared to dying animals. However, the difference is that while Mrs Curren senses that her 'time is near' (158), South Africa is 'taking its time to die' (70). However this does not change the reality of her old age or of her impending death, nor does it mitigate the extreme state of pain and discomfort she feels at being dislocated from her home. She has nothing left to do but listen 'to the beat of the pain that might as well have been the beat of [her] pulse' (158). Here, her entire consciousness is taken up by the demands of the ill body and the ageing body. The extent of this is highlighted by the fact that she believes she 'must have slept' and that '[t]ime must have passed' (158).

Her physical dislocation has thrust her into a realm of pain in which the normal mechanics of time have been suspended and warped.

This disruption of normality is magnified throughout the passage. When Mrs Curren wakes up, she discovers 'a child kneeling beside [her], feeling inside the folds of the quilt' (158). She describes how his 'hand crept over [her] body' (158). Through opening herself up to heterogeneous meanings and realities (the culmination of which has been the episode of John's being shot), she has placed herself in a position of vulnerability in which she is susceptible to confrontation with everything that is Other. Having left the privacy of her home as it has been invaded by the political, she finds that her body is her final sanctuary of privacy against the world. However, the child's hand creeping over her body ruptures the limits of this privacy. Such intimate touch usually connotes the sexual, which renders this episode even more grotesque. Mrs Curren tries to ward off the boys but she cannot speak because her 'teeth were loose' (158). This relates to abjection in two ways: firstly, it distorts the idea of a unified corporeality and alludes to the way in which her ageing body betrays her, through the need for false teeth. Secondly, it suggests the failure of language and of communication that forms part of the abject encounter. Whereas previously, she is able to use her cancer as a weapon against the police officers, when she tells the children that she is 'sick' and that they will 'get sick from' (158) her, they simply withdraw and are described as 'waiting' like 'crows' (Coetzee:158). Crows are carrion birds that feed on corpses, and this further renders Mrs Curren's body as abject, as, according to Kristeva (1982:12), the 'corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection'. This relates to the metaphor of an 'old animal' that senses that 'its time is near' (Coetzee:158), as it casts Mrs Curren's ageing but living body as a body existing in the liminal space between life and death.

Compounding the effect of this abject representation, Mrs Curren, unable to ignore the physical demands of her body, empties her bladder while still lying under the quilt on the ground. This too relates to abjection in various ways. Firstly, on the most basic physiological level, as previously mentioned, Mary Douglas (1969:121) asserts that '[m]atter issuing from the orifices of the body is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body'. This suggests that the act of urination in itself disrupts the boundaries of the body and thus signifies abjection. Secondly, social mores regarding decency and privacy inhibit urination in public. Following the politically motivated police invasion of the privacy of Mrs Curren's home, her urinating further expresses the extent to which she has transgressed the societal mores of apartheid South Africa that have governed her existence up until this point in her life. However, the intrinsic shame in not being able to govern her own body's impulses reduces this to an act of ultimate abjection, as it magnifies the split between her corporeality and her consciousness. Thirdly, bed-wetting is usually associated with childhood, but is also very much associated with the incontinence of many elderly people and this is thus a further indication of the purported reversion to childhood in old age that will be discussed further on in this chapter. However, it is significant that Mrs Curren's position of vulnerability is the direct result of her own actions: she herself comments that 'all things work together towards an easy birth' (158). This is a reference to her earlier question of whether one must give 'birth' to one's 'death' without an 'anaesthetic' (141). The conflation between 'birth' and 'death' yet again points to the grotesque nature of the situation. This emphasises that Mrs Curren truly believes that her death is near, resulting in the 'numbness' (158) she experiences. Here, she is giving birth to her death without anaesthetic, because she is

without the pills that ease her pain. Metaphorically, her eyes are now open to the reality of the political situation, as she has witnessed its atrocities first-hand.

The sexual undertones of the passage become more pronounced when Mrs Curren describes something that is 'pressed between [her] lips' and 'forced between [her] gums' (158). She is described as 'gagg[ing] and pull[ing] away' (158). The fact that the 'something' is unnamed heightens the abjection of the encounter, as do the facts that it is children who surround her and that she is unsure how many of them there are. Her feeble attempts to repel 'the hand' only result in its pressing 'all the harder' (158). The diction here tentatively suggests a grotesque and absurd rape scene, made all the more abject by the 'rapists' being children and the victim being elderly. She is unable to speak, but an 'ugly noise came from [her] throat, a dry rasp like wood splitting' (159). This refers to the failure in communication that forms part of the abject encounter. Mrs Curren is unable to protest against her situation or plead for mercy from the children, as she wonders 'why [there should] be mercy in the world' (159). The implication is that after having seen John being shot mercilessly by the police, she is doubtful about what right she herself has to plead for mercy. Discovering that it is a 'stick' that the boy has 'forced into [her] mouth' (159), she tries to spit at him. This mirrors the way in which Vercueil spits at her at the beginning of the novel. There, she wonders at his 'lassitude' and 'letting go' (8), and in retaliation, he spits at her. Now, she has succumbed to 'lassitude' and has let go, and spitting is the only means of retaliation available to her, as she cannot even speak in her own defence.

At this point in the grotesque episode, Mrs Curren situates Buitenkant Street as a 'stone's throw away from Breda Street and Schoonder Street and Vrede Street, where a century ago

the patricians of Cape Town gave orders that there be erected spacious homes for themselves and their descendents in perpetuity, foreseeing nothing of the day when, in their shadows, the chickens would come home to roost' (159). The significance of this lies in the fact that not only does it allude to the historical culpability inherent in colonialism and the apartheid regime but it also informs Mrs Curren's understanding of her role within the latter. In this section, Coetzee distorts the ideas of time and distance in order to demonstrate how Mrs Curren exists in a liminal space between absolution and culpability, which marks the abjection of her condition.

Mrs Curren's previously safe yet ignorant life is described as something that has not been so safe after all. The darker, more dangerous (and heterogenous) 'Buitenkant Street' has *always already* been about to infringe on her well-lit, ordered (and homologous) world. It is simply because she has transgressed the physical and metaphoric boundaries that separate the two that she can perceive how small the distance is. Previously, individuals like Vercueil and John who, for different reasons, are in opposition to the dominant political discourse, have disrupted the uniformity of Mrs Curren's thought by physically crossing the distance from without to within her domestic sphere. Now, however, she herself makes the conscious decision to position herself in opposition and to traverse from within to without. Coetzee extends the sphere of influence by referring to the 'patricians of Cape Town' whose 'shadows' stretch all the way from across the century to create 'Buitenkant Street' (159). His diction in this section is highly ambiguous, and one is left unsure whether Mrs Curren's thinking of 'the chickens [coming] home to roost' (159) refers to the political conditions and repercussions of apartheid, or to her own position of ageing vulnerability at the mercy of a gang of delinquent youths. Is she, as one of the 'descendants in perpetuity', who also lives in

a 'spacious' home, just as culpable as the 'patricians of Cape Town' (159), even if she chooses to position herself as an outsider to their belief? Does she mean, by referring to 'the chickens [...] come home to roost' (159), that her abuse at the hands of the boys is what she deserves for her genealogical complicity? Or is she referring to a broader social and historic culpability? The liminality of her position is evidenced by the 'gray confusion' and 'fog' in her head (159). She describes herself as being 'nowhere' (159). This refers both to her belief that she is hovering on the brink of death, and to the fact that she is suspended between culpability and blamelessness.

Significantly, this relates to the manner in which her ageing body informs her perception of whether or not she is culpable or complicit in the apartheid regime. Had she been younger, the trauma of her experience in Buitenkant Street would not have been as great, as she would have been spared the pain and the humiliation of her physical condition, and she would have been free to contemplate only the political importance of choosing to position herself as Other. However, because she is old and because she is sick, her experience in Buitenkant Street is informed completely by the demands of her ageing and unwell body. These demands dictate that she is unable to extricate *herself* from both the physical and the mental suspension that now keeps her in Buitenkant Street. Because of her old age and her illness, she is physically trapped in Buitenkant Street and cannot reposition herself in the mental space of her old life in Schoonder Street.

Instead, it is yet again Vercueil who acts as that which disrupts her stasis, appearing with his dog. Significantly, he asks her, 'Who put you here?' (160). The diction of his oddly phrased question seems to imply that he sees Mrs Curren as unable to transport herself to this

position, and it renders her ageing body an object that can simply be picked up and put down again. She replies that it was herself, but has to speak 'past the raw place on [her] palate' (160). This response perfectly encapsulates the importance of her experiences in Buitenkant Street: she has to speak the truth of her defiance through the pain of her old age. In her subsequent confession to Vercueil, she states that she believes that her voice is 'the true voice of wisdom' (164) and directly foregrounds apartheid as a 'war of the old upon the young' (163). She begins by questioning her right 'to have a voice at all' (164) and then states that she has 'no voice' (164), that the 'rest should be silence' (164), but that she carries on speaking with a 'voice that is no voice' (164). However, she speaks in a 'toothless whisper sticky with sibilants' (164) and is described as probing 'the sore place in [her] mouth, tasting the blood' (163). It is significant that Coetzee interweaves this discussion of voice and the right to have a voice with a description of that which physically currently hinders Mrs Curren's literal voice. While she might debate her ethical right to voice an opinion, she has to do so through the corporeal pain caused by the stick that has been pushed down her throat and through the absence of her false teeth. This clearly indicates Coetzee's awareness of the manner in which her old age informs and shapes her subjectivity. The fact that she refers to her voice as a 'voice that is no voice' (164) is evidence of this. Again, this relates to the fact that Coetzee represents Mrs Curren's older age as liminal. In this case, the agency Coetzee affords the elderly Mrs Curren is presented as being ambiguous, in that while her older age grants her greater freedom to express herself, it also hinders her ability to do so.

After her confession, Mrs Curren relates a dream she has had to Vercueil. In this dream, she is a 'child' (167) and is wearing an old-fashioned 'knitted costume' (167). Vercueil is 'teaching [her] to swim' (167) in oily water. She describes him as 'drawing [her] out, backing into the

sea, fixing [her] with his eyes' (167). In the dream, she wants to tell him to turn back for fear of 'drowning in oil' (167) but is too scared to open her mouth. Immediately after the recollection, she tells Vercueil that she thinks of him as 'an angel come to show [her] the way' (167). This sequence raises a number of important points. In her imagining of her death, she has reverted to childhood. Continuing with ideas of inversion, the vision depicts the process of dying in an ironic light, as it has been compared with learning to swim. Even though she is to die, she has something to learn first. Vercueil's 'fixing [her] with his eyes' (167) is reminiscent of the earlier description in which her 'mind [is] like a pool, which his finger enters and stirs' (82): he is that which disrupts her stasis. Finally, her fear of opening her mouth relates to her previous discussion of voice, as it again is a physical hindrance that impedes the voice. However, she problematises the idea of Vercueil's being the 'angel' of her death by admitting that we 'half-perceive but we also half-create' (168). Again, this highlights the manner in which Coetzee represents the changes Mrs Curren undergoes in her older age as ambiguous: her realisation that she might be attributing qualities to Vercueil that he himself does not necessarily intrinsically possess renders her the agent of her own redemption. However, her uncertainty about whether or not she is in fact the one projecting her own desires onto him means that this agency is infused with a profound sense of ambiguity. She recognises that retelling 'a dream is always meant to achieve something' (168), and then questions the purpose behind her recalling this specific dream. As I have pointed out, this dream acts as a locus for various ideas surrounding her old age and subjectivity. However, the most significant of these is her reversion in the dream to a state of childhood.

Throughout the novel, Coetzee foregrounds the ways in which the ideas of childhood and old age rely on each other for definition. Childhood itself in the novel is a problematic concept, as the only positive representation of it by Coetzee is in Mrs Curren's idealised reminiscences of her own ignorant yet blissful childhood. However, even these recollections become problematic, as towards the end of the novel she comes to realise that her idyllic childhood was the product of the apartheid system. This undermines the innocence of her recollections of her years as a child, and relates to the novel's wider concern with the ways in which the apartheid system negates the idea of childhood.

It is important to note the distinction between the concepts of 'youth' and 'child'. The only *children* in the novel are Florence's daughters, Beauty and Hope, the young boy who acts as their guide in Guguletu, the young girl, Lilly, who answers the phone when Mrs Curren telephones Mr Thabane, and the children who accost her in Buitenkant Street. Beauty and Hope largely remain allegorical figures throughout the novel, aside from an interesting sequence in which they tentatively initiate a game with Vercueil, which is subsequently interrupted by the arrival of Florence. Mrs Curren's description of the game seems to indicate approval, with her even describing Vercueil's dog as 'full of regret' (38) at its termination. In the very next passage, Bheki is 'bouncing a tennis ball off the garage door' and Mrs Curren finds 'the noise maddening' (38). She peevishly tells Florence to make him stop. This description seems to indicate childish sulkiness on Mrs Curren's part, and relates to her own reversion to a childish state. In the first instance, when it is the young, female children who are engaged in play, Mrs Curren approves of the game, and it is Florence who puts an end to it. In the second instance, when the older, male Bheki plays with a tennis ball to relieve his boredom, it is Mrs Curren who commands its end. Significantly, the reason why

Bheki is at home and not at school is that his school has been burnt down in political protest. Mrs Curren tells Florence that in her day they 'considered education a privilege' (38) and that they 'would have thought it madness to burn a school down' (39). In light of the novel's portrayal of the reversion to childhood in old age and the manner in which this relates to the liminality of Coetzee's representation of Mrs Curren's old age, the first thing to comment on would be her seemingly childish sulkiness in 'peevisly' putting an end to Bheki's 'game'. Next, it is important to note the difference between her reaction to this and her approval of the younger girls playing with Vercueil. Their playing with him is depicted as being life affirming, as it connotes 'noise', 'excitement' and 'pleasure' (38). Mrs Curren seems amazed that Vercueil could be enticed to participate in such frivolity. In contrast, Bheki's 'game' is described as a 'remorseless thudding' (38) from which she cannot escape. This 'thudding' does not imply any forward movement or progression, and is thus representative of stagnation and stasis. The use of the word 'madness' in relation to the burning down of schools echoes her finding the noise of the tennis ball 'maddening'. The implication is that she finds such acts equally meaningless and directionless. Through aligning himself with those who burn schools down, Bheki, the youth, is now being denied the 'excitement' and 'pleasure' (38) of childish play. This life- and joy-denying quality relates to Mrs Curren's referring to the youth as 'the children of death' (49). However, Coetzee renders this depiction of her disapproval of the burning down of schools problematic through her extended desire throughout the novel to set herself alight in front of the Parliament building in protest. This connection between Mrs Curren and 'the children of death' is made even more apparent when she reminds Florence of how upset Florence had been when witnessing 'a woman on fire' who 'screamed for help' only to have children laugh and throw 'more petrol on her' (49). Firstly, the repetition of the fire imagery relates to both the burning

down of schools, and to Mrs Curren's desire to set herself alight (it is interesting to note that Florence, however, is much more upset by the children's pouring petrol on the burning woman than she is in Mrs Curren's dream of her). Despite her condemnation of their actions, Mrs Curren, the other 'woman on fire' (49), has more in common with 'the children of death' (49) who burn down schools and pour petrol on burning women than is initially apparent. This alludes to her growing political awareness whereby she comes to understand the motivations behind the burning down of the schools.

The word 'children' in the novel is used to describe more than simple childhood. It is used ironically in 'children of death' (49) to describe the youthful generation that has lost the last vestiges of its childhood innocence, and it is also used to describe Mrs Curren's generation as 'children of [a] bygone age' (92). It clearly connects Mrs Curren with the 'children of death' (49) in that both of these descriptions ironically make use of the *lack* or *loss* of childishness in their representations. In the case of Bheki, a child forced prematurely to become a youth because of a political imperative, a simple childhood game becomes dangerous and problematic (as is again seen in the incident of the bicycle accident). In the case of Mrs Curren, it is the reversion to childishness in her old age that textually allies her with the politically motivated youth. Thus, through the refusal to represent old age and childhood as binary oppositions but rather as concepts that blur and merge because of the political conditions of the times, Coetzee renders the imputed reversion to childhood in older age complex, and as directly informed by the ideological factors surrounding South Africa's transition to democracy.

On several other occasions in the novel, Coetzee does represent a reversion to childhood as being part of the process of ageing. When the police invade Mrs Curren's home to find John, she comments that '[t]hey paid [her] words no more attention than they would a child's' (155). This implies that the adults, or the middle generation, at least in the mind of Mrs Curren, disregard children and the elderly equally. It is significant that she states that it is her 'words' that they pay no attention to, as this renders 'words' as that which connotes power. She describes herself as 'someone who longs [...] to creep into her own mother's lap and be comforted' (20), implying that the ageing condition engenders a childlike need for comfort. Significantly, this need cannot possibly be fulfilled. Coetzee reinforces the fact that the need to be mothered is part of both childhood and old age through echoing this sentiment in John's seeking Florence as a mother-figure after his departure from the hospital: 'When they are in trouble they come to a woman. To Florence he comes, except that there is no Florence. Has he no mother of his own?' (135). Mrs Curren, the elderly woman, cannot look to her own mother for comfort, as her mother is no longer alive. John, the child who has become a youth in a generation in which there 'are no more mothers and fathers' (39), cannot satisfy his childlike need for comfort because he is one of the '[c]hildren scorning childhood' (7). After seeing Bheki's body in Guguletu, Mrs Curren expresses a desire to go '[h]ome to [her] safe house, to [her] bed of childhood slumber' (109) and recognises that '[f]rom an old person's throat' her voice emerges as 'a child's voice' (109). In this instance, it is the political horror she witnesses that reduces her to a state of childlike fear and uncertainty. Ironically, however, this 'safe house' of hers becomes the site for the perpetuation of politically motivated violence when the police shoot John in her backyard. Furthermore, in this instance, the representation moves from being a mere conflation of

childhood or youth with old age to signifying the perversion inherent in this conflation, and begins to hint at the abjection in the childishness which may be part of the ageing condition.

Even though Coetzee, as shown above, continually portrays the reversion to childhood as something that is part of old age, he simultaneously depicts it as abject or unnatural. Thus it becomes something that simultaneously grants and undermines Mrs Curren's authority. Mrs Curren believes that when an 'old person begins to plead for love everything turns squalid. Like a parent trying to creep into bed with a child: unnatural' (73). She refers to this as 'another of the iron rules' (73). The implication of this is that childishness in an old person can be read as abject or 'unnatural' (73). The abjection derives from the transgression of boundaries or divisions between childhood and old age. The fact that she refers to it as 'another of the iron rules' relates to Florence's calling the militant youth the '[c]hildren of iron' (50), as well as to the title of the novel. In this exchange between Florence and Mrs Curren in which they debate the value of such activism in the youth, Coetzee represents Florence as busy ironing and nearly scorching a white sheet, until she is stopped by Mrs Curren. Scorching the sheet implies that the sheet is in effect being burnt, relating to the novel's recurring (and paradoxical) imagery of fire that both destroys and has the potential to redeem. The idea of fire is connected to both the militant youth and to Mrs Curren herself. Mrs Curren alludes to the perversion that characterises the inversion of childhood and older age, when she speaks of the 'iron' (73) rule that the 'comfort' and the 'love should flow forward, not backward' (73). This refers to the fact that parents should comfort and take care of their children, and not the other way around. Furthermore, this relates to the fact that Bheki, a youth, is engaged in political activism, while his mother, Florence, is not. Similarly, Mrs Curren's daughter's leaving South Africa is an act of political defiance. If old age is

inherently childish and if in the political context of apartheid South Africa, children like Bheki and John are forced to relinquish their childhoods, this 'flow' of 'love' is disrupted in the same way that the ideas of childhood and old age are disrupted. Mrs Curren herself contradicts this iron rule by stating that '[w]e bear children in order to be mothered by them' (5), implying *backward*, not forward, movement. Elsewhere, as suggested earlier, she explains that she finds 'direction' through 'indirection' (82). Thus, the representation of childhood and old age in the novel is rendered more complex than a mere conflation of the ideas, despite the fact that old age contains elements of childhood and that childhood itself is portrayed as being an anachronism in the political context. Even though the 'love' should flow 'forward' (73), it cannot do so while the identities of the projectors and recipients of this love do not remain fixed. This is reinforced by the fact that Mrs Curren relates the idea of being 'shameless' (119) to childhood. However, if the novel portrays childhood as being problematic and anachronistic, and if old age itself contains childishness, then this could be related to the fact that it is through 'indirection' that Mrs Curren finds 'direction' (82). Even though she might disapprove of the actions such as the youth burning down their schools or choosing political activism over education, Coetzee depicts her as intrinsically being allied to them, as is evidenced by the fire imagery of the novel. While the representation of old age as containing elements of childishness might render her as helpless and vulnerable as a child, the novel's portrayal of youth and childhood undermines this, as the things that link her to the youth are what give authority to her activism. However, this activism is very clearly itself portrayed as problematic, as both Bheki and John are killed in the novel as a result of their political involvement. As is evidenced by her experience in Buitenkant Street, Mrs Curren's activism is also depicted as problematic, as it causes her pain and discomfort. The relation between the problematic nature of the activism of the youth and the problematic nature of

Mrs Curren's own activism can be seen in the fact that her experience in Buitenkant Street directly associates her with ideas of childhood. Her experience of sleeping outside and watching the 'stars [begin] to swim' after drinking Vercueil's sweet wine is reminiscent of her mother's experiences as a child travelling 'to the seaside for Christmas' (16) in an 'ox wagon'. They would 'camp at the roadside' (17) and it would seem to her mother that 'the stars were moving' (17). Furthermore, as has been mentioned, Mrs Curren's emptying her bladder on the quilt on which she lies in Buitenkant Street reminds one of the bedwetting of childhood. Significantly, her presence in Buitenkant Street is the result of an act in which she defies the brutality of the police. The purpose of this association is to indicate that although this link to the activism of the youth might provide her with authority, it simultaneously undermines her authority, reducing her to a state of childlike dependence on Vercueil. The young boys who probe Mrs Curren's body in Buitenkant Street possess none of the qualities one would normally associate with childhood. They are mercenary scavengers reduced by poverty to prey on the weak and the helpless. The one who initially accosts Mrs Curren is described as having 'a shaven skull and bare feet and a hard look' (158), relating him to her idea of the '[c]hildren of death' (49) whom Florence sees as 'monster[s] made by the white man' (50). Previously, Mrs Curren compares the situation of her having terminal cancer with 'prisoners' standing before the 'firing squad' (26). Nothing the prisoners do will evoke any mercy in the soldiers who 'laugh. For they will take it all anyway, and the gold from the prisoners' teeth too' (26). In the same way, the young boys who accost Mrs Curren to search for her gold teeth in Buitenkant Street cause her to wonder why 'there should be mercy in the world' (159). However, here it is not soldiers who loot the bodies of the dead for gold teeth, but rather young children who violate Mrs Curren in their search for gold teeth while she is still alive. Significantly, she has no gold teeth for them to take and their violation of her is thus in

vain. Her false teeth have already fallen out, rendering her as toothless as a toddler. Abjectly enough, this toothlessness simultaneously confirms her old age and associates her with infancy.

In this sequence, the categories of childhood, youth and old age blur and become merged in alarming and disturbing ways. As will be shown below, the children are additionally described as 'ravishers' (26). The sexual undertones of the encounter in Buitenkant Street have been discussed earlier in this chapter. With reference to the current discussion, the sexual nature of Mrs Curren's being 'violated' (161) by the boys could be read in relation to her thinking of South Africa as a land 'taken by force, used, despoiled, spoiled, abandoned in its late barren years. Loved too, perhaps, by its ravishers, but loved only in the bloomtime of its youth' (26). The conflation of her physical body with South Africa as a political or ideological concept has previously been established. The distinction between South Africa's 'youth' and its 'barren years', coupled with the allusion to rape (which is repeated in an altered form in the encounter in Buitenkant Street), relates the childishness of Mrs Curren's old age to the ideological context of transitional South Africa. In effect, Coetzee both affirms and denies her authority as an elderly individual through associating her with a childhood which is itself portrayed as being devoid of childishness.

Towards the end of the novel, Mrs Curren writes that her letter 'was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses' (185), and that because of this, she 'will draw a veil soon' (185). Indeed, for most of the novel, her predominant concern seems to be with her soul, and with the ways in which Vercueil, as Other, represents the ethical duty she believes she has to enact in order to redeem her soul and save herself from dying in a state

of moral ugliness. Because of this, the final passages of the novel detail the ways in which she grows closer to Vercueil: she manages to convince him to tell her parts of his story (187), worries about what will happen to him after she dies (188), speaks to him about her love of Latin (192), and proposes to him that he fly to America to give her daughter the letter personally (194). However, the phrasing of her statement that her letter ‘was never *meant* to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses’ (185, my emphasis) seems to imply that despite her intentions, her letter inevitably does also centre on her body. The final passages of the novel evidence this: she describes the increasingly intense pain she experiences and the hallucinations brought on by her medication (182), as well as Vercueil cooking for her (189), sleeping next to her on her bed for warmth (189), and helping her hang up the underwear she has washed (191). This concern with embodiment is indeed also reflected throughout the novel: Coetzee continually returns to the suggestion that Mrs Curren has to speak the truth of her disapproval of the apartheid system through the pain caused by her cancer and her old age. The implication of this is that the story of her soul is inextricably entwined with that of her body, and that her embodiment shapes the ways in which her subjectivity is constructed in her old age prior to her death. If it had not been for her cancer and her older age, she would never have considered inviting Vercueil into her home, and would not have been granted the opportunity to open herself up to alternative systems of belief. The decay of her body thus becomes the impetus that propels her into attempting to stave off the decay of her soul. Because of this, it may be possible to argue that Mrs Curren is able to speak her soul’s truth *because* of her body’s pain. Furthermore, the political changes occurring in the decade before the demise of apartheid provide the necessary conditions that allow her to do so, as the transitional nature of this time period reflects the transitional nature of the process of her dying.

The final passage of the novel most poignantly encapsulates the ambiguity of Coetzee's representation of Mrs Curren's old age, and the ways in which this relates to ideas of embodiment, textuality and politics (198):

I slept and woke up cold: my belly, my heart, my very bones cold. The door to the balcony was open, the curtains were waving in the wind.

Vercueil stood on the balcony staring out over a sea of rustling leaves. I touched his arm, his high, peaked shoulders, the bony ridges of his spine. Through chattering teeth I spoke: "What are you looking at?"

He did not answer. I stood closer. A sea of shadows beneath us, and the screen of leaves shifting, rustling, like scales over the darkness.

"Is it time?" I said.

I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. The curtains parted; he came in beside me. For the first time I smelled nothing. He took me in his arms and held me with a mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush.

From that embrace there was no warmth to be had.

Above all, the passage is underpinned by an irreconcilable sense of ambivalence, as this is the first point at which Coetzee abandons the illusion of the novel's being an extended letter from Mrs Curren to her daughter by describing events that Mrs Curren cannot possibly transcribe, as this passage seems to culminate in her death. In this sense, then, Mrs Curren's death allows her to escape the bounds of textuality, and as she phrases it earlier in the novel, cross 'the border upward, between the Republic of South Africa and the empire of the sky' (23). Additionally, this passage serves to highlight further the inextricable connection between Mrs Curren's body and soul. Throughout the novel, she believes that she has to embrace those who are Other to her, such as Vercueil and John, in order to ready herself for dying. In this passage, Vercueil's literal embrace is ambiguously described as possibly causing Mrs Curren's death. However, it is significant that Coetzee stresses that '[f]rom that embrace

there was no warmth to be had', as he is extremely careful to cast doubt on whether it is possible for Mrs Curren ever to know Vercueil fully. This is further evidenced by the fact that her final companion does not answer the two questions she poses him in this passage, and that parts of his story still remain a mystery to her. The implication of this seems to be that the lesson Mrs Curren has to learn before her death is not that she has to embrace those who are Other to her, but rather that despite her best intentions, the divisions between herself and those others cannot necessarily be breached. Nonetheless, despite this, or possibly because of this, the trust she places in Vercueil in asking him to deliver her letter to the post office after her death becomes even more significant. This has profound political implications when seen in relation to the transitional context in which the novel was written, as it alludes to the fact that any encounter between the self and the Other centres on both uncertainty and on the existence of a trust that disregards this indeterminacy.

Similar to the manner in which Van Niekerk in *Agaat* is careful not to depict Kamilla Redelinghuys's dying as representing the new replacing the old (as will be discussed in the next chapter), Coetzee seems not to suggest that Mrs Curren's death should be read as simplistically symbolising the death of apartheid. In both of these novels, the authors grant their protagonists a sense of futurity that extends beyond their deaths (in Milla's case, this would be the impact she has on the life of her foster-daughter Agaat, and in Mrs Curren's case, it would be the trust she places in Vercueil in asking him to deliver her letter). However, Coetzee's depiction of Mrs Curren's death differs from Van Niekerk's representation of Milla's dying in that Van Niekerk envisions a future for Agaat after the elderly woman's death, while Coetzee does not do the same for Vercueil. This could be attributed to the respective political contexts in which the novels were written. *Age of Iron*, written in the turbulent and

violent period before the demise of apartheid, shares the inability of many novels written in this period to visualise a coherent sense of a future free from political tyranny, while *Agaat*, written after apartheid had already been dismantled, is able to do so. As such, the ambiguity and liminality that underpin Coetzee's depiction of Mrs Curren's older age are particularly appropriate.

‘My death is of me!’: *Agaat*, old age and impossible reconciliation

While both J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* and Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat* are concerned with issues of ageing, death and political transition, their depiction of these issues differs. Mrs Curren’s efforts to achieve redemption in her old age are grounded on a self-conscious realisation of the connection between the imperative demanded by her ageing and the need for political restitution. For this reason she invites Vercueil into her home and determines to forge a connection with him in the time remaining to her. She decides to take a risk in trusting the delivery of her letter to him in order to reaffirm her belief in the idea of trust itself. Her agency in determining the manner in which she seeks to redeem herself is what differentiates her from Kamilla Redelinghuys in *Agaat*, who is afforded almost none of the agency invested in Mrs Curren. Even the narrative form of *Age of Iron* is evidence of this: while its entire narrative unfolds through the act of Mrs Curren’s writing a letter to her daughter, Milla is unable to write despite her intense desire to do so, as she is almost entirely paralysed, with only the reflex in her eye muscles remaining to her. As with Mrs Curren, Milla’s experience is determined by the manner in which the past intersects with the present. This is evidenced by the fact that vast sections of the narrative are taken up by the diaries she writes in her earlier life, and by a second-person account of her experiences of this life. Moreover, even her present day experience of the physical degeneration of her body is conflated with events that occur in the past: the manner in which her former foster daughter, Agaat, nurses her mirrors the manner in which Milla initially cares for and nurses Agaat as a child. Because of this, how we read Milla’s experience of ageing is not determined by her agency in seeking out any kind of redemption, as was the case with Mrs Curren, but rather

through an understanding of the ways in which her past shapes and informs her present. This understanding centres on the character of Agaat, as she and the farm are the only links between the ageing Milla of the present and the younger Milla of the past accounts. Through Agaat's demotion from the position of cherished foster daughter to ambivalently stationed servant, she comes to represent Milla's complicity with the burden of history in this conflation of past and present. While Mrs Curren's redemption hinges on her understanding of the need for active engagement with the changing political world around her, Milla initially does not seek redemption; instead the need for it is almost thrust on her through her engagement with the past. Only when she realises the magnitude of the violence she has done unto Agaat, does she realise her need for absolution. However, these realisations coincide with the knowledge that both her physical condition and the magnitude of what she needs to atone for render the mammoth task of seeking redemption almost impossible in any realm aside from the textual interpretation that is available to the reader through the artifice of the novel.

A nuanced reading centred on the novel's connections between the past and the present is thus necessary in order to come to an understanding of the ways in which Van Niekerk represents the process of Milla's ageing. Since the present, the past and the future are not represented as fixed structures in the novel, the ways in which they overlap point to the difficulty involved in dissecting Milla's and Agaat's shared history, as well as how this negotiates the reader's response to the two women's perceptions of their present experiences. This highlights the problematic nature of representing the ageing subject as obsolete in the ideology of newness inherent in the future of political transformation. I will

argue that this representation hinges on the jumbled chronology of the novel, as well as on the variety of literary styles employed by the novel, and that this could be read as indicative of the way in which the ageing subject processes experience. As with *Age of Iron* I will investigate how the embodied ageing subject occupies her physical space and how this reflects ideas of personal and historical guilt. This chapter will expand on the investigation of the previous chapter into the purported reversion to childhood in old age, but I will show that in *Agaat* this process is depicted as being intrinsically linked, through the artifice of the novel and on a textual level, to the crimes of Milla's past. I will examine how Van Niekerk represents Milla's body as being abject, and how this informs both her experience of ageing, as well as the way in which we read this experience. I will show that the ways in which Milla's body can and cannot be read as grotesque relate to how Van Niekerk represents Milla's body as that which denies her agency in seeking redemption. However, since the novel is concerned with ideas of textuality, the redemption Milla seeks is only granted to her, if at all, through the textual interpretation of the reader. My use of the word 'textuality' relates to the self-conscious artifice of the novel, and how this in turn opens up the realm of textual interpretation to the reader. In light of this, while certain insights might not be available to the characters themselves, the artifice of the novel allows the reader to forge these connections.

The depiction in *Agaat* of the reversion to childhood in old age is much more nuanced and complex than that of *Age of Iron*. This is because of the necessarily complicated and painful relationship shared by Milla and Agaat. In fact, Van Niekerk does not merely represent *an* inversion to childhood in old age, but rather depicts Milla as reverting to *Agaat's* childhood in

her old age. In her diaries, Milla records her mother's telling her in relation to Agaat that 'everything [she] put[s] in there, will come back to [her]' (Van Niekerk:515)⁵. While her mother's intention is to warn her against an unseemly intimacy with Agaat, her words are prophetically true: almost every single experience Milla shares with Agaat as a child re-enacts itself when she herself is reduced to a state of childlike dependence on Agaat. This serves as a depiction of the inversion of power that takes place between the two women. However, Milla's initial care of Agaat cannot be separated from her subsequent abandonment and relegation of Agaat. She thrusts Agaat from a nurturing space free of racial identification to a position that conforms to the dominant racial ideology of brown subservience and inferiority. As a result, every act of care Agaat performs for Milla evokes Milla's initial love for Agaat, as well as simultaneously acting as a mark of Milla's betrayal of her. This is because of the fact that the description of the ways in which the coloured woman cares for her former foster mother mirrors Milla's previous care of the young Agaat. Every act of care Agaat performs for Milla is ironically inscribed as a signifier for the unbalanced power relation that governs subjects living within a racially defined space. As a result, it is in effect Milla's old age, and the reversion to childhood inherent in it, that ironically highlight the crimes of history she perpetuated.

In the same way that Milla is only able to communicate with Agaat with her eyes, the child Agaat is initially unable or unwilling to speak, and she and her foster mother communicate through the power of the glance. While this does represent Milla's present subjugation as

⁵ The English translation of the novel makes use of a very idiosyncratic system in which it tries to reproduce the accents which are used in Afrikaans. They do not have the same meaning or effect in English, and I have therefore, for the sake of clarity and to avoid confusion, decided not to reproduce them.

well as the powerlessness Agaat experiences as a child, Milla records in her diary, upon initiating successful communication with Agaat: 'I could never have dreamed you can achieve so much with your eyes' (483). Thus the glance becomes the simultaneous marker of disempowerment and the secret language in which Milla and Agaat resume communication in Milla's old age, concurrently signifying love and betrayal, and communication and disconnectedness. When Agaat is banished to the outside room, Milla writes in her diary of giving her a radio 'for the idle hours' (18). Agaat permits the radio to remain in the elderly woman's room for the same reason, even though she banishes the television, as there 'are already too many things happening in [the] room [...] without [their] having to make room for *People of the South* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*' (18). Agaat thus mediates Milla's connection with the outside world in the same way that Milla initially mediates Agaat's experiences of the world. As a result of the danger of cosmetics blocking Milla's nose, Agaat only cleans her with Mum and calamine, the same toiletries the other woman puts on her list to buy for the child prior to her relegation to the outside room. While toiletries signify an act of care through their purpose of keeping the body free from infection, they thus simultaneously allude to the abandonment of Agaat. This can be seen because of the discrepancy between the cosmetics Milla previously uses (signifying luxury and a focus on appearance) and the toiletries used by Agaat (instead of using cosmetics, Agaat herself uses the practical and no-nonsense toiletries Milla initially assigned her). In fact, the very lists that Milla makes in her diaries regarding the preparation for the child's move to the outside room mirror the lists made by Agaat for the preparation of the elderly woman's dying. Both these sets of lists reflect an attempt by Milla and Agaat to make sense of and order a difficult and traumatic experience: Milla, to subsume into domestic practicalities her guilt over

abandoning Agaat, and Agaat to re-enact Milla's denial of her guilt, as well as to distract herself from the impending loss of the only mother she has ever known.

Regarding the cleaning of Milla's teeth as opposed to having them pulled out, Agaat questions, 'how much [anaesthetic] does one pump into [Milla] so that [she] feel[s] absolutely nothing' (59). This may be related to Milla's having Agaat's milk teeth pulled at the coloured clinic where they do not provide any anaesthetic. The striking difference embedded in this similarity is the fact that Milla subjects Agaat to this painful experience, whereas Agaat only hints at the threat in order to enact the reversal of power that has occurred. Milla tries on Agaat's bonnet and has tea in her room to experience what she envisions the child's reality will be like subsequent to her demotion to the back room. Similarly, Agaat later tries on Milla's oxygen mask to foresee how the older woman will experience wearing it. In both cases, they willingly take on the other's painful experience in order to foresee its reality. However, it is significant that both these acts take place in isolation and in secret; neither wants the other to know of her willingness to enact a position of vulnerability for the other. This re-enactment of Agaat's childhood in Milla's old age thus serves to highlight the impossibility of connection between them. Agaat makes whistling sounds and pours water from a jug to encourage Milla to urinate exactly as Milla once does for the child. This reduction of identity to biological function illustrates the powerlessness inherent in both Agaat's childhood and in Milla's old age. Milla gives Agaat spinach to eat to help her digestion in the same way that Agaat gives Milla spinach to eat to loosen her bowels. Significantly, Milla locks Agaat up in a room for the afternoon without a chamber pot in the same way that the coloured woman withholds the bedpan from her after giving her a laxative. Here, Van Niekerk

distorts the commonly held perception of children and the elderly as not being able to control their bodily functions and positions it as something that is intrinsically connected to ideas of power. When Agaat exercises Milla's paralysed body, she says, '[W]e greet, we greet, the mighty sun!' (84). As a response to Agaat's physical frailty and weakness as a child, Milla devises an exercise called 'The Greeting to the Sun' (484). Milla's initially compassionate intentions become in Agaat's mouth a reminder of the ways in which Milla appropriated and shaped Agaat's identity. In order to exercise Agaat's weak hand, Milla gives her a bell to play a game called 'call-each-other-with-bells' (486) in the same way that Agaat puts a bell in Milla's hand and says, 'You ring your little bell, and I'll ring mine' (64). In reading the difference between this in Agaat's childhood and in Milla's old age, it is significant that in Agaat's childhood, the game involves communication, whereas in Milla's old age, it signifies mimicry. Agaat even uses the alphabet charts from her childhood to communicate with Milla. In the same way that Agaat was entirely helpless and dependent on Milla, Milla is now completely dependent on Agaat.

Milla's reversion to childhood thus indicates more than simple helplessness, and instead serves as a constant reminder of the hurt she inflicted upon Agaat. However, because of the jumbled chronology of the novel, the correlation between Agaat's childhood and Milla's old age is not immediately apparent upon a first reading. Instead, it involves a close interpretation on the part of the reader, and requires that the reader stitch together disparate sections from the novel in order to understand fully the significance of this representation. This uncovers the way in which the artifice of the novel relies on a reading strategy underscored by its self-reflexive textuality in order to create its meaning.

Furthermore, Milla's reversion to Agaat's childhood ironically inscribes her old age as something that draws meaning from the conflation of present and past, and shows the generational nature of the legacy of power. Because of this, Milla's old age is not something that can be read in isolation of Agaat.

Agaat's centrality to my reading of Milla's old age, as well as Van Niekerk's preoccupation with how the artifice of the novel allows the reader a closer understanding of Milla's old age, can be seen throughout the novel, particularly where Milla compares her deathbed scene to a variety of images often relating to art and representation. Initially, she is the 'still-life', her room the 'perverse painter' (103). This image relies on the absolute stasis and immobility of both a painting and her paralysed body. She is rendered frozen in time, subject to an artist's whims for the representation of her identity. She continues the comparison by relating herself to a 'turned-open book' in which 'the sounds of the last harvest' (103) inscribe themselves. It is significant to note the difference between a 'book' as being an object that exists in the material world and the realm of the symbolic to which a narrative belongs. Milla sees herself as the physical entity on which a narrative is inscribed by an external force, in the same way that the meaning of her old age can only be discovered by the textual interpretation of a reader through the artifice of the novel itself. The unchanging physicality of this description relates to the way in which her body has been rendered a physical object outside of her own control. The 'last harvest' relates to the deep-rooted connection between Milla and her farm, but also hints at how differently she now views the relationship she shares with it. In her earlier life, she inscribes her meaning onto the land through the act of farming it. Now, she is rendered the passive object subject to the inscription of a force over

which she has no control. Similarly, she later compares her body to a musical instrument on which Agaat 'the virtuoso' performs 'the note-perfect rehearsed death' (310). Again, the musical instrument itself belongs to the realm of the physical, while the music forms part of the realm of the imaginary. She becomes the medium through which Agaat's meaning is played out.

Upon hearing that Jakkie, Milla's son, is to visit from Canada, Agaat wants to make sure that his mother looks her best and initiates a large-scale beautification regime. During this, Milla imagines herself as a 'circus tent' in which 'shadows of trapeze artists glide to earth in the spotlight' (328) to the resounding applause of an audience. This alludes to Milla, Jak and Agaat's disastrous trip to the circus during Agaat's childhood. Jak's impatience in the face of the difficulties imposed by Agaat's race leads to her being left outside and having to watch the show by the shadows cast on the outside of the circus tent by the performers inside. This reference is emphasised through Milla's use of the word 'shadows' in her present description of the trapeze artists. Agaat's role has changed from being a passive spectator watching the spectacle from the racially partitioned position of outsider, to the creator of the spectacle of the beautification of Milla's old age. Again, Milla is reduced to the physical structure of the circus tent in which Agaat is the ringmaster who determines the conditions of the spectacle that is to be played out.

Milla later compares herself to a movie projector: she is a 'film on a reel, conducted through all the channels and grooves and spools' (334). Agaat wants to 'dismantle [her], unscrew all [her] components' (334) to reach the 'still frames' and discover what Milla thinks 'of her

resistance' (334). Milla's room, containing all the items carted in by Agaat in her attempts to decipher what Milla wants, is compared to a 'stage-prop store' (334). However, she suspects that it is 'all meant expressly for [Jakkie's] eyes' (334). The use of the word 'eyes' is significant, as it relates to the image of Milla's being the mechanical device that simply projects the 'still frames' from which Agaat, and by implication, the reader, can extract the meaning of Milla's narrative. Additionally, it renders her room, and thus the external perspective of her death, a spectacle intended for the eyes of someone else.

As Milla's impending death draws nearer, and as the relationship between her and Agaat begins to show signs of the possibility of changing, the dynamics of these comparisons begin to change. Instead of her being a 'still-life' (103), she and Agaat are both artists in an artist's studio: 'Both beginners [...] with a stick of charcoal in the hand, dumbfounded before each other's nakedness, without anybody to instruct [them] in the fashioning of a faithful representation' (394). Ironically, while this image affords both women the agency to create and construct each other's meaning, they are both at a loss as to how to do so. The use of the word 'faithful' to describe that which hinders them from beginning the task of representation is significant, as it implies awareness on both their parts of the necessity (and also impossibility) of an accurate representation. If she 'were suddenly to recover [her] speech', Milla wonders they 'could in these last days find a language to understand each other' (393), but concludes that perhaps 'a lot of jabbering would have prevented [them] from getting to where [they] are now' (393). '[W]here [they] are now' is, however, perpetually poised at the brink of mutual interpretation and representation, but unable to continue. Thus the task of representation is depicted as dangerous and impossible, because

of the mutability and slipperiness of language. Significantly, the reference to their lack of ‘anybody’ to instruct them in the fashioning of such a representation is a gesture that moves outwards towards the reader. While the process of reading allows the reader to attempt to stitch together as faithful a representation as possible given the limitations of the narrative, this is something to which Milla does not have access, trapped as she is in the physicality of her old age and death. Again, her comparison of herself to a mode of representation renders her as static and as frozen in time as her paralysed body, despite the hints at the possibility of change.

While her paralysed body is depicted as rendering her frozen and ‘without any purchase upon time’ (105), this frozen state does not necessarily imply a stasis of time. Leroux, the doctor, tells Agaat that Milla’s experience of time relates to ‘an endless tunnel [...] full of shreds of yesterday and today and earlier times’ (209). This is reflected in the structure of the novel in the fact that Milla’s story unfolds through her present experiences, her diaries (significantly not presented chronologically), a second person past account, and the almost disembodied and timeless stream-of-consciousness sequences. This may be related to Gary Kenyon and William Randall’s model of narrative gerontology, as the presentation of these disparate temporal sequences signifies her attempt to create a ‘generativity script’ (2005:337), and the process in which she comes to ‘recast, revise, and retell’ her life-story ‘so that the past is seen as giving birth to the present and the future, so that beginning, middle, and ending make sense in terms of each other’ (Hooker & McAdams:143). Significantly, though, while the jumbled narrative construction does represent her attempts at providing coherence to the meaning she attributes to her life, this temporal distortion simultaneously

works to undermine this attempt, to some extent. While this does suggest that this generativity script can never be complete, the fact that she *attempts* to inscribe her life with coherence is of importance. This collapse in Milla's experience of time brought on by her sickness and old age is further enhanced by the jumbled chronology of these accounts. From the very beginning right through to the end, events are foreshadowed and reflected on before the reader is made aware of their significance. Additionally, she indulges in imagining situations in which events could have unfolded in a different manner. Her narrative thus shows evidence of Kenyon and Randall's description of the ageing experience of time as being characterised by foreshadowing, backshadowing and sideshadowing. Thus, in the same way that Milla tries to understand the meaning of her past and present by flitting through time, the reader's understanding of the unity of Milla's story unfolds in a disjointed and circular manner. The narrative structure of *Agaat* can as a result be said to rely on the reader's interpretation to convey the way in which Milla's old age relates to the idea of time. Her experience of time will be read in relation to Kenyon and Randall's model of narrative gerontology, in that the relationship between her past, present and future will be analysed in order to establish the manner in which she attempts to give coherence to her life as a whole.

Milla herself is aware that she does not experience time chronologically. The first sentence of her present account reads: 'It'll be the end of me yet, getting communication going. That's how its [sic] been from the beginning with her' (Van Niekerk:9). Significantly, Milla here conflates the end of *her* life with the beginning of her relationship with Agaat. In fact, Agaat is shown throughout Milla's present experience as being the only one in control of linear time, as she is constantly winding up the grandfather clock that provides the older woman's sole

connection with sequential time, implying the central role Agaat plays in both our and Milla's experience of her old age. It is significant that it is a grandfather clock that serves this function, as the necessity of winding it up already indicates a disruption in the flow of time, and because of this highlights the artificial nature of Milla's temporal experience in old age. The schedule of her day-to-day life is entirely dependent on Agaat, as it is the other woman who determines, for example, when it is 'reading-aloud time' and when it is 'breakfast time' (9). Furthermore, Agaat is scrupulously punctual when it comes to maintaining this schedule. Agaat, 'the commander of [Milla's] possibilities' (55) develops a list of questions to ask Milla, so that she can blink and let her know what it is that she wants. As Milla becomes ever more incapacitated, the 'list gets shorter' as Agaat 'revises it ever more frequently' (55). This relates to the way in which Milla's 'purchase upon time' (105) diminishes with her increasing age and the progression of her illness, as well as with her increasing dependence upon Agaat. The young woman's control over time is made more significant through her awareness of the power she wields. In a description of her winding up the grandfather clock, Milla notes that Agaat is aware that she is listening to her doing so. Milla reads '[t]ime flies' as Agaat's message in the 'shutting of the clock's glass door' (64). In the shutting of the sideboard's door, Agaat conveys: 'You can weep yourself blue, but your time you've had' (64). Milla experiences Agaat's 'elegant symmetry' of 'emptying and filling' as time 'that streams backwards, time that ticks on ahead, time being wound up for the running down' (64). This connotes the conflation of the past and the present in Milla's experience of time, as well as highlighting the fact that time is a luxury granted to the young, and not to the old. Agaat's possession and control of time can thus be read as evidence of the power inherent in youthfulness and absent in older age. It also acts as a symbol for Agaat's intrinsic role in

seeing Milla through to the end of her days, and more importantly, implies that something still needs to happen in the process of Milla's 'running down' (64).

Milla provides a clue as to what this is when she questions whether she and Agaat 'are perhaps jointly out of [their] minds to think [they] can complete this project in the allocated time. All the parts of it. The remembering, the reading, the dying, the song' (212). This implies that the present process of her dying is intrinsically connected to the process of her remembering her past. This may be related to Kenyon and Randall's description of how the process of ageing relies on the construction of a 'generativity script' (2005:337) in order to create meaning between past, present and future. Furthermore, this is not something that she is capable of doing by herself; it is a 'project' (Van Niekerk:212) that she and Agaat have to tackle together, as Agaat's alternative reading of Milla's past will be shown to inform and undermine the authority of Milla's narrative. As Kenyon and Randall state, '[f]or better or worse, self-authoring is always *co-authoring*' (2005:338, emphasis in original). Because of this, the act of ascribing coherence and meaning to her experiences is a 'project' (Van Niekerk:212) in which Agaat is a co-author. The novel intimates that this project centres on the possibility of reconciliation between the two women. However, as will be elaborated on later, Van Niekerk is extremely careful to represent any possibility of reconciliation between them as almost impossibly difficult, as she has Milla question '[h]ow to make peace with one eye, an unfathomable interpreter and the alphabet' (488). She stresses that Agaat 'would have to explicate it in a language other than the tongue [Milla] had taught her' (554). Furthermore, Milla realises that she cannot convey her changing perceptions to Agaat, no matter how her 'heart burns to tell her this [...] Now that it's too late' (219). Significantly, the

artifice of the novel allows the reader access to these changing perceptions, even if Agaat is denied this insight.

The final present tense sequence before Milla's death begins with her stating: 'In my end is my beginning' (645). This alludes to a section in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* that reads, 'In my beginning is my end' (1968:8). Significantly, this reference that evokes the meditation in *Four Quartets* on being and time is absent in the original Afrikaans text. This poignant allusion reinforces the collapse of time in itself. It is important that at this point in the narrative right before Milla's death, the reader is yet to experience her account of the story of how she finds Agaat, which unfolds in the following section. Acting as the missing centre around which the narrative revolves, this story has been alluded to throughout the novel, but has ultimately been withheld from the reader. In light of this, the T.S. Eliot reference gestures to the opening of Milla's first present tense sequence, in which she conflates her end with Agaat's beginning: her death only has meaning when seen in relation to her finding Agaat. The reader can only understand her death fully upon witnessing her initial motives for adopting the child. Despite her subsequent cruel and tyrannical treatment of Agaat, and despite the fact that she possibly has selfishly ulterior motives in adopting the girl (the novel emphasises her failure during that period to conceive a child of her own), the reader witnesses the spark of impulsive compassion that governs her actions. The implication is that it is the collapse of time intrinsic to her condition of ageing and sickening that finally allows us, right at the end of the novel and right at the end of Milla's life, to view her in a slightly redemptive light. Of course, the irony is that it is too late for Milla to capitalise on this possibility of redemption, as the very collapse of time that makes it visible also renders it impossible. This is a deliberate

textual strategy employed by Van Niekerk, and as a result highlights the central role played by the artifice of the novel in our reading of Milla's old age.

Near the beginning of the novel, Milla states that while Agaat may be in control of time, the idea of space is important too. The vast majority of critical work on *Agaat* focuses on the novel's concern with the idea of place in general, and the ways in which the novel undermines the *plaasroman* genre specifically. Lara Buxbaum argues that the 'visceral descriptions of the body and embodiment in [Van Niekerk's] fiction challenge conventional understandings of the relationship between corporeality and spatiality' and that this is diminished 'by merely examining it from the narrow perspective of "writing back" to the *plaasroman*' (Buxbaum:2011). This opens up interesting possibilities for an investigation of the ways in which Milla's old age is related to both space and political concerns. In this context, "political concerns" can be understood to imply the racially defined ways in which Milla exerts power over Agaat and appropriates the child's subjectivity for her own ends. Throughout the novel, Milla's deep-rooted connection with the land is clearly established. This connection is furthermore inscribed as something corporeal, and as intrinsically related to the condition of her sickening and ageing. For example, when attempting to urinate, Milla thinks of the 'water map' (Van Niekerk:80) of the farm. She thinks of the 'underground water-chambers in the mountain, of the veins branching from them, of the springs in the kloofs, of the fountains of Grootmoedersdrift, the waterfalls in the crevices' (80-81). Thinking in these terms opens up her 'blessed piss-sphincter' to allow the 'first passing of the day' (81). However, this ambiguously positive description is undermined in a poetic sequence of Milla's stream-of-consciousness, where the relief associated with the corporeal imagining of the

representation of the water imagery gives way to a darker and more sinister comparison (50, italics in original):

in what subterranean seams does history precipitate? a catchment of rain does not elect itself the mountains choose and a mouth for the stream is gifted by the sea how was I then reservoiried so wrongly such a still mephitic pool?

The use of the word ‘*history*’ is significant, as it implies a correlation between Milla’s physical condition of sickening and ageing, her embodiment of the landscape, which has become associated with something foul and noxious, and the crimes of history she perpetuated upon Afaat.

Similarly, when attempting to write the word ‘map’ to indicate to Afaat that she would like to see the maps of the farm, Milla uses spatial images as ‘handholds inside [herself]’ (16) to fortify herself against the difficulty of the task of writing. She thinks of ‘[r]ye grass, klaaslouw bush, wattle branches to anchor [herself] against the precipice’ (16). She ‘feel[s] around inside [herself]. There’s still vegetation, there’s water, there’s soil’ (16). However, again in a poetic sequence, Milla undermines the stability of this image (35, italics in original):

how does a sickness begin? [...] soil sickens slowly in hidden depths from tilling from flattening with the back of a spade from heavy grubbing in summer wind [...] and what would have happened if i had resisted her my mother my instructress of amenability foot-rot will-wilt green-sick nasella-clump charlock disillusioned despot skeleton in the ground now it has struck will strike at me

because i did not strike back i smother in words that nobody can hear i clamp myself gather my waters my water-retaining clods my loam my shale i am fallow field but not decided by me who will gently plough me in my stubbles and my devil's-thorn fertilise me with green-manure and with straw to stiffen the wilt that this wilderness has brought on this bosom and brain? [...] who will chew me until i bind for i have done as was done unto me the sickness belongs to us two.

This section implies a correlation between sickness of the body and sickness of the soil. Again, her condition of sickness and ageing vulnerability is shown to have its roots in historical causes. It seems to suggest that her sickness itself has been brought on by the crimes of history she perpetuated. In light of the above, it is significant that Milla's mother tells Jak that farming 'is in [Milla's] blood' (28). A further poetic sequence clarifies this idea (94, italics in original):

was that where the germ entered my heel the iron around my ankle the black pound-weight swinging from the bridge of my foot? foot that drags foot that hangs foot that sleeps and everywhere that milla went the lamb was sure to go.

Her neurological condition is reduced to something that can be brought on by a 'germ'. Furthermore, the fact that she describes this germ as entering her body through her foot seems to imply that the germ originates in the soil. The reference to the 'lamb' is an allusion to Agaat's hanslam that Milla forces the child to slaughter on the day she forgets her birthday. The suggestion is that Milla cannot escape the crimes of her past, and that these

crimes can be understood through the embodied spatial relationship between her sickness and the soil.

The correlation between Milla's old age, space and the crimes of her past is epitomised in the episode in which Agaat gives Milla a laxative, and finally shows her the maps of the farm. Whereas previously Milla wants to 'send [her] eyes voyaging' and to 'see [her] land, even if only in outline, place names on a level surface' (58), she is now unable to withstand the physical urges of her body brought on by the helplessness associated with her sickness and old age, and imagines making a 'sewerage farm' from 'Bot Rivier to Heidelberg, the municipalities, the districts, the regions' (401) by loosening her bowels over the maps that Agaat has been withholding. Buxbaum argues that Milla's 'retribution for her tyrannical treatment of Agaat is to imagine all that she has laboured over turn to excrement' (Buxbaum:38).

While Buxbaum's analysis here centres on the representation of maps, it is useful to extend the analysis to examine the other aspects Van Niekerk foregrounds in this episode as informing the correlation between space and historical, as well as personal, guilt. Milla states that she'll 'darken for [Agaat] the Light of the Word that the Dutch supposedly brought here on the Dromedaris' (401). In suggesting this, her "civilisation" of Agaat (through giving her language and religion) becomes a synecdoche for the historical precedent of the colonial conquest of space in South Africa. Her use of the word 'darken' is especially significant, as this idea is further racialised when Milla describes how she is utterly helpless to meet the

demands of her ageing body, whether she is '[c]overed whiter than snow or not' (401). Agaat produces the feather duster with which she was punished as a child when she refused to speak or to obey Milla. She uses it to point out places on the maps, and in doing so, symbolises the transfer of power that has taken place, as it is now within her power to punish Milla and 'stick [her] four lids up and down with plasters' (404) in order to force her to see what she does not wish to see, namely the conflation of Milla's personal guilt and the national guilt of South Africa. She does this through pointing out to Milla the 'weak spot[s]' or 'soft spot[s]' (403) on the map that refer to '[e]verything that [Milla] forgot and never even noted' (405) in her diaries. (Significantly, Agaat here uses the other woman's diaries to wave away the smell of her excrement.) Agaat points to a place they stayed over, but where she slept 'on sacks with the smelly servant in the hovel' (405). In the original text, she is described as sleeping '*op sakke by die stink meid in die stroois*' (420, italics in original)⁶. She points to a place they visited, and where she had 'tea and cake [...] in the shade of a great old bluegum' (405). The text here melds with the punctuation-free style of Milla's diaries, as the sentence flows directly into the justification 'what more could one wish for' (405), again serving to mimic her past behaviour. Agaat moves on to the place where they ate sheep on the spit, and she ate 'the shinbone that [Milla] kept [for her] in a white napkin' (405). She concludes by pointing out the place where they saw the circus that she 'peeped [at] through a chink' (:405). Her purpose in doing this is to destroy the unity of Milla's authoritarian reading of the maps, and to supplement it with her own narrative of inequality and pain. In doing so, Van Niekerk warns the reader against reading Milla's narrative without questioning her motives and intentions. Again, this is a gesture that makes visible the artifice of the novel and thus reaches out to the reader and calls for a framework of reading that relies on an alternative

⁶ In the English version this reads as: 'on sacks with the smelly servant in the hovel'. However, the word 'meid' is much harsher and more racialised in implication than the word 'servant'.

reading strategy in which the reader, and not the characters, is able to come to an understanding of the ways in which the different sections of the narrative relate to one another. It is significant that Agaat chooses to do this while Milla's laxative is working, as this implies that it is the physical condition of her sickness that propels Milla towards self-awareness.

In order to understand the ways in which Van Niekerk represents the process of Milla's sickening and ageing, it is necessary to explore how her ageing body can be described as abject. Reading Van Niekerk's depiction of Milla through the lens of abjection is particularly appropriate, because of the ways in which her senescent embodiment in general, and her paralysis in particular, lend themselves to association with certain elements of Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject. These include how the depiction of Milla's disassociation from her body positions her liminally between life and death, and how the reduction of her corporeal identity to products of bodily waste in itself renders her embodiment abject. Kristeva's discussion of how the corpse may be seen as being ultimately abject may also be related to Van Niekerk's depiction of the manner in which the condition of Milla's paralysis renders her corpse-like. Finally, the role reversal that takes place when Agaat is forced into a position in which she has to perform maternal acts of care for Milla may be connected to Kristeva's idea of how abjection marks the child's attempt to separate himself or herself from the maternal entity.

When describing Milla's body, Van Niekerk repeatedly foregrounds the ways in which her embodiment places her in a liminal position between life and death. These descriptions centre on how she feels disassociated from her paralysed body. This disassociation is indeed a defining constituent of abjection, as it implies a split in the subject's unified corporeality. This can be seen when Milla describes how she 'can feel [her] insides welter inside [her]' (102). Her 'heart' is in a 'basket' and her 'guts a roll of chewing-tobacco, tumbling around inside a crate' (102). In this description, the unity of her corporeality is broken down into consisting of disembodied fragments. She in fact describes her arm as a 'fragment, something that belongs to [her] only by loose association' (186). It is a 'dead arm, but a life-like replica. Like an artificial arm' (186). The use of the word 'dead' is especially significant, as it relates her physicality to the necessary proximity to death that characterises abjection. However, she next comments that 'an artificial arm needn't be washed like this' (186). This description acts as the culmination of Milla's association with the abject in this section, as it relates to the way in which her ageing and paralysed condition renders her abjectly positioned between life and death. Van Niekerk highlights the distinction between 'flesh' (which is of the body) and 'meat' (which is consumed by the body) in order to further the disassociation from her body experienced by Milla. This is seen in her statement that her '*meat* is unfairly distributed over [her] bones' (102, my emphasis). The abjection of this description arises from the fact that embodied flesh signifies a unity of corporeality, whereas meat is something that is of the body and yet exists in disassociation outside of the body. This ruptures the defined borders of interiority and exteriority that govern embodiment, and places Milla in an ambiguous position. The liminality of this alludes to the notion that Milla's corporeality may be associated with the abject.

As indicated earlier, a person is confronted with abjection when bodily fluids such as faeces, urine, spit, blood or sperm cross the boundaries of the body. These corporeal by-products force the individual to realise the mortality of his or her bodily existence. This, in Kristeva's view, prompts the horror which constitutes abjection. She explains that '[s]uch wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere, cadaver*' (Kristeva:3, emphasis in original). This can be seen in Milla's description of 'shit and hair' as the 'last secretions of the almost-dead' (Van Niekerk:335). This reduces Milla's capacity to act autonomously to a biological function, and foregrounds the proximity to her impending death as that which reduces her to this state. When Milla is no longer able to urinate or defecate without medical assistance, she explains that her 'pee and [her] poo are no longer [her] own. [Her] sphincters no longer open and close' (436). She describes this condition as being 'permeable' (436). This may be related to the ultimate dissolution of bodily borders implied by abjection, as the need for external assistance in producing bodily wastes ruptures the unified interiority of Milla's corporeality.

However, Van Niekerk investigates the ways in which the abjection associated with the production of bodily waste can be inscribed with meaning, a process which may be seen as contrary to Kristeva's understanding of the abject. Kristeva sees a product of bodily waste such as faeces as being abject as it signifies the necessary internal biological process of digestion. However, she suggests that once it has traversed the borders of the body, it signifies something that is of the body and is simultaneously not of the body, as it has now

become waste and filth. The crossing of these bodily borders is that which marks the abjection. However, while tears are also a product of bodily waste that cross the boundaries of the body and are thus associated with abjection, Van Niekerk's description of Milla's crying render her tears as something that can provide her with access to the symbolic. Milla describes crying as 'a last capacity in [her] depleted demesne' as tears are 'something that can still come forth from [her], something other than pee or poo or condensation' (65). As opposed to the understanding of other products of bodily waste, it is the act of crossing the borders of Milla's body that provides her tears with meaning, as they only gain significance once they are outside of her body. Furthermore, tears are associated with emotion, and thus also with selfhood, unlike the other bodily processes. However, it is up to Agaat to develop a 'unique index' with which to measure their '[s]alinity, sob-factor, specific gravity of grief' (65), in the same way she examines and classifies, for example, Milla's urine. But Milla describes how Agaat is completely 'indifferent to [her] tears' (65), and thus their potential access to the realm of the symbolic is denied. However, another incident near the conclusion of the novel does inscribe the abjection of her waste products with symbolic meaning: Agaat empties Milla's bedpan of urine in the hydrangea bed in the garden. Significantly, she has been growing these flowers for Milla's funeral. The practical reason for emptying the bedpan in the hydrangea bed is that the acid of the urine will improve the colour of the flowers. In this act, Milla thinks that Agaat is telling her that her 'influence will be felt for a long time yet, even unto the capillary roots of the plants of [her] garden' and that she'll 'keep up the old traditions' (433) for her. Here, urine, a waste product of abjection, is given the capacity to extend Milla's futurity past her death. Because of this, it grants her access to the symbolic and undermines to some extent the abjection inherent in her condition of ageing and sickness.

The ways in which Milla's paralysed body resembles a corpse further her association with the abject. This is because Kristeva views the corpse as the ultimate embodiment of abjection. She writes that in 'that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders' (Kristeva:4). This erasure of borders relates to the fact that the corpse may be seen as the concretisation of the human body's inevitable future. It is the ultimate sign of abjection as it represents 'the very border between life and death' and 'shifts this limit or boundary into the heart of life itself' (Grosz: 75). According to Kristeva, the corpse is 'death infecting life' (1982:4), and because of this it threatens the stability and unity of a person's identity. This can be seen in the novel in Milla's wondering at 'the tremendous art that is to treat a half-dead relic like a whole human being' (Van Niekerk:188) and in her statement that '[p]eople don't want to hear about [her] ever more chilly feet' (242). This implies that the process of her dying is gradually turning her body into a corpse. The paralysis of her condition further emphasises this idea, as she becomes more corpse-like as her body loses its animation. Not only is her physical condition informed by the image of the corpse, but her psychological preoccupation turns to what will happen to her body after her death (336):

Shit and hair. The last secretions of the almost-dead. Shit and hair. Like old oil still leaking from an engine on the scrap-heap. And piss and nails. That's why they stopper you with a plug or two. So that you don't start oozing and spoil your coffin, or interrupt the sermon. That's why they draw a little net over your hair. So that your skull doesn't start rustling. And that's why they bind up your jaws. So that the tongue doesn't erupt in post-mortem babbling.

Significantly, the focus of this extract seamlessly shifts after the first six sentences from describing the condition of the 'almost-dead' to describing the condition of the corpse. This points to how her position inevitably places her in close proximity to death, and thus, to the corpse. This proximity and blurring of boundaries between the embodied subject and the corpse are further emphasised after the first six sentences of this extract through the use of the words 'you' and 'your' to describe the corpse. This personalises the corpse and ironically inscribes it with the agency that Milla lacks in the last part of her life, as she imagines the 'babbling' of her corpse, while she herself is denied the use of her tongue. The effect of this is to show the complex relation between her embodied self and the corpse, and in doing so it blurs the boundaries between the two, inscribing her with abjection.

Milla's association with abjection further derives from the ways in which Agaat is forced into a maternal role in relation to her. Her paralysis forces her to occupy a similar position to Agaat as a child's to its mother: Agaat provides her with nourishment, she cleanses and cares for her body, she removes her waste products, and she provides her with language when she devises the alphabet chart method of communication. Ironically, though, while a mother caring for a child prepares it for entry into life, Agaat's care of Milla readies her for *death*. For Kristeva, the abject is the space of struggle against the mother. In this struggle, the child simultaneously desires to 'release the hold of the *maternal entity*' (Kristeva: 13, emphasis in original) and 'to be her, to blur the division between the child's identity and the mother's' (Grosz: 78). Milla's desire to be separate from Agaat can be seen in the ambiguous and

complex section in which Agaat is described as speaking Milla's thoughts out loud for her (and thereby investing her with language in the way a mother would for a child). In this section, Agaat gives voice to Milla's desire for separation by stating that her 'death is of [her]' and that '[t]here are boundaries' (Van Niekerk:450). Here, Milla's rejection of Agaat, the maternal entity, speaks of her desire to enter into death alone, in the same way in which a child struggles to be separate from their mother upon their entry into life. This rejection of the mother further manifests in food loathing. Kristeva suggests that '[f]ood loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection' (Kristeva:2). The rejection of food, according to Kristeva (1982:3, emphasis in original)

separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of the element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not want to assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me", who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*.

Through rejecting the food the mother wants to feed the child, he or she rejects his or her dependence on the mother, and attempts to create an autonomous identity. Milla displays evidence of food loathing in this passage when Agaat on her behalf states, 'And the slops you feed me! I'll choke' (Van Niekerk:450). Milla further attempts to separate herself from Agaat when she exclaims that '[s]oon [she'll] be in a hole where even [Agaat] won't be able to get at [her]' (450). This statement may be related to abjection in a number of ways. As has already been discussed, the corpse itself represents the concretisation of abjection. The diction here anticipates the relief Milla associates with being free of Agaat. This is highly abject and ironic,

as the price of this freedom would be her death. However, this relief is undermined by the fact that Milla's enunciation of her desire to break from Agaat is spoken with Agaat's mouth. Finally, Agaat translates Milla's thinking by suggesting that she will only be able to get at her if she 'dig[s] [her] up to claw [her] bones' and accuses her of '[b]one hunger' (450). This is a reference to their cows contracting botulism as a result of eating the bones of carcasses. Significantly, this condition in cows is characterised by muscle and motor paralysis, as well as by allotriophagia, which is the desire to eat unnatural foodstuffs. The reduction of Milla's embodied corporeality to a corpse is abject in itself, but the further reduction of her corpse to a carcass that can spread an infection that causes paralysis in others indicates the absolute abjection of her condition.

However, this passage does not only allude to the child's (or Milla's) rejection of the mother (or Agaat), but also to the child's desire *to be* the mother. This can be seen in the way in which the unstable position of enunciation in this passage conflates Milla's thoughts with those of Agaat, and because of this alludes to their consciousness as being a joint one. However, the meaning of this highly complex section is further complicated by Agaat's suggestions that Milla is experiencing a delusional episode brought on by her sickness and by her old age. Near the end of the passage, Agaat tells Milla that she is 'wandering again' and that 'it's just the little light' that is 'going on and off [...] in [her] head' (450). Furthermore, throughout the passage, Milla wonders if she can 'believe [her] ears' (448), if she is 'hearing aright' (449), if she 'could [...] have imagined it all' and if she is 'dreaming' (450). Milla's dreaming the episode or being delusional might explain the practical impossibility of Agaat's dangerously symbiotic and telepathic translation of her thoughts. It could also clarify the

unstable narrative position of the passage, as the uncertainty of whose thoughts we are actually reading could be a reflection of the confusion of her delusion. However, this interpretation is undermined both in the rest of the novel and within this passage itself. Through having Milla flicker semantically complicated messages at Agaat throughout the novel (and more importantly, through having Agaat understand and react to these messages), Van Niekerk has established a basis for this kind of seemingly untenable communication. Additionally, Van Niekerk intersperses their telepathic communication with Milla's concrete and clear sensory perceptions. She smells Agaat's 'sweet rooibos breath' and the 'borax in the starch' (448) of her uniform. When Agaat 'stands back, [Milla's] ear feels cold without her warm breath' (449). When Agaat's 'lips are at [Milla's] ear, [she] feel[s] the moistness of [Agaat's] mouth' (449), and when Agaat closes Milla's eyes, '[h]er fingers are cold on [her] eyelids' (451). While this is not concrete evidence that she is not delusional, these sensory perceptions act as moments of contact with an unchangeable reality that seem to ground their telepathy in credibility. Furthermore, as has been explored, this passage is characterised above all by ideas of abjection and because of this, the uncertainty of whether or not Milla is delusional relates to the ambiguity associated with abjection. Because of this, it may be possible to relate Milla's attempts to separate herself from Agaat and her simultaneous conflation with the other woman to the abjection implicit in Kristeva's discussion of the child's struggle against the mother.

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, the abjection inherent in the representation of Mrs Curren's embodiment may be seen as granting her some measure of agency, as it aligns her with alternative systems of belief. In contrast to this, the ways in which the

representation of Milla's embodiment may be related to abjection seem to reinforce the reality of her paralysis, and thereby associate her with stagnation and stasis. The narrative thrust of *Age of Iron* moves towards the possibility of Mrs Curren's embrace of Vercueil, and the Otherness he represents, while that of *Agaat* circles around whether or not Milla and Agaat can come to some sort of reconciliation with and recognition of each other. Because of this, it is only when the abjection of Milla's embodiment propels her towards Agaat that it may be seen as enabling her growth as a character, rather than reinforcing the reality of her inertia and powerlessness. This is only the case in some of the instances discussed above that relate Milla to abjection. As a result, it may be possible to conclude that the abjection that characterises Milla's ageing does not grant her the same measure of agency as that which can be seen in the representation of Mrs Curren's older age. A possible reason for this could be the fact that Milla's experience of ageing differs radically from Mrs Curren's, as Van Niekerk's representation of it continually foregrounds the former's paralysis as the defining constituent of her senescence.

In the same way that Van Niekerk's depiction of Milla's ageing finds resonance with Kristeva's understanding of the abject, it may also be associated with Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque. The depiction of Milla's body lends itself to association with the grotesque in a number of ways. As will be discussed below, Van Niekerk foregrounds the notion of Milla's body as being defined by orifices and protrusions, and by gratuitous hyperbolism. She describes Milla's body through its relation to mountains and streams, and topographical and architectural images. These descriptions find resonance with Bakhtin's understanding of the grotesque body. Furthermore, it may be possible to relate certain instances of Van Niekerk's

representation of Milla's senescence to Bakhtin's ideas of 'gargantuan feats of defecation' and 'carnival laughter' (Bakhtin: 227).

Bakhtin's theories on carnival and the grotesque body may be related to old age in general, but are specifically pertinent to understanding the representation of senescence in *Agaat*. This is because Milla's ageing corporeal identity is represented as being directly connected to the period of political transformation in which the novel is set: the paralysis of her body is inscribed as the site on which the political ramifications of her relationship with Agaat are played out. Because her body is described in grotesque terms, the manner in which it overreaches individual meaning and extends towards social meaning may allude to how the existing social order is overthrown and turned on its head. The special temporal space in which Milla's body is associated with the grotesque has the potential to allow for her liberation from the established patterns of behaviour that she has enacted throughout her life, and enable her to recreate her identity in new ways. However, Van Niekerk undermines this possibility through her depiction of Milla's ambivalent political position, as well as through the suggestion that a reconciliation with Agaat may in fact be impossible. In *Age of Iron*, it was possible to read Mrs Curren's body as that which offers her 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order' (Bakhtin: 199) through Coetzee's use of maternal metaphors in the description of Mrs Curren's cancer and death. The novel's conflation of Mrs Curren's body with the body of the country, as well as with the 'endless chain of bodily life' (Bakhtin: 241), allows for her body to be read as something cosmic and universal. For Bakhtin, these qualities constitute a defining characteristic of what he identifies as the grotesque. Furthermore, the narrative point towards which the novel moves, namely

Mrs Curren's death, is informed by the ways in which the grotesque body can be understood as rupturing official, social divisions, through the final embrace with Vercueil that potentially precedes her death. In contrast, while the narrative structure of *Agaat* does not necessarily move *towards* Milla's death so much as circle *around* it, her death is characterised by the ambiguous reinforcement of official social order, even while it chronicles the demise of this order. In Vercueil's final death-embrace of Mrs Curren Coetzee merges the physicality of her grotesque body with her new-formed social realisations and political understandings. She has moved from a position of political inertia and blindness to one of unification with the social truths (as embodied by Vercueil) of which she is previously unaware. In contrast, Milla's death is marked not by an embrace of the other, but by *Agaat* and the coloured workers singing a hymn to her, and equally significantly, by their singing 'Die Stem' at her funeral. The association of her death with this anthem of Afrikaner nationalism does not signify the outward-moving embrace of alternative truths that characterises Mrs Curren's death. Instead, it ambivalently indicates a reinforcement of the political ideologies that govern Milla's life. Because of this, it may be possible to conclude that the association of Milla's body with the potential for regeneration associated with the grotesque is undermined by her ambivalent political position. Despite this, as will be illustrated below, Van Niekerk's representation of Milla's embodiment may be read as alluding to this potentiality, even though its realisation may be thwarted.

As suggested earlier, Bakhtin maintains that the grotesque body is described in terms of orifices and protrusions. Van Niekerk's representation of Milla's corporeality indeed often centres on its convexities and concavities. Bakhtin argues that 'the artistic logic of the

grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices' (Bakhtin:234). This can be seen in Milla's statement that '[a]ll [her] orifices interest [Agaat]. The more [she has] the better' (Van Niekerk:432). Her own description of her body focuses on the 'three axils of armpit and pudendum, the clefts of finger toe and buttock, the hollow of [her] navel, the subsidence above [her] collarbones, [her] head with its seven holes' (152). The grotesque image 'displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body' (Bakhtin:234): Milla can feel her 'insides welter inside [her]. [Her] heart in a basket, [her] guts a roll of chewing-tobacco, tumbling around inside a crate' (Van Niekerk:102). According to Bakhtin, the 'outward and inwards features are often merged into one' (1965:234). Thus Milla describes how when she is 'relieved of unwanted hair and nails and calluses, [her] shell will become transparent so that [Agaat] can see [her] inner workings' (Van Niekerk:333).

Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque body further relies on its hyperbolic qualities. It is thus significant that Van Niekerk's depiction of Milla's corporeality often foregrounds its excessiveness. Bakhtin argues that of 'all the features of the human face, the nose and mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body' as these signify 'all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines' (1965:233). Van Niekerk focuses on Milla's nose in Leroux's stressing that in her room there 'must be nothing to irritate the nose' (Van Niekerk:19) and because of this there are to be no 'dogs, no plants or dirty things [...] no face powder, no perfume, no underarm sprays that can make her sneeze or snort' (19). Since the grotesque body is constituted by '[e]xaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness' (Bakhtin: 232), her ordinary nose becomes something larger and more dangerous in the threat it poses to

her existence. Similarly, her mouth too is enlarged to dangerous proportions, as eating might cause her to choke, and '[e]very mouthful' of food is described as 'a leap in the dark' (Van Niekerk:41). Bakhtin believes that the eyes have no part in the grotesque, as 'they express an individual [...] self-sufficient human life, which is not essential to the grotesque' (1965:233). As a result, the 'grotesque is interested only in protruding eyes' (233). Significantly, Milla's eyes too can be read as being grotesque: it is through the use of her eyes that her consciousness extends itself beyond the confines of her body, initially through flickering messages at Agaat, and later through blinking and using the alphabet chart method of communication developed by Agaat. More importantly, since she is paralysed, her only interaction with the outside world occurs through the act of her observing it: in effect, her consciousness is concentrated only in her eyes and her eyes are thus enlarged to contain her entire being.

Bakhtin's understanding of the grotesque body involves its association with mountains and streams, and topographical and architectural images. The connection between Milla's embodiment and these ideas can be seen throughout the text. The grotesque body, according to Bakhtin, is defined by that 'which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths. Mountains and abysses, such is the relief of the grotesque body; or speaking in architectural terms, towers and subterranean passages' (1965:234). Milla wonders, in an excerpt quoted earlier, '*in what subterranean streams does history precipitate? a catchment of rain does not elect itself the mountains choose and a mouth for the stream is gifted by the sea how was I then reservoired so wrongly such a still mephitic pool?*' (Van Niekerk:50, italics in original). Bakhtin additionally describes how 'the grotesque

body is cosmic and universal. It stresses elements common to the entire cosmos: earth, water, fire, air' and he suggests that this 'body can merge with various natural phenomena, with mountains, rivers, seas, islands, and continents. It can fill the entire universe' (Bakhtin:234). Similarly, Milla uses imagery related to farming the earth to help her swallow. She pictures the 'sluice in the irrigation furrow, the water damming up, a hand pulling out the locking-peg and lifting the plate in its grooves, letting through the water, and lowering it again, so that it bumps shut in the track of the sluice frame below' (Van Niekerk:41). Significantly, this additionally serves as a reference to the exaggeration of her mouth (as described above in relation to the hyperbolisation of the grotesque), as her mouth becomes enlarged to the proportions of a dam in order to let food pass through. In order to help herself urinate, Milla imagines her body merging with the water systems of her farm: she thinks of the 'underground water-chambers in the mountain, of the veins branching from them, of the springs in the kloofs, of the fountains of Grootmoedersdrift, the waterfalls in the crevices' (80-81). This merging of her body with architectural and cosmic images can be seen in many of the poetic sequences. For example (622, italics in original):

sometimes I still have the urge to call to scream to get up the need walks in waves but congeals an ocean of glassy gel noiseless salty white coast [...] am awake between me and me all hollows are silted shut a mountain without caves storeys without stairwell trapped in a lift the lift is myself [...] I fill myself fully [...] or shall I leak myself wind from an inner tube? carried out over an arm to the place of all inner tubes? images no longer offer solace my filling seed soil wind I am impermeable [...] my damage is dense is black my tongue silts my mouth full of water

All of the examples cited above combine cosmic images of mountains, streams and earth, as well as architectural images of subterranean passages, stairwells and lifts, which are then merged with Milla's body, aligning it with Bakhtin's understanding of the grotesque. Significantly, while her body in this passage is merged with architectural and cosmic images, these images are described as perverted or stunted. She is a '*mountain without caves*', '*storeys without stairwell*', a '*lift*' that cannot move, her '*tongue silts*' her '*mouth*' (622, italics in original) shut. This may be related to the ways in which Van Niekerk denies Milla's body the universality associated with the grotesque, because of her political ambivalence and because of the seeming impossibility of her being able to reconcile with Agaat.

The passage in which Agaat withholds the bedpan from Milla after giving her a laxative may be related to Bakhtin's focus on excrement in his understanding of the grotesque body. He argues that 'the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus' (1965:233). In contrast to Kristeva's view of excrement as signifying the ways in which the body ruptures the unity of its physicality and thus places itself in proximity to its unavoidable death, Bakhtin views excrement as representing the ways in which the body overcomes its own limitations. The 'new, second body' (233) referred to by Bakhtin signifies how, through the act of defecation, the ordinary body becomes aligned with the grotesque body, and thus becomes associated with the cosmic, universal body of 'people and of mankind, fertilised by the dead' that 'is eternally renewed and moves forever forward along the historic path of progress' (243). Because of this, 'dung' in relation to the grotesque body 'appear[s] in hyperbolic quantities and cosmic dimensions' (238). The

grotesque body is also as a result often associated with ‘gargantuan feats of defecation’ (227).

After being given the laxative by Agaat, Milla wonders if she is ‘Atlas’ and thinks that the ‘myth is the wrong way round. The earth like heaven is not above us, but inside us. For us to retain in our cavities and to surrender through our orifices’ (Van Niekerk:399). This statement combines many elements of the grotesque (cosmic images, excessiveness, a focus on cavities and orifices, an inverted topography, excrement). While withholding the bedpan from her, Agaat shows Milla the maps of the farm that she has been longing to see. Milla’s imagining making ‘a sewerage farm’ (401) of the maps can itself be described as a ‘gargantuan feat[...] of defecation’ (Bakhtin:227). This feat is hyperbolised through her focusing initially on the maps of the farm, then moving on to ‘seven continents’ so that she can ‘shit them into oblivion [...] one by one’ (Van Niekerk:401) and finally imagining folding ‘the water map into a little boat’ so that ‘up to [her] chin in shit’ she can ‘paddle through shit to the underworld’ (401). The topographical stratum of this image is highly curious. In the traditional topographical hierarchy, travelling to the underworld implies vertical descent, yet Milla imagines paddling *toward* the underworld, which suggests horizontal, and not vertical, movement. However, she has previously suggested that the ‘earth like heaven is not above us, but inside us’ (399). The reference to ‘heaven’ is of significance, as travelling to ‘heaven’ implies vertical ascent, in the same way that travelling to the ‘underworld’ suggests vertical descent. As a result, if the ‘earth’ and ‘heaven’ are ‘inside us’, then the ‘underworld’ is ‘inside us’ too. If we can ‘retain [the earth and heaven] in our cavities and [...] surrender [them] through our orifices’, then we can ‘retain [the underworld] in our cavities and [...] surrender

[it] through our orifices' too. Heaven and the underworld both relate to the separate life characterised by Bakhtin as the cosmic, universal body of humankind. Thus through the act of defecation described by Milla as 'paddl[ing] through shit to the underworld' (Van Niekerk:401) she is constructing what Bakhtin refers to as a 'new, second body' (Bakhtin:233). As the afterlife is inside her, her act of defecation propels her towards it. The act of this construction of a second body can be seen through the use of active verbs in her description of how the earth, heaven and the underworld are inside us, for us '*to retain* in our cavities and *to surrender* through our orifices' (Van Niekerk:399, my emphasis), as this implies an act of will.

However, Van Niekerk again denies the universality of this image through the fact that it is not Milla who can actively defecate her way to the underworld, so to speak, but rather that it is Agaat who has to give Milla a laxative to loosen her bowels. Significantly, her 'gargantuan feat[...] of defecation' (Bakhtin:233) becomes 'Agaat's turn to flush her [own] system' (Van Niekerk:406) through releasing in 'a flood' the names of the places on the maps that signify '[e]verything that [Milla] forgot and never even noted in [her] little books' (405). Milla, upon understanding that Agaat plans to show her the maps only after she has been given the laxative, wonders '[w]ho else could think up that anagnorisis should coincide with catharsis' (397). Here, she associates 'catharsis' (397) with the purgation of the laxative, and 'anagnorisis' (397) with her finally being able to see the maps. However, because Agaat asserts power over her in withholding the bedpan after she has given her the laxative, the 'anagnorisis' (397) Milla expects to experience after seeing the maps becomes something else entirely. Because Agaat has placed her in a position of powerlessness as a result of the

physical demands of her ageing and sickening body, Agaat is able to hijack Milla's experience of 'catharsis' and thrust the focus of her 'anagnorisis' (397) in another direction. Her purgational 'catharsis' thus leads to Agaat's experiencing 'catharsis' (397) as a psychological phenomenon. Milla's focus is shifted from the clear-cut dominant narrative of stability associated with cartographical representation to an alternative space in which Agaat dictates the conditions of the experience and supplements the representation with her own narrative of absence and lack. This is embodied through Agaat's 'shak[ing] [her] little arm at' (Van Niekerk:403) Milla. Significantly, Milla comments that it is 'the first time Agaat has ever pushed up her right sleeve for [her] like that' (403). The focus of Milla's 'anagnorisis' (397) is as a result centred on Agaat, and not on the maps themselves. Because of this, the 'new, second body' (Bakhtin:233) created by Milla's 'gargantuan feat[...] of defecation' (Bakhtin:227) is not connected with her association with the cosmic, universal body of 'people and of mankind' (Bakhtin:243) but rather with Agaat's exercise of power over her. This ruptures the stability of Milla's identity in such a way that it allows Agaat to inscribe her own meanings and her own need for Milla's recognition onto her impending death. It is not Milla who is 'eternally renewed' and who now 'moves forever forward along the historic path of progress' (Bakhtin:243) but rather Agaat who is 'fertilised' (Bakhtin:243) by her death and who is given the opportunity to renew her association with the cosmic, universal body of 'people and of mankind' (Bakhtin:243) through the assertion of her identity. However, despite the power she derives through this, she still remains an isolated figure who does not become part of the coloured community. This reinforces the fact that the ageing subjectivity in transitional and post-transitional South Africa should not be read in terms of the new (represented by Agaat) replacing the old (represented by Milla), as the relationship between the old and the new is far more complex and problematic.

Bakhtin's understanding of the grotesque body is closely related to the idea of carnival laughter. This is because he believes that laughter has the potential to undermine existing social hierarchies, and to mitigate the fear of death. He emphasises the idea that carnival laughter signifies humankind's defeat of fear by suggesting that laughter 'overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations' (1965:209), and describes this victory as

not only a victory over mystic terror of God, but also a victory over the awe inspired by the forces of nature, and most of all over the oppression and guilt related to all that was consecrated and forbidden [...]. It was the defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than the earth itself. Through this victory laughter clarified man's consciousness and gave him a new outlook on life.

This regenerative potential of laughter may be seen in one of the only sections of the novel to inscribe the dying Milla with sufficient agency to affect external conditions drastically, where she exploits the resemblance of her body to a corpse to play a joke on her old friend Beatrice. When Agaat goes into town to take care of Milla's funeral arrangements, she asks Beatrice to keep an eye on her. Milla is suspicious of Beatrice's feigned sympathy, as she is sure that Beatrice is there 'for the last scrapings from the pot, for the last meat on the bones', and that '[h]er sympathy smacks of frikkadel' (Van Niekerk:269). In describing her friend's discomfort at being near her, she states that Beatrice would be much more comfortable looking at her if she were 'a stuffed pig with an apple in [her] mouth' (273). The repetition of this meat imagery reinforces the abjection that characterises the distinction

between embodied flesh and the abjection associated with meat. This helps to foreground the distinction between the embodied subject and the corpse that marks the axis of the joke Milla plays on Beatrice. Upon seeing Beatrice in her room, Milla thinks back to the time when she tells her about Jak's physical abuse of her, when she expects her friend to reciprocate the shared confidence with one of her own. However, Beatrice condemns Milla by saying that *she* 'shall never talk out of the house' because '[m]arriage is holy and [...] private' (120). In the present, Milla realises that her friend now 'knows nothing about [her], can now no longer know anything about [her]' (269) as she herself has become 'impervious to that God of mutually humbugging neighbourliness and pretentious poets' (270). Hoping to pay Beatrice back for 'coming to stand by [her] bed with a fastidious smirk on [her] face' (275), Milla, with the last bit of muscle power remaining to her, stretches and flutters her eyes at the other woman, imitating somebody in his or her death throes. Here, she purposefully embraces the abjection that characterises the corpse in order to get back at Beatrice for her sanctimonious and hypocritical attitude. She says that she has not 'felt so lively in a long time' (275) and that she 'could die laughing' (277). By actively blurring the boundaries between the body and the corpse, and thus thrusting the body into closer proximity to death, Milla is ironically able to reawaken her joy at being alive. This may be related to Bakhtin's idea of carnival laughter, as in this joke, death and laughter are closely interwoven: through pretending to be dead, Milla reasserts her relation to life, and in doing so mitigates to some extent her fear of her impending death.

Despite the humour involved in the trick Milla plays on Beatrice, she herself is unable to laugh. This clearly indicates the ambivalent nature of her joke. Bakhtin (1965:200) explains

that carnival laughter ‘asserts and denies, it buries and revives’, and that it ‘is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding’. While Milla’s joke reminds her that she is alive, the fact that it revolves around her pretending to be dying reinforces the inevitability of her rapidly approaching death. Significantly, Bakhtin makes the point that carnival laughter ‘is also directed at those who laugh. [...] They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed’ (200-201). Importantly, Milla is not only laughing at Beatrice; she is also laughing at herself: her impending death is the axis on which the joke revolves. Through pretending to be dying, she is able to enact her return to life. However, Bakhtin also notes that the regenerative potential of laughter is ‘ephemeral’ as it is ‘followed by the fears and oppressions of everyday life’ (209). Despite this transiency, ‘from these brief moments another unofficial truth emerged [...] about world and man’ (209). Even though Milla’s joke is fleeting in nature and is followed by the repercussion of Agaat’s being angry, it nonetheless temporarily allows Milla to ascribe a different meaning to an event that usually terrifies her. Because of this, in this instance, her grotesque signification not only endows her with agency, but also liberates her from the confines of her ageing body.

In the same way that reading Van Niekerk’s representation of Milla’s embodiment in relation to abjection allows for an enriched understanding of the connection between Milla and Agaat, reading her body through the lens of the grotesque reinforces the connection that the two women share. This can specifically be seen in the passage in which Agaat is unaware that Milla is watching her while she thinks that the older woman is sleeping. The potential relation of this passage to Bakhtin’s theories arises from how Van Niekerk describes Milla’s and Agaat’s bodies as merging in this section, as will be elaborated on below. Bakhtin, in fact,

stresses the ways in which the grotesque body is never an individual body and that it can only be read in relation to other bodies. He states that the 'grotesque body [...] is a body in the act of becoming', and because '[i]t is never finished, never completed', it is rather 'continually built, created' and continually 'builds and creates another body' (1965:240). Its 'distinctive character [...] is its open unfinished nature, its interaction with the world' (228). In keeping with this, Milla describes how her 'skin presses on [her], an underfelt, a rain-wet canvas' and suggests that it 'wants to fashion from [her] flesh another layer, a last pressing of itself' (Van Niekerk:369). She wonders why her 'body begrudge[s] itself its own closure' and asks '[w]hat lesson is contained in this reluctant diminution' (369). At this point it is necessary to note that Bakhtin states that '[t]he events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at their points of intersection' (1965:243-244). The grotesque body 'never presents an individual body; the image consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body' (234). After wondering '[w]hat [she is] to understand from [her] skin that rejects [her]?' (Van Niekerk:369), Milla discovers that Agaat has fallen asleep at the foot of her bed, and that her 'feet are lying against [Agaat's] chest, as if she'd gathered them there to hold them, like a child going to bed with a teddy-bear' (370). She wonders if 'feet [can] breathe' (370) and likens the sensation of this to the sensation of 'a lung' under 'the arch of [her] foot' (370). Her feet have previously signified her move towards death, as she states that '[p]eople don't want to hear about [her] ever more chilly feet' (242). Here, however, through the connection with a lung, her feet are no longer associated with her impending death but rather associated with the breath of life, because of the sensation of breath given by Agaat's embracing her feet. This is enacted on the 'boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at their points of intersection' (Bakhtin:243-244). Her feet signify the boundary between her and Agaat (as her

death is something Agaat cannot share) and also the intersection between her and the other woman (as her death signifies, at least potentially, the birth of a new life for Agaat). This implies that 'one body offers its death, the other its birth' (Bakhtin:234). As has previously been discussed, Milla's death becomes associated with Agaat's birth through her death allowing her former foster daughter to enact the grievances she feels towards Milla and to assert her own identity. Agaat's body merges with Milla's body in the 'two-bodied image' Bakhtin (234) associates with the renewal inherent in grotesque representation. The fact that this tension between death and rebirth is made corporeal through being embodied by a lung is significant since this implies that her body becomes 'another, newly conceived body' that marks the 'point of transition in a life eternally renewed' (234). If there is a 'lesson [...] contained in [the] reluctant diminution' (Van Niekerk:369) of Milla's body, it could be found in the ways in which her body becomes the 'inexhaustible vessel of death and conception' (Bakhtin:234) signifying her demise and Agaat's emergence as an autonomous subject.

However, the novel's representation of this cycle of death and birth is highly problematic. Milla describes the way in which she transcends her own body through being able to communicate with Agaat through blinking as 'a whole grammar developing there on the wall [...] more complicated than Agaat on her own, than [Milla] or the two of [them] together could think up. If it had to be fleshed out as well... muscles, skin, hair, nerves, glands' (Van Niekerk:436). This is the embodiment of the 'newly conceived body' (Bakhtin:234) created through their attempts to goad, reach and understand each other. Through the similar use of anatomical features in both this description and the description of Agaat's embracing Milla's feet, it is possible to read her embracing Milla's feet and thus merging her feet with a lung as

an act of attempted connection in an alternative 'grammar' of grotesque signification. Agaat's cap is an example of another kind of subversive alternative grammar. When Agaat is a child, she hates having anything on her head. However, when Milla moves her into the backroom, she forces her to wear a cap in her new duties as maid. 'Over the years' the 'zone above Agaat's forehead' becomes 'ever more forbidden' and 'nobody except Jakkie when he was small, was allowed to look at it straight on' (Van Niekerk:371). When Agaat catches Milla looking at her cap, the older woman explains that she 'made [her] feel as if [she] were peeking through a transparent blouse' (371). Alyssa Carvalho and Helize Van Vuuren (2009:50) explain that her cap 'indicates her identification with her status as servant'. Her cap can be seen as 'the tableau on which [she] is continually "writing" and "rewriting" her story into a dense palimpsest of white on white embroidery' (51). Her cap is thus simultaneously a 'negative sign of [her] servitude' and a 'positive space of personal and well-guarded creativity' (51). To relate these ideas to my present argument: Agaat, after waking up and discovering herself embracing Milla's feet and seeing Milla staring at her cap, is filled with 'embarrassment', 'defensiveness', 'confusion' and 'anger' (Van Niekerk:372). After walking to the door but not leaving, she returns to the bed and 'presses [her arms] against her breast, still tighter, she bends her neck, she presses her forehead against the arches of [Milla's] feet, hard' (373). She 'crumples up with one stroke' the entire intricate and ambiguous design on her cap 'against [Milla's] ankles' (373). In this chapter of the novel, Agaat's cap is pressed against Milla's feet twice. The first time, when Agaat is asleep, it is a subconscious act of chance and forgetfulness. As has been described in detail, the diction used in describing this first act suggests it is associated with Milla's death being connected with Agaat's birth. The second time, it is a wilful act of great ambiguity. This time, the act is informed by the reality of history and consequences, and not by a dream-like web of possibility. Instead of using the

regenerative image of a 'lung' to describe this act, Van Niekerk associates it with the violence of the word 'crumples'. As a result, this second act does not signify the creation of 'another, newly conceived body' that marks a 'point of transition in a life eternally renewed' (Bakhtin:234). Instead, it highlights the danger of the conflation of Milla's death with Agaat's rebirth. In crumpling up her cap against Milla's feet, Agaat is not only destroying that which marks her subservience, but she is also destroying the physical manifestation of her own resourcefulness her cap has come to represent. This implies that the death of the old leading to the rebirth of the new is not as simple as a transfer of power from the old to the new. This is because the old and the new are intrinsically connected, and because of their shared history, separating what constitutes the old from what constitutes the new is problematic.

While Milla's death will free Agaat from a life of servitude, it also marks the death of the only mother she has ever known, and the destruction of the only world in which she has ever had a place. The possibility of this can be seen in Milla's imagining Agaat after her death (Van Niekerk:540):

It will feel too large and too lonely for you. You will step back from the gate. You will turn round. The yard, the house, will feel too small. Small and deserted and inexorable. You will want to shut your eyes. You will open them again. You will want to crawl into your hearth. You will crawl out again. You won't know what you're about. You'll go round the back, past the sheds to the backyard. Your feet won't feel as if they belong to you, your steps will feel too long, your legs too loose. The milk-can there next to the screen door will seem to you like a thing you've never known. You will lift its lid by the chain and let go of it again. You will push open the door of the little creamery. The smell will drain you of your strength. With the front end of your cap against the separator's cool shiny chrome you will stand for a while. Blindly you'll feel for

the handle till the high keening sound is released and you feel the vibration against your forehead.

While Milla's death will release Agaat, this release is not depicted in positive terms. The uncertainty of her new position is highlighted through the description of her 'feet' feeling as if 'they don't belong to' her, her 'steps' becoming 'too long', and her 'legs' being 'too loose' (540). Without the focalisation of Milla to react against, Agaat, in this imagined (and therefore suspect) account, seems uncertain as to how to proceed to embroider her alternative meaning after Milla's death. While Vercueil's final embrace of Mrs Curren suggests acceptance and possibilities, Agaat's embrace of Milla's feet suggests a meaning that is darker and more complex than a simple transfer of power, and more problematic than the old being replaced by the new.

As a result, it is necessary to return to my original investigation of how the elements that associate Milla's body with the grotesque can be said to deny her access to the social universality Bakhtin considers indispensable to the grotesque. While Bakhtin describes the grotesque as something 'deeply positive' (1965:205), the ways in which Milla's ageing body can be read as grotesque are at best ambiguously positive, and more realistically, not positive at all. To elaborate: instead of the grotesque features of her face signifying protrusions towards universal meaning, her nose and mouth signify danger and death, and the hyperbolicism involved in the depiction of her eyes signifies the reduction of her agency and autonomy. Furthermore, while Bakhtin considers the use of cosmic images in the representation of the grotesque as that 'which leads beyond the body's limited space'

(Bakhtin:234), Milla considers herself '*reservoired*' in a '*still mephitic pool*' (Van Niekerk:50, italics in original); she is a '*mountain without caves*', '*storeys without stairwell*', a '*lift*' that cannot move, and her '*tongue silts*' her '*mouth*' shut (Van Niekerk:622 italics in original). Hence, instead of this association with the grotesque extending her beyond the confines of her body, it rather reinforces the ways in which she is trapped inside her body. While the grotesque is associated with 'gargantuan feats of defecation' (Bakhtin:227), Milla's bowels are unable to function on their own, and she is denied the catharsis associated with purgation because Agaat is able to dictate the conditions of this experience and manipulate the effect to her own ends. While Bakhtin believes that in grotesque representation, 'one body offers its death, the other its birth' and that this marks the 'point of transition in a life eternally renewed' (Bakhtin:234), Van Niekerk represents the conflation of Milla's death and Agaat's rebirth as something that is highly problematic because of the two women's shared history. Because of this, it may be possible to conclude that Milla's association with the grotesque hints at possibilities of redemption, but does not follow these potentialities through. This is appropriate because it reflects the seeming impossibility of Milla's and Agaat's reaching a point of reconciliation. It is only when the ways in which Milla's body may be read as grotesque propel her towards Agaat that some measure of the regenerative quality Bakhtin associates with the grotesque may be seen. However, as will be elaborated on below, even these moments that hint at the possibility of reconciliation are depicted as problematic.

The common thread that runs through these considerations is the reality of Milla's paralysis. Even though she might believe that she has 'changed' and that 'every day that [she] lie[s]'

there she is still 'changing' (Van Niekerk:83), the reality of her paralysis renders these changes problematic. For example, when she is finally able to communicate with Agaat using the alphabet charts, the questions she asks her centre on old grievances and past accusations, even if she does ask these questions only to provoke a response in Agaat. She asks Agaat who started the fire on the mountain, what she was doing that first night on the mountain, if she drowned the kid the night of the fire, why she dug up the lamb's ear, why she is always on the scene so quickly after any disaster, how Agaat got to the dam so soon with Jakkie's christening robe, if she really had milk when she fed Jakkie, what Jakkie told her in the plane on the night of his birthday, and if Jakkie really knows that she, Milla, is dying. In the same way that Milla's body is paralysed, the focus of her concern is frozen in the past. While she explains that without understanding 'causes', 'effects', 'reasons' and 'grounds [...] one cannot live and cannot die' (494), the way in which she expresses these questions connotes hostility and accusation, rather than an attempt at understanding. She accuses Agaat of satanic rites, of being possessed, of being a witch, and tells her that she is not taken in by her innocence. The tone of this is in direct contrast to the bitter-sweet passage in which Milla imagines herself consoling Agaat after her death. In this passage, Milla asks 'why' she 'only now love[s] [Agaat] with this inexpressible regret', and more importantly, wonders 'how [she] must let [Agaat] know this' (540). She comments that only 'now that language has forsaken [her] and one eye has fallen shut and the other stares unblinkingly, now [she] find[s] this longing in [her] heart to console [Agaat], in anticipation, for the hereafter' (541). The significance of this is that it is a longing that must remain unfulfilled, since even the expression of it is impossible. Again, it is the reality of Milla's paralysis that prevents her from reaching out to the other woman, and thus being associated with the universality Bakhtin connects with the grotesque. Significantly, the consolation she wishes to offer Agaat is

expressed through her imagining herself merging with the cosmic images of the farm: she is the 'smell of fennel', the 'breeze' that gives 'a fern-tip of courage', the 'gentle Jersey cow' in whose eyes Agaat will find 'bucketfuls of mercy', the 'arum lily' with 'starlight in its throat', the 'bokmakierie [...] in the wild mallow' with 'all love contained therein' (540-541). Bakhtin explains that 'all unearthly objects [are] transformed into earth, the mother which swallows up in order to give birth to something larger that has been improved' (1965:217). However, because of her paralysis, she 'can [...] only now be with [Agaat] like this, in a fantasy of [her] own death' (Van Niekerk:540), and the consolation she wishes to offer Agaat remains locked in her paralysed body. While Bakhtin comments that '[v]arious deformities [...] are symptoms of pregnancy or of procreative power' (1965:217), the 'deformity' of Milla's paralysis is that which denies her 'procreative power'. Thus it is possible to conclude that Van Niekerk denies Milla access to the universality associated with the grotesque, through the way in which she represents the woman's habitation of her ageing and paralysed body. However, while Milla might not be able to express her feelings to Agaat, they become evident, as suggested earlier, through the self-conscious artifice of the novel. The reader is privy to Milla's bittersweet longing for reconciliation, while Agaat is not. In light of the above section on Bakhtin, the grotesque signification of Milla's ageing body can thus be said to allow the reader to understand the potential for renewal and rebirth inherent in her death, even though this regeneration becomes more complex and problematic in the lived experience of the characters.

As has been alluded to above, Milla's lack of political awareness can be seen throughout the novel, and may be said to shape the ways in which she experiences her older age. This is in

contrast to Mrs Curren, who gains access to the universality associated with the grotesque through her active engagement with Vercueil and through her awareness of how her reality is informed by political considerations. The only date Van Niekerk inserts in the poetic sequences that chart Milla's consciousness is that her discovery of her illness occurs in 1994. While the conflation of the onset of her illness with the year that marks political transformation could indicate that we should additionally relate her death to the death of the previous political regime, Van Niekerk does not foreground the association between Milla's body and body politics as extensively or explicitly as Coetzee does with Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*. More significantly, and unlike Coetzee, she does not inscribe her representation of this tenuous connection with the power of redemption and positive change. The description of Mrs Curren's grotesque body as associated with ideas of change and transformation endows her with agency and allows for personal growth, whereas the ways in which Milla's body could be read as grotesque deny the cosmic and universal element of the representation that would have made change and transformation possible.

This ambivalence towards political issues can be seen in Van Niekerk's depiction of Milla's political awareness in her youth and middle age. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren moves from being relatively ignorant of politics and current affairs to recognising her need for an awareness of these issues, and as a result experiences political matters first hand. In contrast, Milla does not display any significant political awareness in *Agaat*, and thus does not recognise a need to develop such awareness, as will be demonstrated below. In response to Beatrice's warnings about how her taking in the coloured child will look to the community in general, and to the Broederbond in particular, Milla tells the other woman that she 'votes Nationalist

but [is] not ashamed to object in public to such skulduggery' (Van Niekerk:639). However, her actions contradict this and her ambivalent attitude towards politics can be seen throughout the novel. For example, when she gives Agaat an old swimming costume, she hopes that the child will swim 'at a time and place where she won't offend because the beach is for whites only' (314). In fact, she articulates an awareness that she will most probably never dare to swim and then placates herself by thinking that she has 'at least given her the opportunity to enjoy herself' (314). She recognises that Agaat should have an opportunity to enjoy herself, and considers that the child will probably not be able to make use of this opportunity, but does not take into account the moral and political implications of her giving Agaat a swimming costume that she will not be able to use and enjoy. Similarly, when Agaat embroiders a christening robe for Jakkie and bakes cakes for the dominee in hopes of being allowed to carry Jakkie into the church for his christening, Milla does not want to tell her that it is 'totally out of the question' because of 'all the trouble [Agaat's] gone to' (220). Because of Milla's forcing Agaat to be christened, the young girl believes that she is a 'baptised child of the Lord' (220) but Milla feels ashamed when Agaat sings a hymn with the dominee 'because coloureds don't sing with white people in the sitting room' (221). She wants the child to know the value of religion, but does not consider the political implications of mixed-race worship. Milla decides to take Agaat to the circus to console her for Jak's tearing up her pictures and destroying her insect collections, but does not take into consideration that Agaat would need a coloured ticket while she and Jak would use white tickets. As a result, as is discussed earlier, she is forced to stay outside the tent and watch the show by the shadows cast on it, while Milla and her husband sit in the audience. Again, she wants to provide her foster daughter with enjoyment and consolation but does not consider the political implications that such an excursion would entail. In fact, the very act of Milla initially deciding

to rescue Agaat and take her home is inscribed with political ambivalence. Her ignorance of political matters means that she has no idea of the implications involved in such a decision. Furthermore, her subsequent relegation of Agaat to the backroom displays the same political ambivalence. Her initial decision to move the child into the backroom is not narrated in the novel at all; instead, the text focuses on the extensive practical arrangements of the move. This could indicate an attempt by Milla to absolve herself of the responsibility and consequences these decisions entail. For her, the domestic subsumes the political. She does not recognise the ideologies that govern her way of thought or her actions, and, instead thinks only in terms of swimming costumes, sewing machines and the practicalities of getting Agaat's backroom ready.

In fact, (aside from Jakkie's political tirade that Milla overhears) Jak makes the only overt references over the course of the narrative to political events. Furthermore, he recognises the political implications of Agaat's position, while Milla does not. While Milla focuses on the domestic details of organising a light for Agaat's backroom, Jak says 'it's the first time he's heard of a skivvy's room with electricity is this [her] interpretation of the Light we're supposed to bring to the Southern Tip of Africa' (94). Again, when Milla questions whether she has done enough to prepare the room, Jak points out that the other workers will get jealous of the young girl's privileges and says that they 'don't want to prepare a Sharpeville' (72) for themselves in the Overberg. In describing Milla and Agaat's relationship, he refers to them as 'Mother Smother and Maid Overpaid' and as the 'silenced minority, the last domestic trench, the aborted revolution' (546). When Milla wants to give Agaat a sewing machine to console her for Jakkie's being away at school, Jak replies that 'a sewing machine

won't solve the problem it's just like a chamber in parliament before you know it they want to pass laws' (389). Significantly, Milla makes the comment that Agaat is not 'them', to which Jak replies that she is not 'us' either (389). While she recognises that because of her interference in her life Agaat cannot be associated with coloured people, she does not realise that the young woman will also never be able to be associated with white people either. As a result, it is possible to conclude that the political position of Milla's youth and middle age in the novel is one of ambivalence. Furthermore, this ambivalent position is reinforced by her ignorance of it. The subsumed political implications of her actions enact themselves in the domestic sphere.

Irma du Plessis (2010: 175) investigates Milla's initial encounter with Agaat and attempts to give an explanation for her reasons for taking the girl and claiming her as her own child. This could, according to Du Plessis, be attributed to the 'ggggg' (Van Niekerk:657) sound made by Agaat as awakening recognition of herself in Milla: she recognises her own powerlessness and helplessness in the child, and is moved to action as a result. To elaborate on Du Plessis's discussion: immediately after being filled with 'sorrow and pity' (657) by the sound, Milla claims ownership over it by thinking that it is 'a sound that belonged to' (657) her. While, as mentioned earlier, her decision to relegate Agaat to the backroom is not narrated, the ways in which she attempts to justify this decision in her diary entries provide a clue as to her motivation. She tells herself that it is 'God's great providence' (36), that it is 'preordained' (53), that 'everything is as it should be' and that 'it's the right thing to do for everyone's sake' (36). She explains that the situation with Jak is 'better now that [she's] doing something about the matter [of Agaat]' (36), and that doing 'more would be wrong' (72). In her

justifications, she appeals to the authority of religion, to the stability of social order, and to the dominance of patriarchal influence. In effect, she is capitulating to the forces she initially countered in her decision to take Aagaat. However, throughout the novel, it is implied that her primary reason for relegating Aagaat to the backroom has to do with her own pregnancy. She views her pregnancy as a 'reward' for 'everything [she'd] had to endure [...] everything that [she'd] undertaken' (108). It transforms her body from something 'always inadequate, always inferior' to something 'too much, too full' (108). She feels that a position of biological motherhood would endow her with the power and authority she previously lacks. It is significant, as will be elaborated on later, that the formation of this fulfilment is expressed in corporeal terms. Because of this, her moment of recognition with Aagaat, as marked by the 'ggggg' (657) sound, becomes problematic in this new construction of her identity, as it now serves as a reminder of her past powerlessness, inferiority and lack. By placing Aagaat in what she now views as her rightful place in the political and social order, Milla is erasing the evidence of her own previous inadequacy.

The next consideration concerns how Van Niekerk represents Milla's political awareness in her old age, and whether this awareness has moved away from the ambivalence that characterises her earlier life. It may be possible to argue that her writing in her will that '*their share as earlier to sow reverts to the okkenels*' (423, italics in original) indicates an awareness of the damage caused by her taking away the share crop of the families of the farm labourers and signifies an attempt to redress this. However, the matter of her leaving the farm to Aagaat along with '*the money from furniture cattle and yard sales and savings of the last seven years*' and a '*hundred thousand rand plus extensively enlarged personal nursing fee*' (423,

italics in original) is more complicated, as the magnitude of what it attempts to redress stretches beyond the capacities of monetary obligation, despite its allusion to land restitution. This is because the damage done to Agaat (unlike the damage done to the Okkenels) is enacted on the personal sphere of the domestic. If money will not suffice, the question of what Milla can do to redress this damage remains. The first condition necessary for restitution is an awareness that restitution needs to occur. This implies that she needs to be aware of the damage she has done unto Agaat.

This awareness can be seen in Milla's saying of her former foster daughter (215):

Poor Agaat. What has my life been? What has her life been? How can I ever reward her for daring to come this far with me here on Grootmoedersdrift? How does one compensate somebody for the fact that she allowed herself to be taken away and taken in and then cast out again? And to be made and unmade and remade? Not that she had a choice. I even gave her another name.

These admissions signify her awareness of the fact that she previously regarded Agaat's life as belonging to her, as well as her recognition that her actions denied Agaat any agency or authority. Her referring to the fact that she 'made and unmade and remade' Agaat points to the way in which she used Agaat to her own benefit when it suited her, only to discard the child when her needs changed. This awareness can further be seen in her saying, 'Oh, my little Agaat, 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). The use of the words 'appropriated', 'caught' and 'locked up' connotes the violence associated with ownership, and relates to Milla's original act of taking Agaat. These words highlights the morally ambiguous nature of Milla's act, and signifies her awareness that her own motives could be regarded as questionable, and may, in fact, be likened to a personal crime. The fact that Milla 'forsook' Agaat, 'pushed [her] away', was not able to 'captur[e]' her essence, and did not 'unlock[...]' her relates to her subsequent abandonment of Agaat. The similar diction used in describing these two acts suggests that both could be read as morally ambiguous and problematic. Curiously, in the next part of this passage, Milla addresses Agaat directly, and asks 'Why did I not keep you as I found you? What made me abduct you over the pass? What made me steal you from beyond the rugged mountains?' (540). It is significant that these questions concern Milla's first crime of taking Agaat, and not her second crime of abandoning her, and that she does not question this abandonment. This could imply that Milla considers the first crime to be more serious than the second, but it could also imply that she considers the second crime so serious that she dare not contemplate its consequences.

It is now necessary to shift the focus of this dynamic back to its representation in Milla's old age in order to examine the efficacy of her attempts to redress the violence she perpetuated on Agaat. She clearly expresses the reversal in the relationship between her current position of powerlessness and Agaat's previous condition of powerlessness through saying, 'Barely alive and I her source of life. /Now it's the other way round./ Me dying and she to accompany me' (435). This reversal of power has implications for both the way in which Milla views Agaat and for the way in which Agaat views Milla. Milla explains that Agaat 'would sponsor [Milla's]

will of [her] own to the end of all time' (213). She suspects that this is because 'only when she's brought [Milla] to that will she have something to subjugate' (394) and that '[p]erhaps [Milla's] sustaining her with [her] dependence' (396). Thus, it is only through 'invest[ing] [Milla] with language' that Agaat can 'goad' her 'with' (436) language. This is similar to the way in which Milla initially invested Agaat with language, and could only have abandoned her after having gained her trust. As a result it is highly significant that Agaat only invents the alphabet chart method of communication at this late point in the novel when Milla has already experienced a prolonged period of helplessness and vulnerability.

Milla provides an indication of her uncertainty as to whether the present is more important than the past in asking, 'who's going to give in first? On the facts of the past? Or does our assignment lie here in this present?' (435). This implies that even though the truth of the past is unalterable and even though this past governs her present relationship with Agaat, the present is still informed by something that has 'nothing to do with the truth' and that lies '[b]eyond the facts' (434). This relates to Milla's comment that '[w]ords strain, crack and sometimes break' (435), showing that because she is now able to do more than blink a response to Agaat's simple, practical questions with '[y]es or no' (435), she is subject to a vast plethora of shades of her own meaning. Because their method of communication now allows for more complexity, she is forced to account for the actions of her past, implying that potential miscommunication and misunderstanding are possibilities. Because of this, her 'language feels like a brutal instrument with which [she's] torturing' (428) herself. However, she expresses the impossibility of neat resolutions and easy answers through questioning, 'who'd want to bluff at the end? That everything is in order? Forgive and forget and depart in

peace?’ (435). She explains that ‘[i]t would be too easy’ for Agaat ‘to forgive’ her and that ‘it would solve nothing’ (439). However, neither would taking revenge on Milla satisfy Agaat as ‘avenging yourself on a helpless victim is not interesting’ (439). This relates to the way in which their present relationship has become more complicated than being defined by simply asking and receiving forgiveness for what occurred in the past, and instead revolves around the ways in which the past has informed the dynamic of their present relationship.

If neither Agaat’s forgiveness nor her vengeance will suffice, the question remains of how, and indeed whether, Milla is able to redress the harm she caused the other woman. She does recognise that she is being given ‘a last chance’ (438). The text does not specify precisely what Milla means by the idea of a last chance, but the textual preoccupation of forging a connection with her former foster daughter in this section provides a clue as to what she could mean, as does her question of ‘[h]ow [she] can [...] help’ (439) Agaat. The implication is that this ‘last chance’ (438) of Milla’s is only viable when the structured order of truth and facts can be discarded in order for her to forge a connection with Agaat. While the novel here represents the inability of words to bridge the gap between the two women, the self-conscious artifice of the text in this section, as will be elaborated on below, demonstrates this connection on a textual level, reinforcing my argument about the centrality of textuality in Van Niekerk’s creation of meaning in *Agaat*.

This can be seen in a variety of instances. Firstly, Agaat begins to revert to talking ‘on an inhalation’ (441). This is something that Milla attempts to teach the young girl not to do in

her childhood, and as a result, conjures up their past dynamic of being connected through Agaat's 'ggggg' (657) sound. It is at this point important to note that here Agaat has begun reading 'the third parcel' of diaries about 'her first life on Grootmoedersdrift' (435), reinforcing the reference to their initial moment of recognition. Secondly, when Agaat says that she is 'cutting [her] own throat now' (435) through providing Milla with the opportunity to communicate through the alphabet charts, Milla questions 'whose throat is it really' (435) as it is her 'spelt-out words that [Agaat] has to pronounce' for her and as it is her 'sentences that [Agaat] has to complete aloud' (435) for her. This serves as a textual connection between the two women that is further strengthened through its preoccupation with the politicization of language and the ownership of meaning. Milla protests against this transfer of the ownership of her meaning to Agaat through telling her not to 'put words into [her] mouth' (436) and not to 'impose the wrong stress, wrong nuances' (436) on her. Agaat too resists this connection through evading Milla's questions. Their hindering the forging of this connection again highlights the manner in which the connection between them is made more problematic in any realm aside from the realm of textual interpretation made possible by the artifice of the novel.

Thirdly, the way in which this connection only functions through textual interpretation can be seen in Agaat's telling Milla that she herself is 'not made of glass' (441) while washing Milla 'gently, as if she were afraid [Milla] would break' (441). Milla associates Agaat's saying this with the transparency of glass, as she says that Agaat knows that she 'can read her thoughts and express them too' (441). However, the artifice of the novel illuminates the fact that both women are described in diction associated with glass, and that this serves as a connection

between them, despite the ways in which they resist this connection through problematising the question of the ownership of meaning. Fourthly, despite wanting to explain ‘the dynamic between’ (442) them, Milla instead begins ‘casting aspersions upon’ (442) Agaat, as she explains that if she ‘can anger her, then [she] can get angry [herself]’ and that this ‘would be better than nothing’ (442). Despite her good intentions in purporting to want to understand Agaat, Milla appears to be attempting to anger her, so that she herself can also experience the emotion. If words alone are not enough to forge a connection between the two women, Milla has to resort to relying on Agaat’s reaction to her prefabricated narrative of accusation. Again, the source of this connection can be found in the artifice of the novel and in the textual interpretation of the reader, and not in the words available to the characters.

Fifthly, Agaat’s response to Milla’s calling her an arsonist is to present her with a vase of flowers. Here, Milla imagines Jak’s referring to it as ‘[s]cenes from coming attractions’ (442). This already situates this gesture in textuality through its self-conscious reference to the artifice associated with film. Milla comments that the vase ‘could still be used at [her] funeral’ (442) and notices ‘under the base [...] a few large exuberant bronze leaves of coleus, the plant we call fire-on-the-mountain’ (442). As a result, this serves as Agaat’s reminder to Milla of her impending death, which implies disconnection rather than connection between them. However, it also connects Milla’s impending death to her accusing Agaat of arson. In the same way that Agaat cannot share Milla’s death, Milla cannot share or understand Agaat’s previous act of defiance. Additionally, this is the vase that Milla breaks in a fight with Jak and that Agaat fixes. As a result, the vase also serves as Agaat’s reminder to the other woman of the ways in which she kept her secrets and attempted to protect her from harm. Thus the

way in which this gesture creates a connection between them relies on the artifice of the novel and the textual interpretation by the reader rather than on a connection between the characters forged from the words they themselves speak. However, Van Niekerk disrupts the unity of this representation through foregrounding Milla's age as that which renders the communication of this connection in words problematic. When Milla attempts to convey to Agaat in words that she has understood the message, Agaat pretends not to understand. Milla's interpretation of the message in *this* is that if she is 'trying to be difficult [...] on her deathbed' Agaat will 'pretend to think [she's] senile' (443). Here, Agaat could be seen as making use of a common stereotype regarding the elderly to hinder the formation of a connection between them. The implication is that words will not suffice in the communication of this connection, and that if Milla resorts to words, she makes herself vulnerable to pejorative discourses regarding the elderly. It is necessary to note that the representation of their communication from this point forward in the text is depicted through Milla's literally spelt-out words. This represents the way in which words themselves are torn apart and robbed of meaning, as their visual representation as spelt-out entities ruptures the unity of the text and forces the reader to interpret the meaning of what is being conveyed in the same way that Milla communicates her message and Agaat receives the message. As a result, this destroys the illusion of the words of the text as being sufficient to convey Van Niekerk's intention in representing a connection between the two women, and highlights the fact that an alternative method of reading is needed in order to interpret and understand this connection.

The sixth instance that marks this connection in textual terms can be found in Agaat's responding to Milla's questions with recitations from the *Farmer's Handbook* and from the embroidery book, texts that originally form part of Milla's dominant narrative of asserting power and control. Agaat's appropriation of the instructive words of these texts at this point in response to Milla's intimate questions distorts the original meaning of the words and forces the reader to re-evaluate the significance of what is being said. It is significant regarding my argument that her responses originate from other texts, as this again implies that any ordinary words said between them will not suffice in forging a connection between them, but that instead this connection can only come about as a result of textual interpretation. At this point, the possible connection between them begins to be depicted as something dangerous. Through taking Milla's words and reciting them back at her out of context, Agaat is simultaneously forging a connection with her and instructing her in the extent of the harm she caused her. This can be seen from the fact that these texts served as Milla's tools in the process of her reconstructing Agaat's identity from adopted foster-daughter to maid and servant. The danger of this connection is textually reinforced through Agaat's waving around 'Japie' (444), the feather duster with which Milla used to hit her when she punished her as a child. This danger intrudes on the text through Agaat's revelation that it was her hand that Milla out of self-preoccupation and ignorance forces her to slaughter, and additionally forgets on the day that it is Agaat's birthday. Milla is initially shocked and does not want to believe that she had in fact done this. Agaat's reaction to this is to stuff 'the knuckle of her small hand into her mouth as if she wanted to push in a stopper so that nothing more can come out of there' (446). This act of vulnerability is reminiscent of the way in which Agaat acts after Milla initially rescues her, and through its helplessness serves as a textual reminder of their first moment of recognition brought about by Agaat's 'ggggg' (657)

sound. The reference to this moment of recognition simultaneously mirrors their current attempts to reach each other, but also serves to act as a stark contrast to these attempts, as it highlights the painful difficulties involved in overcoming the past to forge a connection in the present. Significantly, after this present tense sequence the chronology of the diary entries shifts and returns to 1953, and the entries detail the two women's initial time together. This shift reinforces the discrepancy between the current situation and Milla's past intentions, as the reader becomes privy to her initial tenderness and love for Agaat. Again, the complexities of this cannot be conveyed between Milla and Agaat in words alone. It is an interpretation only available to the reader.

However, after realising that she forced Agaat to slaughter her own hansom, Milla ignores 'the entreaty in [Agaat's] eyes' (446) and swiftly continues in her accusations of her. The violent intrusion of Agaat's revelation marks a shift in the tenor of their interaction in the section from this point forward, and shapes the way in which the seventh instance of their textual connection is represented. Here, Milla's spelt-out words become replaced by Agaat's whispering Milla's thoughts into her ear. This reversal and appropriation of meaning signify the uncertainty and chaos into which the text descends. It is no longer possible to attribute words to either Milla or Agaat. Instead, the reader has to interpret what is being said in the liminal space between them as belonging possibly to either or neither or both of them. The textual unity of their exchange is destroyed and meaning is instead shifted and elided, relying on the interpretation of the reader rather than on the characters' intention of communication. While this does mark the beginning of a possible connection between the two women, it simultaneously highlights the instability and impermanence of such a

connection, as the suspension of disbelief required of the reader is not something that is or can be sustained throughout the remainder of the novel. This is because of the fact that it is impossible for the reader to verify whether Milla is imagining what Agaat is whispering, as well as whether her whispering the other woman's words in fact accurately reflects Milla's intention. Because all vestiges of realism of the text have temporarily been ruptured in order for this textual connection to be forged, any connection between Milla and Agaat (and by implication any attempt by Milla to atone for the damage she caused Agaat) is reliant on a textual strategy of interpretation, rather than what is possible in a commonplace exchange of words between them. It is significant that while such an interpretation does allow for a connection to be forged between the two women, its reliance on textual interpretation wrests the formation of this connection from Milla's grasp, and situates it as something that is instead created because of the artifice of the novel, undermining the agency granted to Milla in her old age.

In order to understand how Van Niekerk represents this, it is necessary to read this present tense sequence in relation to the next present tense sequence. Whereas in the present tense sequence examined above Milla wants to talk and to explain the dynamic between her and Agaat, she now wonders '[h]ow to make peace with one eye, an unfathomable interpreter and the alphabet' (488). It is curious to note that she refers to Agaat as an 'interpreter' at this point, rather than the person with whom she needs to make peace. This points to the difficulty of Agaat's position: she is both the interpreter and the recipient of the peace Milla wishes to create. This is in direct contrast to Milla's previously questioning the value of peace through asking 'who'd want to bluff at the end? That everything is in order? Forgive and

forget and depart in peace?’ (435) and seems to imply that something has changed between the two women from the previous section to this one. It could be possible to argue that what has changed between them is the formation of the possibility of a connection in the previous section. However, it could also be argued that Milla is realising the impossibility of such a connection, and feels the need to ‘bluff’ instead. Significantly, she asks, ‘Can I make [peace] with her?’ (488). Instead of questioning whether peace is possible, this questions Milla’s own ability to formulate it.

She suggests a possibility for how this can be achieved through stating that they ‘could make a flower garden’ (488). However, because of Milla’s condition of ageing and paralysis, this is almost an absurd impossibility. The creation of any such garden would have to be enacted in metaphoric rather than literal terms. She describes how Agaat ‘dug up a photo’ of them from when ‘the trellising for the rambling roses was put up’ (488). Her use of the word ‘dug’ is particularly significant, as it connotes gardening, and seems to imply that Agaat’s act of retrieving the photograph could in itself be read as contributing to their metaphorically making this flower garden. In the photo, they are ‘standing there amongst the holes and the trenches and the heaps of soil’ but they ‘look as if [they] can already see everything in flower’ (488). The description of this photograph raises interesting points about the conflation of the past and the present, and the ways in which this relates to the possibilities for the future. Firstly, it is significant that Agaat is the one who produces the photograph almost in response to Milla’s idea of their making a flower garden, which in itself is Milla’s idea of how peace could possibly be achieved. This seems to undermine Milla’s agency in conducting any such formation of peace. Secondly, the photograph depicts a moment of process, and not an end

result in itself. As a result, the moment of peace (represented by the blooming of the flowers in the garden) is something that is eternally deferred into the future in the photograph. However, their 'elated' (488) faces suggest that the process as well as the prospect of the garden is sufficient in itself. Thirdly, since a photograph captures a moment from the past, this garden has already been built. This is reinforced through Milla's present observation that she can 'smell the gillyflowers, the wild pinks through the open door' (488). This seems to imply that the idea of peace is not something that is confined to the past, the present or the future, but rather something that derives meaning from the ways in which the past, present and future merge. Additionally, while Milla articulates to herself the idea that a garden could bring them peace, Agaat autonomously produces the photograph. Neither Milla's thought nor Agaat's act has the same meaning in itself; instead, meaning is created on a textual level through the combination of Milla's intention and Agaat's effect. Again, this meaning becomes problematic when viewed in relation to the knowledge available to the characters rather than the interpretation available to the reader: Agaat cannot know the effect her producing the photograph has on Milla, in the same way that Milla cannot know whether Agaat divined her desire to see a concrete reminder of their building a garden. This implies that the artifice of the novel allows for a paradoxical connection to be created between the two women, even if they are not fully privy to understanding this connection.

After questioning whether the 'paradisiacal garden' would 'have to be peace enough' (488) for them, Milla's focus shifts to the 'large hydrangea arrangement' (489) next to her bed. As has previously been discussed, this arrangement is abundant in signification, as it represents Milla's impending death, Milla's accusing Agaat of arson, and Agaat's reaction to the abuse

Milla suffered from Jak. Significantly, these three levels of meaning respectively relate to the future, the present and the past, reinforcing the conflation between these different times that is discussed above. Both the photograph and the scent of the garden from the open door relate to ideas of representation and limitation. The photograph is a mere representation of the past to which Milla, in her present condition of ageing and paralysis, does not have access, while the scent of the flowers comes from a doorway that Milla cannot cross, again because of her physical condition. Even though Milla can see the photograph and can smell the flowers, a barrier exists between her and the peace she wishes to achieve. However, the hydrangea arrangement is something concrete that has intruded upon Milla's immediate space, and to which she does have access. The paragraph in which Milla's focus shifts to the hydrangea arrangement implies her awareness of a correlation between it and herself. After taking note of the flowers, her thoughts immediately turn to herself (489):

Next to me is the large hydrangea arrangement. How long have I been sleeping? Two days? Three? Four? This morning she gave the flowers a look that I know but too well. Past their prime. One day more. Then they have to get out of here. Onto the compost heap. Ready to be dug in.

The similarities between the flowers that are '[p]ast their prime' and Milla, whose one eye has now become frozen and who has lost track of time, are immediately apparent. As a result, she imagines telling Agaat not to 'throw [...] out' their 'blue-purple hydrangeas' as there 'is beauty also in flowers that fade' (489). She articulates the relation between herself and the flowers through imagining telling Agaat, 'Don't throw yourself out, and me neither' (489). If Milla associates the 'paradisiacal garden' (488) with the possibility of peace, and if

the flowers from the garden are representative of both the women, then the implication is that the possibility for peace resides within them. It is significant that the flowers represent the possibility for peace as embodied in Milla and Agaat, as well as the discord and accusations of the novel's previous chapter. Milla's imagining telling Agaat that the 'last hour' of the flowers 'provide[s] stuff for contemplation' (489) simultaneously articulates her assertion of the value of her old age, as well as the value of their shared history. This can be seen in Milla's imagining telling Agaat that it is their 'last flower arrangement with a history' (489) in the room. The implication of this is to enforce the value of their 'project' of 'remembering', 'reading' and 'dying' (212) and to remind Agaat that *she* 'salvaged the vase' (489). However, Milla does not attempt to communicate through blinking to tell Agaat not to throw away the flowers, and instead imagines appealing to Agaat to '[c]ontemplate it for' (489) her. This can be seen in her blinking at Agaat to 'P-R-A-Y' (488) as this is 'the only opening [she] can devise to initiate what [she] want[s] to plead for' (489).

Milla's description of what follows seems to suggest that Agaat does 'contemplate' it. However, her perception of and reaction to what happens imply her inability to stomach or understand the other woman's contemplation of who they are. Agaat 'bare[s] her small crooked shoulder' (491) in front of Milla, and recites from the *Farmer's Handbook* instructions on how to wean lambs from their mothers. The correlation between this and Milla's abandonment of Agaat is immediately apparent. This could also allude to the fact that Agaat is now weaning herself from Milla, in preparation for the older woman's impending death. However, Milla's reaction to this is to close 'the eye that could close' as she 'couldn't look upon the crooked shoulder any longer' (491), indicating her rejection of this gesture. The

previous night Milla hears what seems to be Agaat on the mountain. Significantly, the mountain is previously described as the site of Agaat's unknowable rites. Milla hears 'a muffled exclamation. And then nothing, only the wind, and floating on it a rumour, an image, an intimation of discord, of lamentation, of a beating of the breast' (493). The sounds seem to suggest that Agaat is performing her personal expression of contemplation. The obscurity of what the older woman hears implies that the meaning of Agaat's ritual is something to which neither the reader nor Milla has access. Significantly, the implication is that while Agaat can '[c]ontemplate' (489) their joint meaning, she cannot contemplate it for Milla, as the language of her contemplation is something that Milla can never translate into a language she herself understands. This can also be seen through the fact that Agaat has circled the sixteenth of December on the calendar. Significantly, while this was the Day of the Covenant and while it has become Reconciliation Day after the end of apartheid, this date also marks the first day Milla initially takes Agaat home. It is important that at this point of the novel, Agaat has already begun reading the first packet of diaries, and is thus aware of the significance of the date. Milla's reaction to Agaat's circling the date is to wonder how 'anybody [can] be so deliberate', 'literal' and 'pathetic' (494). Milla reads Agaat's marking of this 'affirmative calendar' (494) as a deliberate attempt by Agaat to preordain the day of her death (as this is indeed the day on which Milla dies) and to force it into coinciding with the day of Agaat's "birth" into her new life. Milla's use of the words 'affirmative calendar' points to the political ramifications of the date, in that the public holiday in the new regime moves from being a celebration of Afrikaner domination to a day 'rename[d] [...] the Day of Reconciliation' due to the 'grace' and 'exquisite tact' of 'the Mandela government' (Van Vuuren, 2010:104). While Milla can begin to guess at Agaat's intentions in circling the date,

she immediately dismisses it, flattening and covering the nuances that surround the significance of the date.

Agaat again rolls 'up [her] sleeve in front of [Milla]' (Van Niekerk:495). Milla describes her arm as a 'crowbar', a 'length of bent copper tubing', and a 'brazen snake in the desert' (495). Despite the fact that Milla purports not to understand the other woman's need for 'exposure all the time' (495) and that she also cannot interpret what Agaat wants her arm to signify, she still questions what she is 'supposed to see that' (495) she has not seen already. She states that she 'brought [Agaat] up' and that it is 'the same arm that made [her] pity [Agaat] in the first instance' (495). She fails to recognise the crucial fact that after her abandonment of her, Agaat's arm comes to represent something else entirely. She does not realise that Agaat is attempting to communicate to her not the original significance of her arm, but rather the meaning that Milla's abandonment of her created. This can be seen in the prayer that Agaat prays at the conclusion of the chapter (496):

Lord God in heaven, comes her voice.
Hear me!
Foot-rot!
Stinking smut!
She dips her head, the white cap casts a splash against the mirror.
Pip!
Roup!
Glanders!
Greasy heel!
Contagious abortion!
Waterpepper knotweed!
Who do I have other than you? Don't go away from me! Don't leave
me! What would I ever do without you, with my words?
I'm looking for the suitcase!

Have mercy on me!
For thy Name's sake.
Amen.

Significantly, she here distorts the original form of prayer and supplements it with her own meaning. Shifting between accusing Milla and pleading with her not to die, Agaat in the prayer references several diseases contracted by animals: “pip” is a disease that calcifies the tongues of birds, “roup” is a disease that affects the eyes of birds, and “glanders” is an equine lung disease. This may be related to the fact that Milla has lost the use of her tongue, and will soon lose the use of her eyes, as well as to the episode in which she imagines Agaat’s ‘lung’ merging with her feet (Van Niekerk:370). ‘Waterpepper knotweed’ is a type of plant used to treat diseases in humans, but it is, however, poisonous to cattle, which may be related to the Grootmoedersdrift cows contracting botulism. While it may be possible to attempt to unravel more of this dense and complex section, the most important point is that the symbolism of Agaat’s prayer is highly personal and unfathomable. While Milla wants to hear her pray in order to divine what she is thinking, the other woman’s prayer takes a form of free-association so radical and arcane in meaning that Milla is still left merely conjecturing about what occupies Agaat’s mental space. As a result, while Agaat instinctively does respond to Milla’s plea to contemplate the last hours of the flowers and of Milla, the language in which she does this is something to which Milla cannot have access. This only becomes possible because of the self-conscious artifice of the novel, which elucidates the textual formation of this possibility in the realm of narrative, rather than the realm in which the characters exist.

The overriding conclusion we can draw from Van Niekerk's representation of Milla's old age is that it is depicted as something that is neither monolithic nor simple. Throughout the novel, her condition of paralysis acts as a leash that reins in the limits of possibility afforded her, and shapes the way in which we read her old age. Because Motor Neuron Disease is not a condition limited to the elderly, her experience of her old age can be considered unique and highly individual: instead of gradually slipping into the helplessness of old age, this state is rapidly and violently thrust upon her. Because of this, the way in which we read her experience of time and space, as well as how we interpret her perception of her body and her (lack of) ability to act autonomously and communicate effectively, is repeatedly grounded in her physical immobility. However, it is dangerously reductionist to limit any interpretation of her ageing subjectivity to an irreducible corporeality. Indeed, the structural organisation of the novel seems to resist such a physical reading (while paradoxically using it as a starting point): Milla's physical condition forces her to find new ways in which to embody herself and occupy her space. The different modes of consciousness of which the novel is comprised afford her a temporary escape from the limitations of her paralysis. As her consciousness flits between reminiscences, sensory perceptions, focalised recollections, hallucinations and moments of wishful imaginings, she transcends the bounds of the physical, and gains an almost omnipotently authorial mobility. The jumbled chronology of the novel additionally reinforces this: *because* she is trapped inside her own body, her experience of time is wrested from linear sequentiality and is instead shaped according to the dictates demanded by her internal need for a new kind of temporal organisation prior to her death. Indeed, her relation to the physical world around her is no longer expressed in conventional terms. Instead of inscribing the land with meaning through farming it or being subject to the force of the land (as suggested through her earlier vulnerability in the face of drought and poor soil

conditions), her body merges with the land in a more cosmic manner. Here, Van Niekerk is extremely careful to prevent this from being represented in a similar way to the representation in the conventional *plaasroman* of the relationship between the farmer and the land: Milla's relation to the land does not signify patriarchal and nationalist power. Instead, it has darker and more sinister implications, and speaks of the political as well as personal culpability she faces in her old age. Because of this, while her connection to the land allows her to move beyond the confines of her ageing and paralysed body, it simultaneously acts as a reminder of the ways in which her earlier claim over the land has become tenuous and problematic. Her culpability is epitomised in her relationship with Agaat. In fact, it is through this relationship that Van Niekerk most poignantly expresses the tensions between Milla's physical immobility and the novel's compulsion not to read her only in relation to her paralysis. While Milla is the focaliser of the narrative of the novel, Agaat acts as focaliser to Milla's narrative within the novel: it is because of Agaat's position of power over her in her old age that Milla is forced to revisit and re-evaluate her previous position of power over Agaat. However, Van Niekerk is again careful not to present this in overly simplistic terms. Not only is the possibility of "making peace" represented as insufficient and almost impossible, but Milla's paralysis renders the expression of this extremely problematic. Ironically, it is Milla's old age that allows Agaat to force her into a position of realising the need for restitution, while it is her paralysis that complicates the possibility of this ever occurring. It is only through the interpretation of the novel by the reader that the possibility of a connection between the two women in Milla's old age ever materialises. However, while the characters can neither explicitly make peace nor forge a connection, the novel resists a reading in which the reversal of power between them can be seen in light of the new (representing Agaat) replacing the old (representing Milla) in the narrative of

Grootmoedersdrift. This is because the novel's highly domesticated interpretation of the political does not depict this reversal of power as signifying simplistic ideas of loss and gain, of culpability and forgiveness, or of present political transformation as atoning for the crimes of history. Because of this, the impossibility of positing Milla as being either obsolete in relation to the ideologies of newness surrounding political transformation or as embracing these ideologies, reflects the undeniable state of liminality that governs her experience as an ageing subject on the threshold of the truth and reconciliation demanded by ideologies surrounding the end of apartheid and the beginning of democratic governance.

‘Let us live our degenerate old age to the hilt’: *Body Bereft*, language and unruly older bodies

While both *Age of Iron* and *Agaat* are subjective accounts of how old age is experienced within the time and place of specific socio-political contexts, the thematic concern of Antjie Krog’s collection of poems, *Body Bereft*, centres on menopause as marking the onset of old age and its accompanying physical degeneration. The speaking subject in this text is situated at the other end of the spectrum of old age from where Mrs Curren and Milla are located, namely at its beginning, rather than at its advanced stages. This demands a more nuanced understanding of the definition of old age, and subverts the notion of old age as a monolithic structure comprising homogeneously aged subjects. Instead, it advances the idea of old age as consisting of different stages that mark a process of becoming, rather than a pre-existing condition in which the subject finds himself or herself. For the purposes of this study, I am very conscious of the danger involved in conflating menopause with old age. Krog undoubtedly writes from a menopausal perspective in *Body Bereft* rather than from the perspective of deep old age, as is evidenced both by her chronological age at the publication of the collection⁷, and by various textual examples such as ‘seven menopausal sonnets’, which is the title of a sonnet sequence in the collection. However, she is deeply and painfully aware that she is ‘on the brink of an abyss’ (2006:12) and writes of the difficulty involved in attempting ‘to eke out/ the vocabulary of *old age*’ (my emphasis). It becomes clear that she views the menopausal body as an ‘ageing body’ (2006:20), and in doing so deliberately writes from this perspective.

⁷Krog was 54 years old at the publication of *Body Bereft* and *Verweerskrif* in 2006.

Krog focuses intensively on the role played by the body in the experience of older age, as this text foregrounds the body itself as the defining characteristic of the experience of ageing, and offers alternative modes of the representation of bodily identity in older age. Through detailing the bodily changes brought about by older age, the collection presents the body as a metaphor and a site for the loss, uncertainty and fear experienced by the speaking subject of the poems. Both *Age of Iron* and *Agaat* describe experiences of old age that are accompanied by sickness and physical disability. The same partially applies to *Body Bereft*, although to a lesser extent. In 'softsift of the hourglass' the speaking subject writes about the after-effects of a mild stroke, and in 'Four seasonal observations of Table Mountain', she describes the fear caused by what is eventually discovered to be a benign tumour. However, this subject does not undergo the extreme disability and immobility that mark both Mrs Curren's and Milla's experiences of old age. This means that the poems open up a wider range of thematic nuances that detail the seemingly ordinary and often-banal everyday reality of the process of ageing. The description of this experience is further portrayed as being gendered: the poems suggest that Krog is acutely aware of how the intersection between gender and older age shapes her experience of senescence.

As with both *Age of Iron* and *Agaat*, the depiction of the ageing body in *Body Bereft* may usefully be read in terms of Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject. Krog explicitly foregrounds her awareness of her role as a writer, as well as a reader, of texts. These allusions situate old age within a wider cultural discourse and explicitly attempt to legitimise it as a subject that

has literary value. While *Age of Iron* was written in English, and *Agaat* was translated into English after its Afrikaans publication, *Body Bereft* was released at the same time as its Afrikaans counterpart, *Verweerskrif*. In an interview with Ileana Dimitriu (2008:136), Krog explains that she views translation in relation to ‘the political changes of the 1990s’. For her, translation in the post-apartheid era ‘enables people to live together and have access to one another’ (147). Because of this, her decision to publish *Body Bereft* and *Verweerskrif* simultaneously should be read as politically motivated. Furthermore, it is necessary to interpret the depiction of ageing in *Body Bereft* in relation to this political motivation, as such an interpretation locates Krog’s depiction of old age within the specificity of the post-apartheid South African cultural, literary and socio-political landscape. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the potential role of translation in the post-apartheid South African context in creating what Krog (2006:29) refers to as ‘the vocabulary of old age’. Because of this, while this chapter will focus on *Body Bereft*, I will be using *Verweerskrif* as a point of reference throughout my analysis in order to detail how the shifts in language contribute to the creation of meaning, and how these allow Krog to politicize her depiction of the ageing experience⁸.

The covers of *Body Bereft* and *Verweerskrif* show a photograph by David Goldblatt of the naked torso of an elderly woman with her right arm covering her left nipple, and her right breast exposed. Krog approached Goldblatt with the request to capture visually for a cover photograph the thematic concerns of the text. The reproduction of the same photograph on both the English and Afrikaans texts strengthens the connection between the translated texts,

⁸ Most of the poems in *Body Bereft* were translated from Afrikaans by Krog herself, aside from ‘manifesta of a grandma’ and ‘Four seasonal observations of Table Mountain’, which were done by Andries Wessels, and ‘it might have been a jellytot’ which was done by Gus Ferguson.

indicating that they need to be considered in relation to each other. Additionally, this suggests that another mode of translation is at work – translation from the literary to the visual medium. As expressed by Helize van Vuuren (2009:226), this photograph with its decapitated and anonymous subject ‘suggests the taboo and transgression which materialises in the rest of the collection’ and which include such phenomena as ‘menopausal symptoms’ and the ‘physical decay of the ageing female body’. By using the same photograph of the ageing female body on the covers of both texts, Krog posits the body as a central component in understanding the experience of ageing. However, the titles of the texts are not direct translations of each other – *Body Bereft* suggests a body in a state of loss and mourning, while the word ‘verweerskrif’ refers both to a written defence and a state of decay. In light of this, the title *Verweerskrif* indicates that the defence against this position of vulnerability in older age can be found in the act of writing, as well as in reading, and in the text itself. Thus, the separate titles together address the main concerns of the collections – namely, the body and language. The translation of the texts’ thematic concerns into a visual medium, and then the duplication of this image across the bounds of linguistic translation, allow Krog to centralise translation itself as that which provides coherent meaning to the ageing experience in the South African context.

Adèle Nel considers the peritextual⁹ implications of the photograph in relation to the collection of poems. She explains that the facelessness of the subject of the photograph highlights both the universality of her female identity and the alienation and fragmentation of

⁹ The ‘peritext’ of a literary work refers to the meaning of the text in relation to elements that would normally be considered extraneous to it: for example, the book as a physical object, the cover of the work, what is said on the dust jackets and the information provided on the back-cover.

this identity (2008:56). My reading of this fragmentation of the subject's female identity elaborates on Nel's: while the subject of the photograph is indeed faceless, the photograph itself stretches over the back-cover of the book, as well as into the front inner dust-jacket flap, on which the significance of Krog's poetic oeuvre is discussed. This means that when the reader stretches the book out and pulls open the flap, partial unity is restored to the subject of the photograph. The photograph thus regains coherence of meaning through its placement on the cover of a book, again emphasising both the necessity of translation (the movement from photograph to book cover) in depicting a coherent experience of ageing, and the ways in which language (specifically writing, as well as reading) has the power to act as a defence against the fragmentation caused by the ageing experience. As a result, the information on Krog's poetic oeuvre becomes even more significant: her identity as a poet is that which can defend her against the alienating experience depicted by the decapitated subject of the photograph, in the same way that the reader of the text can restore meaning through the physical act of opening up the book itself. However, despite this partial restoration of unity, the subject of the photograph remains dissected and fragmented, problematising the issue of whether such a defence against old age is fully viable.

It may be possible to relate both the cover photograph and certain elements of some of the poems in the collection to Kristeva's work on the abject. Reading *Body Bereft* through the lens of abjection is particularly appropriate because of Krog's focus on the body and because of her depiction of the physical signs of ageing as shaping an individual's experience of senescence. As has been discussed previously, the loss of control that occurs as a person grows older (loss of memory, decreased physical mobility, loss of control over bodily

functions), arises from changes that happen in the body. In the collection, Krog illustrates how the previously stable corporeal identity the speaking subject claims as her own changes and mutates. While physical changes take place over the whole life-course, the changes that occur in older age catapult a person into closer proximity to mortality, because of his or her awareness that visible signs of senescence such as grey hairs, wrinkles and mottled veins signify the approach of death in old age (bearing in mind that death comes to young and middle-aged people too). Krog highlights her experience of these bodily changes and her awareness that they signal the inevitability of death throughout *Body Bereft*. This allows her depiction of older age to be likened to a process in which the speaking subject of the poems experiences abjection, since the integrity of her bodily identity threatens to collapse because of the corporeal changes brought about by senescence. The fact that these changes place the individual in closer proximity to death means that she finds herself in an abject position in which death has encroached on life.

What differentiates Krog's representation of senescence from Coetzee's and Van Niekerk's is the explicitness with which she inscribes the abjection associated with the ageing body with the potential to allow for a reconfiguration or a re-imagination of the self. If older age can be likened to an experience in which the subject suffers abjection, the implication is that in addition to being repelled by the breakdown of identity caused by the physical manifestations of ageing, the subject should also experience a sense of summons, in which the experience of abjection allows for a simultaneous affirmation of identity. As previously mentioned, Kathleen Woodward posits that a second 'mirror stage' of identification occurs in later adulthood, when older adults begin to feel disconnected from their mirror image. She

describes this experience as devastating and traumatic, and suggests that it may be ‘part of the process of accommodating death in the aging body’ (Woodward:70). As will be illustrated below, Krog gives voice to this distressing experience in many of her poems. Leni Marshall, however, expands upon Woodward’s ideas and attempts to inscribe this experience (which she terms *méconnaissance*) with positive as well as negative meaning. Marshall (2012:63) explains that the ‘recognised old body does not offer a possibility for transformation, whereas the misrecognised old body, because it can be a thing separate from the social or the lived self, contains the potential for each individual to transform the lived self’. Because of the potential for recreation inherent in the misrecognition of one’s self, it is possible that instead of ‘succumbing to invisibility, one could literally come to a *re-vision* of the lived self’ (2012:63, emphasis in original). Thus, while older age is an experience in which the subject is repelled by its abjection, it also offers the potential for transformation. This potentiality can indeed be seen throughout *Body Bereft*, even though Krog presents it as being ambiguous and problematic, as will be illustrated below.

Kristeva, in ‘Approaching Abjection’, describes the abject as that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ and ‘does not respect borders, positions, rules’ (1982:74), and also ‘attests to the impossibility of clear boundaries’ (1982:73). The cover photograph’s truncated and dissected female figure in its shifting distortion of the traditional portrait form resonates with Kristeva’s description of the abject. Furthermore, the explicit sexualisation of the ageing female body flagrantly disregards what is normally considered the proper thematic content for book cover photographs (especially in the conservative South African literary context). In doing so, it blurs ‘the lines of demarcation or divisions between the proper and the improper’

(Kristeva:73). Its liminal position between the English and Afrikaans texts, as well as its ability both to destroy and create coherent meaning, may be related to Kristeva's description of the abject as being the 'in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (12). She explains that abjection 'involves the paradoxically necessary but impossible desire to transcend corporeality' (72). The photograph encapsulates this desire in its elusive shifting between restoration and fragmentation, ambiguously moving between resigned acceptance and angry rejection of the corporeality and mortality suggested by the ageing body. This can also be seen throughout the poems themselves, suggesting that this ambiguity forms part of how Krog understands and depicts the experience of ageing.

The sense of abjection portrayed by the cover photograph extends to many of the poems in the collection. In these poems, the ageing body is described as 'disintegrating' (2006:20), 'weathering' (2006:14) and 'withering' (2006:69) to convey the abject deformation and dissolution of the boundaries of the body's previously stable identity. In 'when tight is loose' Krog presents us with an unruly ageing body that abjectly disassociates itself from the speaker in the poem (2006:23):

it must have happened gradually, but	1
she feels overcome – suddenly her body	2
is simply loose, as if nothing wants	3
to be firmly tied and trim. for example	4
her teeth, hair, everything down to her	5
pelvic floor is now loose, even her	6
eyes bubble – the left one with its own	7
eccentric jumpiness. here is the upper lip	8
plying the accordion and yesterday when	9

she pointed at something, her upper arm	10
flapped its own new suede purse –	11
her thumbs are crumbling away and refuse	12
to open bottles, taps or masturbate.	13
her stomach lies like a dish in her lap.	14

This wilfully disintegrating body is described as not ‘want[ing]/ to be firmly tied and trim’ (3-4)¹⁰, emphasising the abject split between subjective self and body that Krog depicts as part of her experience of ageing. The poem reinforces this idea of a body in revolt through dissecting the wholly coherent body associated with youth into the fragmented components associated with ageing corporeality. Her left eye ‘bubble[s]’ with ‘its own/ eccentric jumpiness’ (7-9), her ‘upper lip’ (8) plays the ‘accordion’ (9), her ‘upper arm’ (10) becomes a flapping ‘new suede purse’ (11) and her ‘stomach lies like a dish in her lap’ (14). Each body part is described as an isolated entity with its own intentions over which the speaker has no control. Not only are ‘her thumbs [...] crumbling away’ (12) but they also ‘refuse/ to open bottles, taps or masturbate’ (12-13). The placement of the word ‘refuse’ at the end of the line and stanza emphasises how ageing has signified a transfer of power in the split between self and body.

In the Afrikaans version of the poem, ‘as vas los is’ (2006:23), this idea is taken even further through a difference in syntax between it and the English version. The ‘thumbs’ that ‘refuse/ to open bottles, taps or masturbate’ become ‘duime’ wat ‘weier/ om bottels, krane,

¹⁰ In this chapter, the numbers in the brackets after references to sections from the poem indicate line references.

masturbasie oop/ te draai'¹¹. Because of the Afrikaans placement of the verb at the end of a sentence, 'masturbasie' is a noun that is included in the list of items that the thumbs refuse to open. In contrast, English grammar dictates that 'refuse' be followed by an infinitive verb. The noun in the Afrikaans becomes a verb in the English, and 'masturbate' is not included in the list of items that the thumbs cannot open. As a result, in the Afrikaans, even the subject's experience of the act of masturbation becomes objectified into an external manifestation of the ageing body's betrayal and revolt.

This betrayal is further illustrated in the stanzas that follow:

these are blue medallions on her thighs	15
and if she <i>has</i> to look down, she sees	16
her knees shrinking like forgotten	17
prunes in a bowl. her skin is loose from	18
her flesh like a shuddered boiled-milk	19
skin. what should be tight, is loose	20
and what should be loose is very	21
tight, because if she looks left all	22
her shoulders simply have to turn as well;	23
it is last year she saw her haunches last	24
in the <i>Hormone Book</i> by Susan Mare	25
she reads about the wane	26
of oestrogen: the waist thickens and	27
the vagina wall thins and the colon crashes	28
through its own arse. how dare her toe-	29
nails grow so riotous then, thicken so	30
yellowish while she is loosening at the	31
seams and simply falling away?	32

¹¹This translates directly to 'thumbs that refuse to open bottles, taps or masturbation' (my translation).

The use of the word 'dare' in her 'toe-/ nails' that 'dare' to 'grow so riotous' (29) and description of 'the colon' that almost wilfully 'crashes/ through its own arse' (28-29) amplify the way in which her body has betrayed her. Significantly, the 'arse' is described as belonging to the 'colon', and not to the speaker, furthering the abject sense of displacement the speaker feels from her body.

At the start of the quoted section of the poem the body's revolt against the speaking subject shifts into the speaking subject's revolt or revulsion at the ways in which her body is changing: her knees are 'shrinking like forgotten/ prunes' (17-18) and her skin 'is loose from/ her flesh like a shuddered boiled-milk/ skin' (18-19). Kristeva, as previously discussed, cites the skin that forms on top of warm milk as the ultimate example of food loathing and abjection. The visceral reaction that occurs when the thin layer of boiled-milk skin touches one's lips disrupts the division between subject and object. Imogen Tyler (2001:77) explains that one 'function of the skin is that it signifies, as abjection enacts, the capacity of the subject to maintain the distinction between outer and inner, ego and other', which is ruptured by the otherness of the boiled-milk skin (signifying in this poem the unfamiliarity and otherness of the ageing body). According to Jay Prosser (1998:65), skin serves the function of 'individualizing our psychic functioning' and 'making us who we are'. It 'holds each of us together, quite literally, contains us, protects us, keeps us discrete' (Prosser:1998). What happens when 'tight' becomes 'loose' is that the discreteness of the individual begins to be compromised. The body described by Krog in this poem is fragmented into disparate elements that lack coherent meaning. This culminates in her choice of simile that compares her 'skin' to a 'shuddered boiled-milk/ skin' (18-19), conveying the utter sense of alienation

invoked by her experience of ageing. The disintegration of her own body becomes that which is abject, and that which causes her to shudder and recoil.

In the same way that the skin of boiled milk signifies a displacement of identity, the process in which a plum becomes a prune involves regressive deformation. The wholeness and the tightness of the fresh plum disintegrate into the wrinkled, misshapen form of the prune, just as the skin tightly covering her knees in youth changes in older age into skin characterised instead by looseness. Significantly, the English version compares her knees to ‘forgotten prunes’, while the Afrikaans version refers to ‘verlate pruime’ (17):

haar knieë, as sy dan nou af móét kyk	16
krimp soos verlate pruime in	17
‘n bak, haar vel is los van al haar vleis	18

A ‘pruim’ is in fact a “plum”, and not a ‘prune’. The direct translation of a ‘prune’ would be a “pruimedant”. Furthermore, ‘forgotten’ is “vergete”, while ‘verlate’ is “abandoned”¹². However, a similar idiomatic expression exists in both English and Afrikaans: both “n suurpruim’ and ‘an old prune’ refer to an unpleasant, disagreeable person. As Krog (2006:112) explains in her ‘Acknowledgements’, ‘the translation process required creative solutions, which in their turn opened up other possibilities in the poems’. As a result, through translating creatively rather than directly, Krog is able to convey that her body feels both

¹² The words in double quotation marks are my own translations.

‘forgotten’ and ‘abandoned’, and to depict the process of degeneration, rather than simply the end-result.

While most of the poem details the subject’s embodied experience of ageing, the final three stanzas explore the far-reaching effects of this corporeal disintegration in relation to the rest of the subject’s lived reality:

since	32
when has her blood impulse changed	33
from ‘fuck off’ to ‘careful now’?	34
since when have her transgressions	35
fallen back to half a zol? since	36
when has her memory gone more than	37
it comes? since when has she been aware that	38
the brain is looking for bridges across	39
the dying of nerve ends at the outer	40
edges of the skin? since when have the tiny	41
sprouts in the ear been calcifying and	42
the retina lost its ability to delight	43
in bright colours? when did the brain	44
let go of the slaked tongue? why does	45
the nose yearning for youth have	46
to muffle forth with an expired prostate?	47
mornings her piss smells like wet cement	48

Her diminishing daring or ‘impulse’ (33) derives from her ‘blood’, her faltering memory relates to ‘the dying nerve ends at the outer/ edges of the skin’ (40-41) and the inability ‘to delight/ in bright colours’ (43-44) is the fault of the failing ‘retina’ (43). In each case, the

division between herself, her perceptions and her corporeal reality results in a dissolution of her previously established identity – she no longer recognises the body she inhabits.

The poem ‘leave me a lonely began’ (2006:21) describes the speaking subject’s experience of being forgotten and overlooked by a waiter inside a closing coffee shop. As in ‘when tight is loose’, this subjective experience is described in relation to an abjectly corporeal perception of existence. Furthermore, Krog again shows this to be a gendered experience:

he sits across, reading his newspaper	1
his coffee waits timorously next	2
to his precisely clipped nails. His	3
hairy ear busting with gunpowder. His	4
shaven cheeks brittle. suddenly he looks	5
up and shouts to the back: ‘coffee shop’s	6
empty, we can close!’ and she realises: he	7
does not see her: she sits as nothing. that where she	8
is is simply air or glass or emptiness	9
he did not <i>not</i> see her, or perchance look	10
past – he looked right <i>through</i> her. She’s	11
vanished without tamper or trauma;	12
to the waiter she’s merely table-leg or chair	13
how did it come to this where nothing	14
exists any longer that acknowledges her	15
as a woman? nothing that recognises	16
that she carries the cool shape of a human	17
who loves the earth and this late coffee	18
on the square where soft seeds waft	19
the midday air? her silent invisibility	20
bends her eyes to her hand playing	21
with crumbs on the blue check table	22
cloth. and it is so: every finger joint	23

is thickened and stiffening into a	24
new direction. next to the swollen vein	25
in an unguarded moment, a brown stain	26
was deftly stapled. it is as if great	27
and dull boulders fill her from the	28
inside and she withholds her	29
from herself as if from a grater. <i>this</i> she knows:	30
nobody will ever again breathlessly	31
peel desire from her shoulders.	32

The waiter, she believes, sees her as a ‘table-leg or chair’ (13), causing her to feel as though she is ‘simply air or glass or emptiness’ (9). Her unified corporeality is shattered by his disregard of her, and her subjective perception of the experience is as a result located in a space in which she herself does not inhabit her body. His disregarding her forces her to examine her ageing body from his perspective: her ‘finger joint/ is thickened and stiffening into a/ new direction’ (24-25), a ‘brown stain’ (26) is ‘deftly stapled’ (27) next to the ‘swollen vein’ (25) and ‘dull boulders fill her from the/ inside’ (28-29). The ‘new direction’ into which her joint is ‘stiffening’ indicates her sense of alienation from her body, while the fact that the ‘brown stain’ is described as being ‘stapled’ onto her hand shows her perception of ageing as a hostile and intrusive force that transmogrifies her previously familiar body. The ‘dull boulders’ that ‘fill her from the/ inside’ rob her of her humanity and force her to ‘withhold[...] her from/ herself as if from a grater’ (29-30). Lively flesh becomes lifeless stone, and yet, abjectly, remains flesh capable of being grated. The image of a ‘grater’ relates to abjection in that it implies a painful rupturing of boundaries, while the fact that her body is that which causes this dissolution of corporeal identity shows the split in the subjective experience of her existence. Instead of being filled with ‘boulders’, the Afrikaans version, also entitled ‘leave me a lonely began’ (2006:21) describes her as being filled with ‘groot en/ droë leegtes’ (24-

25). This translates to an ‘immense and dry emptinesses’.¹³ The contrast between the solidity of the ‘boulders’ and the emptiness of the ‘leegtes’ allows for two very different yet equally effective methods of describing her perception of the dehumanising effects of ageing. Through the act of translation, Krog again opens up interesting and creative possibilities of depicting an experience that is not monolithic in nature.

Part of the corporeal identity that marks her subjective experience is her identity as a sexually desired and desiring female subject. However, her experience in the coffee shop causes her to question how it comes to this that ‘nothing/ exists any longer that acknowledges her/ as a woman’ (14-16). The next section elaborates: ‘nothing that recognises/ that she carries the cool shape of a human’ (17). The implied conflation in being a ‘woman’ and being a ‘human’ shows how her identity as a person is intrinsically connected with her identity as a female. The poem concludes with her realisation that ‘nobody will ever again breathlessly/ peel desire from her shoulders’ (31-32). This elaborates on the identity she fears to lose as it inscribes her femaleness and humanity as being connected to the erotic. The epigraph to the poem is a quotation from a workbook by Tamara Slayton (1990:41) in which she describes how the ‘menopausal woman [...] has been made invisible or encouraged to remain forever young’. By introducing her poem with this epigraph, Krog foregrounds the idea that sexual desirability and physical attractiveness are seen by society as residing in the domain of the youthful. The waiter’s gaze as a result annuls not only her human and female identities, but also her sexual identity. This may be related to a statement by Calasanti et al (2006:21) that ‘an old woman’s attractiveness is judged by the disciplining “gaze of youth,”’ and thus ‘age is revealed as an

¹³ My translation.

intersecting axis of inequality'. However, Krog's poem does not necessarily deal exclusively with the aged body, but rather with a body beginning the process of ageing. Because of this, the dehumanizing effect of the waiter's gaze is two-fold: by failing to see her, he forces her to see herself. His not seeing her causes her to turn the 'gaze of youth' upon herself and judge her own physical attractiveness by its standards. This disassociates her subjective consciousness from her corporeal self: she looks at her ageing body with the eyes of a youthful perspective, and is abjectly horrified by the physical changes of her body.

The title of the poem, 'leave me a lonely began', is a reference to a line in a poem called 'To seem the stranger' by Gerard Manley Hopkins. This particular poem by Hopkins describes the 'third/ Remove' (2010:66) at which Hopkins finds himself as a 'stranger' in a 'life/ Among strangers'. This 'third/ Remove' is echoed in Krog's poem in that the waiter's gaze causes her to become a stranger to herself. However, it is interesting to note that the waiter's gaze causes Krog to focus the reader's attention on her hand. Even though the speaking subject is described as being abjectly horrified by the signs of ageing on her hand, her choice of the hand, rather than any other body part, as a symbol for the effects of ageing draws the reader's attention back to the cover photograph of the collection. The cover photograph also emphasises the subject's hand. The significance of this hand is that it is the subject's (arguably Krog's) writing hand. The existence of this poem thus still attests to the value of the writer's hand, despite the visible effects of ageing and physical degeneration perceived by Krog and, as she believes, the waiter.

While the thematic concerns of 'softsift of the hourglass' (2006:51) relate to the after-effects of a mild stroke and not exclusively to the process of ageing, it is still an interesting example of the sense of abjection experienced by the speaking subject. Furthermore, it relates to both *Age of Iron* and *Agaat* in that it shows that the process of ageing is something that is often associated with the physical degeneration brought about by a medical condition. The title of the poem reaffirms this idea: in this poem, the speaking subject describes an experience brought about by the fact that one half of her body is affected by the stroke, while the other half is not. The hourglass, a classic symbol of human mortality, is conflated with her impaired body through the visual division of the hourglass into two components, in the same way that she experiences her body as split into two. The effect of this is to show that her experience of ageing is mediated by the stroke, in the same way that Mrs Curren's experience of ageing is influenced by cancer, and Milla's by Motor Neuron Disease. Interestingly, the poem appears in the collection as the first part of a sequence of two poems, the second of which, 'it might have been a jellytot' (2006:52), makes it clearer that 'softsift of the hourglass' is indeed about the after-effects of a stroke. The fact that 'softsift of the hourglass' appears before the more explanatory second poem, and would thus be read first, assists in producing the feeling of alienation created by the poem, as the reader is initially unaware of what the poem is describing.

The meaning of this poem that describes the experience of taking a shower derives not only from the language itself, but also from the visual layout of the poem on the page: in the same way that the speaking subject experiences her body as split into two, the poem itself is split into two columns on the page:

half of her is somebody else		1
as if	somebody else	2
is standing next to her <i>in</i> her like		3
the bridge of a nose	her brain	4
tolls and tolls and keeps on tolling		5
she opens the shower	her left	6
cheek soaks in the spray until warm		7
inside	her right	8
cheek hangs	cold and dull on	9
the outside	her blood pressure	10
rears and rears and keeps on rearing		11
a chipped shoulder knob	the other	12
glad and gleaming	the breasts hang	13
wide-eyed in front of a heart which bangs blood		14
deafening through all the veins		15
her body resounds from her lymph		16
the left hand	has lost its grip	17
it fumbles like a dishcloth at the soap		18
the right does not know	what the left is doing	19
only one hand	washes the lame	20
the left as egg whisk	pale stalled fountain	21
disintegrating mop	wilting lily	22
blood begins to crawl	where it once ran	23
but it is the left leg		24
that she misses most		25
the light footed turn	the swank of swerve	26
the quick sidestep in jest		27
enraged she rips into everything		28
inside herself, but quivering in her ribs		29
one can see that already		30
she's been by the half-dead dead eclipsed		31

Furthermore, the column on the left is much more visually dense than the column on the right, and contains a number of indented lines that give shape to the visual impression of the poem. This mirrors the fact that the right-hand side of the speaking subject's body is affected by the stroke: the left-hand side of the poem is as dense with meaning as she experiences the

left side of her body to be, while both the right-hand side of the poem and the right side of her body are associated with a poverty of meaning.

The sense of alienation depicted in both 'when tight is loose' and 'leave me a lonely began' can also be seen in 'softsift of the hourglass'. The speaking subject describes how 'half of her is somebody else/ as if somebody else/ is standing next to her *in her*' (1-3; emphasis in original). The vagueness of the 'somebody else' that signifies the right-hand side of her body increases the sense of horror conveyed by the fact that she is disassociated from her body. This relates to abjection in that the unified interiority of her corporeality is disrupted as the boundaries that defined her identity have been violated. The 'third/ Remove' seen in 'leave me a lonely began' can also be seen in this poem: not only is she cut off from her body, but her body is also cut off from parts of itself. As a result, the sense of abjection conveyed by the poem is magnified. Again, the alienation she experiences from her body is depicted through the comparisons of parts of her body to inanimate objects. Her hand is compared to a 'dishcloth' (18), and an 'egg whisk' (21). These images become more disturbing, as a 'pale stalled fountain' (21), a 'disintegrating mop' (22) and a 'wilting lily' (22) all relate to ideas of decay and decomposition.

This poem differs from 'when tight is loose' and 'leave me a lonely began' in that it expresses the speaking subject's fury over her condition: 'enraged she rips into everything/ inside herself' (30-31). Significantly, her reaction is to turn against the body that has betrayed her. The abject breakdown of identity caused by the after-effects of the stroke incites her to speak

in metaphors that show her wilful desire to enact violence on her traitorous body and to provoke the abject destruction of her bodily borders. However, the poem concludes with the statement that ‘one can see that already/ she’s been by the half-dead dead eclipsed’ (30-31): despite her fury, the speaking subject is unable to do anything to alter her condition. Kristeva suggests that the ‘corpse [...] is the utmost of abjection’ (1982:4) in that it shows what is ‘permanently thrust aside in order to live’ (1982:3). Because of this, Krog’s suggestion that the ‘half-dead dead’ (32) has taken up residence in the speaking subject’s body signifies the abject nature of her condition. Furthermore, the use of ‘half-dead’ dead inscribes her corporeality with a liminality that disrupts any clarified perception of the experience. Because of her condition, the speaking subject is thrust into a space in which only half of her body resembles normal, living flesh, while the other half resembles a corpse or cadaver. Even worse, the power of the corpse-like half of her body is so intense that it has ‘eclipsed’ the living side. Significantly, the Afrikaans version, ‘sagsif van die uurglas’ (2006:42), states that ‘sy’s met die half-dood dood reeds diep gekwes’ (32). To ‘kwes’ means to hurt or to wound.¹⁴ While the English version focuses on the power the corpse-side has over the speaking subject, the Afrikaans specifies that the corpse-side is able to enact violence on her. The use of the third-person voice in this poem conveys the sense of alienation experienced by the speaking subject. The fact that the poem states that ‘one can see that already/ she’s been by the half-dead dead eclipsed’ (my emphasis) indicates that her condition is not only something she experiences subjectively, but that it is also something that is visible to an external observer, and almost invites the reader to be the ‘one’ who observes the victory of the affected half of her body.

¹⁴ My translation.

The sense of fury seen towards the end of 'softsift of the hourglass' is articulated more intensely in 'sonnet of the hot flushes' (2006:17). As its title suggests, this poem details the speaking subject's roiling experience of menopausal hot flushes, in a flurry of sensations that liken the experience to a fever that ravages her body. Interestingly, the poem is written in a second-person voice. The startling effect of this is that the remove between the speaking subject and the reader is destroyed: instead of experiencing the poem from the perspective of a third-person speaker or from the perspective of the subject herself, the reader is invited to share in the harrowing experience, through becoming the 'you' whom the speaker addresses:

Something staples your marrow somewhere	1
you feel a newly floated fire spreading angst from	2
a kernel and how your veins run with fire how	3
your flesh flames your heart keeps her fireproof	4
balance your bones bake besides themselves your	5
face sings your cheeks simmer in dismay and	6
time and again you break out in sizzling encasings	7
of sweat you smell your skin sparking off a blaze.	8

The poem starts off vaguely explaining that 'something staples your marrow somewhere' (1). The indeterminacy of 'something' and 'somewhere' does not prepare the reader for the fury of the fiery description that is to follow, and mirrors how unexpectedly the subject is overcome by hot flushes. Furthermore, the line conveys a sense of the abjection involved in the experience, in that what should be a natural biological occurrence is described as an external force that invades the unity of the subject's interiority, rupturing the boundaries of

her identity. As in 'leave me a lonely began', Krog's use of the word 'staples' indicates that this external force is perceived as hostile and malevolent.

Krog employs a number of devices in order to mimic in language the corporeal sensations experienced by the speaking subject. The dominant device used in the poem is the extended metaphor of fire: the innocuously named 'hot flush' is magnified into fire that burns away the speaker's body. Her 'veins run with fire' (3), her 'flesh flames' (4), her 'bones bake' (5), her 'face sings' (6), her 'cheeks simmer' (6) and her 'skin spark[s] off a blaze' (8). The effect of this is to show that she experiences a hot flush as something that is infinitely fierier than its name suggests and as something much more powerful than the almost mild sensation of a 'flush'. This conveys abjection in that her living flesh becomes fuel for the fire that symbolises and enacts the biological changes, and is thus no longer part of the body she has known as her own. Again, this implies that the experience causes her to become alienated from her body, suggesting a rupture in the demarcations of her identity.

Furthermore, Krog uses the device of enjambment to great effect in this poem. The semantic sense of almost each line is broken up before its conclusion, extending itself in unconventional places onto the next; for example: 'how/ your flesh flames' (3-4), 'your/ face sings' (5-6), and 'encasings/ of sweat' (7-8). The effect of this is heightened by the lack of punctuation marks in the octave: the entire first stanza reads as one long rant of discontent, and is only cut off at its conclusion by a full-stop. This adds to the general sense of confusion created by the poem, and serves to mimic the overwhelming nature of the experience itself.

Contrastingly, the octave of ‘sonnet van die warm gloede’ (2006:16), the Afrikaans version, contains many punctuation marks. The semantic disruption is here heightened in that many of the lines are truncated with full-stops before their conclusions; for example: ‘jy voel./ hoe spreï’ (1-2), ‘angs vannuit./ ‘n kern’ (2-3), and ‘en./ telkemale breek jy weg’ (6-7). This translates to: ‘you feel./ the spreading of/ anxiety from./ a core’ and ‘and./ countless times you break away’.¹⁵ A possible reason for this could be the fact that the English version contains many more examples of alliteration than the Afrikaans: in the English, the alliteration is sufficient to convey the frenzy of the experience, while the Afrikaans conveys this through its prematurely truncated lines. Both cases allude to the abject nature of the experience, as the jolting disconnectedness of the poems relates to the disruption of rules and boundaries associated with abjection. This idea can also be seen in the poems’ disruption of the conventional sonnet structure. While the titles of both poems indicate that the poems are sonnets, and while the poems do consist of fourteen lines, neither poem follows the traditional rhyme scheme of the sonnet form, and both deviate from the iambic pentameter rhythm. In the same way that the poems depart to some extent from poetic conventions and rupture semantic unity, the speaking subject abjectly experiences hot flushes almost as a fever or a sickness that destroys the wholeness and normality of her corporeal identity.

A change occurs in the sestet:

But one day you shift in your chair – and	9
feel this enormous crucible destroying your	10
last juiciness. God knows, this is enough:	11
burning like a warrior you rise – a figurehead of	12
fire – you grab death like a runt and plough its nose	13
right through your fleeced and drybaked cunt	14

¹⁵ My translation.

Significantly, the sestet does contain conventional punctuation marks, indicating that it is more structured and controlled than the octave. The change in tone is further emphasised through the word 'But' at its beginning. It is here that the sense of fury seen in 'softsift of the hourglass' breaks through. The difference is that while the outrage expressed in 'softsift of the hourglass' is described as not being able to produce any change in the speaking subject's situation, here she harnesses the emotion to change her perception of the experience. In the sestet, she explains how 'you shift in your chair – and/ feel this enormous crucible destroying your/ last juiciness' (9-11). Andries Visagie (2007:iii) cites this section of the poem to show that 'the aging body is still an indomitable force'. Similarly, Claire Scott (2006:108) uses this section of the poem to argue 'how it is possible to metaphorically challenge death' as a process 'that is seen as altering and undermining the individual's sense of self'. Louise Viljoen (2009:210), however, relates this poem to Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque:

The high power death holds over existence is lowered and abased, as its nose is ploughed through the female subject's 'cunt'. The abasement implied by this act is three-fold: the woman is considered to be the lesser of the sexes and because of this death is abased in the confrontation, the female sexual organ is considered to be part of the 'lower bodily stratum' referred to by Bakhtin, and the word 'cunt' is an example of the crude language that according to Bakhtin can be found on the marketplace rather than in official culture. This kind of reversal is typical of the grotesque realism associated with the carnivalesque and serves the purpose of countering and undermining official culture.¹⁶

Viljoen's comment on the poem's potential to counter and undermine 'official culture' may be related to the way in which this allows Krog to counteract the narratives of powerlessness that are stereotypically associated with older age in dominant culture, and to how this enables her to reconfigure in literature the identity an ageing person can claim as his or her

¹⁶ My translation.

own. The disturbingly sexual undertone of the final section of the poem unsettles the reader as it relates to an ambiguous affirmation of ageing female sexuality, in that the speaking subject wilfully engages death in a metaphorical sexual act, despite the threat it poses to her sense of identity, undermining what Kathleen Woodward refers to as 'our culture's disbelief in the sexuality of older age' (2006:177).

The references to 'shift[ing] in your chair' (9) and the 'last juiciness' (11) suggest that the hot flush has spread to the speaking subject's genitals. The fact that this is described as a 'crucible' (10) implies that this is the most intense and unbearable part of the experience, but also intimates the possibility of distillation. The statement that 'this is enough' (11) introduces her decision to act upon that which has previously been acting upon her. The 'crucible destroying' (10) her 'last juiciness' (11) becomes the impetus that smelts her into a 'burning [...] warrior' (12) and a 'figurehead of/ fire' (12-13). Significantly, she has not *stopped* burning, but she is now able to 'grab death like a runt and plough its nose/ right through [her] fleeced and drybaked cunt' (13-14). The fire that previously signified the fever ravaging her body now becomes a symbol of her power and dominance. Her reference here to 'death' is extremely interesting, as up until this point the poem has been detailing a biological process. Now, however, this biological process is conflated with the idea of death. Significantly, this implies that despite the corporeal nature of the experience, its ramifications are more extensive: the onset of hot flushes pushes the speaking subject into closer proximity to old age and to death. Kristeva (1982:10) says that 'I experience death only if an Other has settled in place and in stead of what will be "me". Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession

causes me to be'. In this poem, the body at the threshold of ageing is violently catapulted by itself into a space where the subject has to confront death in order to make sense of the biological changes that are wreaking havoc on her corporeal identity. This feverish intruder is part of her, as its inception has always been a biological inevitability, and yet it is also Other as it overcomes her and possesses her, causing her to become a stranger to herself. However, 'death' is described as being a 'runt' (13), indicating her dominance over it. Still, the use of the word 'fleeced' (14) seems to suggest that the speaking subject feels cheated or swindled, and this relates to the title of the collection as it implies that her 'body' has indeed become 'bereft', despite the power derived from metaphorically managing to defy death. In light of this, reading this final section of the poem only as defiant against the onslaught of old age is problematic.

As Kathleen Woodward (2006:180) notes, '[i]t can be exceedingly difficult to distinguish the denial of aging from the resistance to cultural conventions of aging'. However, Krog's poem seems to suggest that these need not be mutually exclusive reactions to ageing. While many of the poems in *Body Bereft* are furiously defiant in their rejection of the negative consequences of ageing, others contemplatively mourn what has been lost, and attempt to make sense of the foreign territory in which the speaker finds herself. Her reaction is mixed, shifting and slipping between disgust in 'when tight is loose', disbelief and tentative resistance in 'leave me a lonely began', recognition of the inevitable in 'softsift of the hourglass' and problematic defiance in 'sonnet of the hot flushes'. The overriding characteristic of these specific poems, however, is that of loss. Julia Twigg (2004: 61), a social gerontologist, explains that '[n]arratives of decline have replaced all other forms of meaning

and interpretation of the body in later years, so that other more humanistic or plural readings become impossible'. In 'how do you say this', Krog (2006:28) expresses a similar frustration with the dominating otherness of discourses surrounding the ageing body:

I truly don't know how to say this	1
your seasoned neatly clipped beard is perhaps	2
too here, too close for language, too grey with grit	3
I really don't know how to write your ageing body	4
without using words like 'loss' or 'fatal'. I don't know.	5
I don't know why the word 'wrinkle' sounds so banal	6
I simply don't know how ageing should sound in language	7

Despite not knowing how to write the ageing body, Krog attempts to do so in this poem that describes a sexual experience between two older bodies. She achieves this through liberating the ageing body from being a self-enclosed marker of identity. Instead of giving in to the reductiveness involved in categorising the components of the ageing body in an unaccommodating language that inevitably has to render a 'wrinkle [...] banal', she instead gives a subjective account of a bodily experience. Through focussing on how an ageing body perceives and interacts with another ageing body, she is able to avoid pinning down the body, and the meaning ascribed to it instead becomes fluid and shifting. Because of this, the meaning of the poem as a whole is two-fold: we see the speaking subject attempting to overcome both conventional ideas of the limited sexuality accorded to an ageing individual in the lived experience itself, as well as linguistic conventions of representing the ageing individual in poetry. Instead, she tries 'to eke out/ the vocabulary of old age' as she experiences it from *within* the lived perspective. While, as mentioned earlier, Krog is writing from a menopausal perspective and not from within deep old age, this lived experience

inevitably has to be coloured by society's (decidedly negative) attitude towards sexuality in later life. Stephen Katz and Barbara Marshall (2003:4) write that historically 'sexual decline was assumed to be an inevitable and universal consequence of growing older; thus, aging individuals were expected to adjust to it gracefully and to appreciate the special moral benefits of postsexual maturity'. While Krog does in this poem describe the maturity associated with ageing, this maturity is decidedly sexual in nature and centres on the changing dynamics of the sexual experience brought about by older age.

Instead of focussing on what has been lost in the process of ageing, this poem details what has been gained. However, the difficulty involved in avoiding conventional descriptions of the ageing body can be seen throughout the poem. As it progresses, her rendering of the experience into a new language of the ageing body becomes clearer:

in the meantime the irises of your infamous blue eyes	10
have over the years buckled under green	11
more stuttering now but two enduring sincere	12
shadows that have loved me a whole life long	13
my forefinger traces your eyebrows	14
from where grey hair crackles like lightning.	15
face that I love; face of erosion	16
if I pull you towards me your hair is thin and light	17
your scalp surprises me with its own texture	18
the grooves cutting down from your ears	19

For example, while discussing the difficulty of writing the ageing body at the beginning of the poem, she describes a beard that is 'too close for language' (3) and 'too grey with grit' (3).

However, in the next section of the poem, she attempts to find new words with which to describe the greyness of her partner: the beard 'too grey with grit' (3) for language becomes 'grey hair [that] crackles like lightning' (12), indicating a sense of power that the previous description lacks. However, she lapses into a narrative of decline in the next line when she describes his 'face of erosion' (13), alluding to the conventional trope of the erosion of time on the body. The 'wrinkle' (6) referred to at the beginning of the poem becomes 'the grooves cutting down from [his] ears' (19), and his 'scalp surprises [her] with its own texture' (18). Here we begin to see Krog articulate more innovatively her love for a familiar body that has paradoxically become new as the process of ageing allows it to reveal itself to her in unexpected ways. Furthermore, the newness of her partner's body allows her to experience her own body in new ways:

The mouth that could scathe so brilliantly still	20
Moves fragrantly against my temples but mild now	21
- as bread. your hands allow my breasts to sink into	22
your palms like dark glasses of wine.	23

Equally importantly, the newness of the experience allows her in turn to translate the experience into a language that resists the conventional delimitation of the ageing body into a narrative of decline.

In the first part of the poem, Krog frames her doubts about her ability to represent the ageing body in language with qualifiers such as, 'I truly don't know' (1), 'I really don't know' (4), and 'I simply do not know' (7). In the middle part of the poem, in which she attempts to find a

language for the experience, she changes this to ‘I think /I’m trying to say’ (19-20). Here, the description of her partner’s ageing body as well as her reaction to it become sexualised:

I think I’m	23
trying to say that I find the thickening of your	24
abdomen attractive, that an erection against a	25
slight curve leaves one wet in the mouth. god,	26
I think I’m trying to say that I can surrender to	27
your thighs for the very first time because of	28
their soaking whiteness, that I prefer the soft	29
looseness of your buttocks to the young hard	30
aggressive passion of our youth. you no longer	31
use sex for yourself but for me. you no longer	32
want to breed children from me but calmly reveal	33
yourself. into the luxury of experience I	34
stretch myself out. it is as if you are deeper, as if I’m	35
quieter, as if we come to be much more complete.	36

Instead of describing his beard, his hair, or his wrinkles, she writes that she finds ‘the thickening of [his]/ abdomen attractive’ (23-24) and that ‘an erection against a/ slight curve leaves one wet in the mouth’ (25-26). Significantly, in ‘hoe sê mens dit’ (2006:28), the Afrikaans version of the poem, the word ‘attractive’ is replaced by the more provocative ‘sexy’. Almost as if abandoning convention and propriety altogether, she continues, ‘god,/ I think I’m trying to say that I can surrender to/ your thighs for the very first time because of/ their soaking whiteness’ (26-29). She prefers ‘the soft/ looseness of [his] buttocks to the young hard/ aggressive passion’ (29-31) of their youth. As she delves deeper into the sexual dynamics of the experience itself, she abandons the use of qualifiers, and explains that the fact that he ‘no longer/ want[s] to breed children from’ (32-33) her grants her enjoyment of ‘the luxury of experience’ (34), not despite of but because of their maturity. This is the

poem's most striking example of Krog's refusal to lapse into the narrative of decline associated with the process of ageing. Menopause is generally seen as undermining female identity, as it marks the end of a woman's reproductive capacity. Here, instead of regarding this as a loss of identity and value, Krog undermines the conventional view and celebrates the sexual satisfaction that has been gained because of menopause.

The conclusions of the English and Afrikaans versions of this poem differ radically. The English version concludes with an allusion to Dylan Thomas's poem 'Do not go gentle into that good night':

at times it seems easier to rage	37
against the dying of the light	38
than to eke out	39
the vocabulary of old age	40

In his famous poem, Thomas urges his dying father to fight for the life remaining to him, and not to accept his impending death meekly. Significantly, he does this from a relatively youthful perspective, as he was 37 years old at the publication of the poem. While Krog does not seem to dispute the importance of 'rag[ing] against the dying of the light' (37-38), her allusion makes the point that fighting against death is easier than living with old age and writing from an ageing perspective. She reiterates this sentiment in her poem 'God, Death, Love' (2006:21), when she writes that 'to jump from the ageing body to Death/ has suddenly become a cop-out act'. Furthermore, her allusion to the Thomas poem serves to highlight the way in which the ageing body has been muted in literature, in favour of the more classically

acceptable metaphor of Death. Significantly, despite her attempts to write the ageing body in 'how do you say this', she concludes the poem not on a triumphant note, but rather with an acknowledgement of the difficulty involved in the writing process.

This sense of uncertainty comes across most strongly in the conclusion to the Afrikaans version of the poem. Instead of using the Thomas allusion as a concluding statement, Krog (2006:29) ends off this version with questions that address the reader:

[...] hoe verset mens	37
jou teen die gemaklike uitweg wat oudword bloot	38
tot metafoor van die dood verstom? Hoe en waarmee	39
verwerf 'n mens die woordeskat van ouderdom?	40

For the purposes of my argument, it is necessary to attempt a direct translation of this:

how does one
resist the easy way out that mutes
ageing into a mere metaphor for death? How and with what
does one eke out the vocabulary of old age?¹⁷

The conclusion to the Afrikaans version expresses more clearly Krog's doubts about the limitations of language and literature. While the English and Afrikaans versions make the same point, Krog's view, as discussed earlier, is that translation 'opened up other possibilities in the poems' that allowed for 'creative solutions' (2006:112). In this case, the English version with its allusion to Thomas enriches the Afrikaans version, while the more direct Afrikaans version clarifies the obliqueness of the allusion in the English. In light of this, the two poems

¹⁷ My translation.

read together allow for a deeper and more nuanced reaction against the narratives of lack that surround the discourse of old age.

As mentioned above, in the poem 'God, Death, Love' Krog (2006:21) elaborates on how the ageing body has been neglected in literature in favour of the more acceptable metaphor of death:

God, Death, Love, Loneliness, Man	1
are Important Themes in Literature	2
menstruation, childbirth, menopause, puberty	3
marriage are not	4

Significantly, 'God, Death, Love' and 'Loneliness' (1), the 'Important Themes in Literature' (2), are all abstract concepts, while 'menstruation, childbirth, menopause' and 'puberty' (2) are biologically corporeal processes that relate to the different stages of maturation in life. Similarly, 'Man' (1) relates to the concept of mankind in general, and appears to posit the biological man as representative of mankind as a whole, while 'marriage' (4) is a more domesticated and concrete human event. In light of this, Krog implies that literature ignores the realities of the body and instead focuses on conceptual abstractions that disassociate people from their corporeal existence. Next, she proceeds to give an account of the bodily experience that characterises the process of ageing:

meanwhile terror lies exactly in how	5
one lives with the disintegrating body	6
in how one accepts that the body no longer	7
wants to intensify with exhilarating detonations	8
in how one loves the more-and-more-slaked-ones	9
in how one resigns to vaginal atrophy and incontinence	10

or that the blade cleaving through one's heart 11
is probably a heart attack 12

Significantly, 'terror' (5) does not lie in the ageing process of the body, but rather in the ways that one 'lives with' (6) it, 'accepts' (7) it, 'resigns to' (10) it and is forced to 'love' (9) it in the 'more-and-more-slaked-ones' (9). The poem concludes with:

to jump from the ageing body to Death 13
has suddenly become a cop-out act 14

The suggested progression in 'jump[ing] from the ageing body to Death' (13) as a 'cop-out act' (14) shows that while death is indeed the final point of the ageing process, the period that precedes it is equally important. The implication of this in relation to the poem is two-fold: the poem asserts that ageing is an unavoidable reality. Because of this, writing about death instead of ageing is a 'cop-out' (14) coping mechanism that attempts to deny this reality in favour of a conceptual disassociation from the corporeal experiences that inscribe death as a bodily truth rather than an abstract idea. This poem forms part of the 'seven menopausal sonnets' sequence. Krog's choice of the sonnet format for 'God, Death, Love' is significant, as the sonnet has classically been thematically associated with ideas of human mortality. Thus, in choosing this format for her own poem, Krog posits the ageing body as an 'Important Theme[...] in Literature' (2), and undermines the conventional rhetoric that she sees as a 'cop-out act' (14). This is reinforced by the fact that none of the sonnets in her sonnet sequence follows all the traditional rules of the sonnet structure. Through deviating from the classical structure, she disassociates herself from sonnets that deny the realities of the ageing process.

While 'God, Death, Love' foregrounds the body as the locus of representation, 'manifesta of a grandma' (translated into English by Andries Wessels) looks at stereotypes in society surrounding old age generally, and grandmothers specifically. In this comic poem, Krog systematically points out and challenges outdated representations of grandmother-hood. The poem starts off with a question, presumably asked by a child (2006:30):

Casually you ask, 'So how does it feel to be	1
a grandma?' and I thought to myself, oh god,	2
my child, what would you have me say?	3
'...very old thank you' or 'I don't	4
get cock past my lips anymore'? I mean, what	5
does one say? More important perhaps is why	6
a question like this makes me so the moer in?	7
Do I suffer from excessive vanity or am I ashamed	8
of my early breeding ability ...? But really,	9
deep down, I know: it roots in the word 'grandma'.	10

Significantly, this question and the imagined response involve issues of societal perceptions and representations, in that they point to how grandmother-hood is perceived as well as to the difficulty involved in finding an accurate and encompassing definition for its roles and characteristics. The first part of the imagined response is substantiated by findings reported in a study by Bäckvik et al. This study states that 'storybooks are one means by which children can learn and develop attitudes towards grandparents and older adults in general' (2010:299). Since 'research indicates that children's books often depict grandparents as very aged', the representations of grandparents in storybooks can be said to shape and simultaneously reflect children's perceptions of their grandparents. More importantly, these depictions very often show grandparents to be homogeneously aged. However, in this poem, the speaking subject very pointedly later refers to her 'early breeding ability' (9), indicating

that she does not fit into the imagined community of ‘very old’ (4) grandparents who populate storybooks and contribute to children’s perceptions of their grandparents. Thus, her inability to define grandmother-hood and her resultantly conflating it facetiously with being ‘very old’ undermine the idea that to be a grandmother should only mean to be ‘very old’. Furthermore, the second part of the imagined response, ‘I don’t/ get cock past my lips anymore’ (4-5), controversially introduces the idea of sexuality to the definition of being a grandmother, and consequently poses the question of whether being a grandmother should mean being desexualised. After the assertion of the speaker’s identity as grandmother, the use of the word ‘cock’, and in the Afrikaans version of the poem, its equivalent ‘piel’, is the first example of the ways in which Krog undermines conventional assumptions about being a grandmother: For a grandmother to write a poem with the word ‘cock’ in its very first stanza goes against the idea of the anachronistically stereotypical grandmother who spends all of her time knitting and baking cookies.

Krog goes on to define the characteristics of stereotypical grandparents, using children’s books as a starting point:

Children’s books are full of modern moms with clogs	16
buying pizzas and dads bathing babies, but in the	17
background somewhere inevitably lurks misshapen	18
a grandma anachronistically in Dr Scholl’s shoes	19
joyously knitting – spectacted and bunned. A bun	20
for fuck’s sake! My own children don’t even know anyone	21
with a bun, not to mention my culturally mixed-up	22
grandchildren! Sometimes a grandpa fumbles along with a stick,	23
coat and grey felt hat (grey what?) – a surprised expression on his face	24
suggesting that throughout life he has peered only through bifocals.	25

Krog's analysis of the representation of grandparents in children's books matches the findings of the study conducted by Bäckvik et al. Her reference to the 'grandma anachronistically [wearing] Dr Scholl's shoes' (19) is supported by their finding that grandparents in children's story books 'wear clothes atypical for the date of the story' (Bäckvik et al:300). Furthermore, the study states that '[w]earing glasses is the most common feature attributed to grandparents: nearly half of the grandfathers and over one third of the grandmothers have glasses' (Bäckvik et al:303). In Krog's poem, both the grandmother and the grandfather wear glasses. According to Bäckvik et al (303), '[g]ender differences appear for accessories such as aprons, sticks, and rocking chairs' and 'more grandfathers than grandmothers are portrayed with a stick'. In keeping with this, Krog's parodic grandmother is 'joyously knitting – spectaclered and bunned' (20), while the grandfather 'fumbles along with stick,/ coat and grey felt hat' (23-24). Both the grandfather and the grandmother in the children's books described in the poem can be associated with the 'aged, fragile, weak, and impaired' (Bäckvik et al:313) grandparents found in the books analysed by the study. Significantly, despite Krog's reference to her 'early breeding ability' (9) which suggests that she considers herself somewhat an anomaly, the study found that the grandparents in children's books are decidedly 'older than the average grandparents of young children' (314). The study suggests that this could be attributed to the fact that the authors and illustrators of these books rely on their own memories of their grandparents rather than on the diversity of types of grandparents found in modern society and thus 'do not seem to adequately represent the multiple realities of most grandparents of preschool children who are still in the mainstream of life' (Bäckvik et al:312-313). Krog's statement that her 'own children don't even know anyone/ with a bun, not to mention [her] culturally mixed-up/ grandchildren' (21-23) points to this discrepancy between the representation of grandparents in literature and the realities of grandparent-hood.

The next two stanzas of the poem attempt to deconstruct newspaper headlines about grandmothers:

A headline announces: 'High jump record for grandma'.	26
What does it really suggest? For a grandma	27
she jumps rather high? How high is a grandma	28
entitled to jump? Or should she indeed jump	29
but not over a bar in public?	30
'Grandma of three sues premier for sexual harassment'.	31
What is the message here? That a grandma should actually	32
be grateful that someone still wants to fondle her	33
or that the premier must be really desperate	34
to molest a grandma to get his rocks off?	35

While these stanzas are undoubtedly humorous, they also foreground the skewed representation of grandmothers in the written media. The achievement of the grandmother in the first of the stanzas above is rendered a mere curiosity because of her status as a grandmother. In the second stanza, the sexual harassment is of secondary importance to the fact that it is a grandmother who is being harassed. Krog goes on to note that 'the premier himself is presented with neither/ kith nor cunt' (36-37). This underscores the fact that in the headline itself, the premier is represented as ageless as well as sexless, while the grandmother is designated as being old and as being a woman, through the use of the word '[g]randma'. Her identity is further constructed by her being a '[g]randma of three' (31). The sensationalist purpose of this seems to be to amplify her status of grandmother-hood and to increase the sense of incredulity the headline wishes to induce in the reader.

In contrast to the stereotypical and sensationalised images of grandparents found in story books and in the written media, Krog presents the reader with her own first-hand observations of the elderly:

At Pick 'n Pay I stop behind a kombi from the Sunset Home.	45
Gingerly they emerge – no spectacles or buns in sight.	46
Short-clipped hair, running shoes for shopping.	47
Nimbly a gent hops from the passenger seat – in one hand	48
his aluminium strut, with the other he smoothes his ponytail.	49

Instead of the 'aged, fragile, weak, and impaired' (Bäckvik et al:313) grandparents found in children's books, these older adults are portrayed as being capable and active. This difference comes across in both Krog's description of their appearance and of their activity. Firstly, instead of appearing 'spectacled and bunned' (20), the women have 'short-clipped hair' (47) and the man has a 'ponytail' (49), and instead of 'anachronistically [wearing] Dr Scholl's shoes' (19), they are wearing much more practical and modern 'running shoes' (47). The 'gent' (48) does not use an old-fashioned walking stick; instead he uses an 'aluminium strut' (49). Furthermore, he is described as '[n]imbly [...] hop[ping] from the passenger seat' (48) instead of 'fumbl[ing] along with a stick' (23) with a befuddled 'surprised expression on his face' (24). Secondly, instead of being depicted as busy 'joyously knitting' (20) or randomly 'fumbl[ing] along' (23), these older adults are on a shopping expedition. This implies that they possess a self-sufficiency and capability that their literary counterparts lack.

Krog locates her aversion to the word 'grandma' in the well-known children's rhyme 'Grandpa and Grandma' (48), and proceeds to transcribe the rhyme along with her own sarcastic commentary on the ridiculousness of its representation of the grandparents:

Grandma asks Grandpa, 'What was that roar?'	50
Grandpa sighs euphemistically, 'My tummy's sore'.	51
Then Grandma asks (of all fucking things she asks):	52
'A pear for the pain?!' whereupon Grandpa draws	53
a highly scientific conclusion:	54
'Then I'll fart again'. For ever and ever in three	55
rhyming couplets metred in the falling	56
rhythm of dactyls this senile hogwash of stoepsitters	57
is conveyed from generation to generation	58
as the very essence of grandpa-and grandmahood	59

The grandparents in this rhyme are portrayed as 'senile' (57) individuals spouting almost nonsensical 'hogwash' (57). While this rhyme might be 'cherished by generations of small children as their first encounter with subversive text' (Wessels in Krog:2006) as is stated in the explanatory note beneath the poem, the rhyme also informs the way in which these children form their perceptions of grandparents and the elderly in general, and may contribute to negative stereotypes surrounding old age. Through citing this rhyme as the 'essence of grandpa-and grandmahood' (59), Krog posits the origin of the stereotypical Afrikaans grandparent identity, and simultaneously undermines it through underscoring the fact that it is actually 'hogwash' (57) that is being 'conveyed from generation to generation' (58). The children's rhyme was translated by Wessels from Afrikaans for the purpose of this poem. An English equivalent of it does not exist. Because of this, I feel it is necessary to stipulate that the identity that is being formed is Afrikaans, and not English. In this instance, the issue of translation makes reading the poem problematic: would English-speaking South African children not have a different source from which they derive their understanding of the 'essence of grandpa-and grandmahood' (59)?

The conclusion of the poem returns to the question that was posed at its beginning:

'So what did you ask?	60
You asked about being a grandma? Lovely, my dear,	61
absolutely lovely – as you can see	62
Grandpa and I here on the stoep	63
- we take it lying down'.	64

While the question at the beginning of the poem might appear innocuous enough, the content of the poem is evidence to the contrary and proves that defining grandmother-hood is a complex and problematic endeavour. As has been discussed above, this is because perceptions about being a grandmother are intrinsically connected to the abounding negative, outdated and stereotypical representations of grandmothers in society, in literature and in the media. As a result, the speaking subject's response – 'Grandpa and I here on the stoep/ [...]we take it lying down' (63-64) – implies that being a grandparent revolves around the tension between the almost inevitable onslaught of these representations and the subject's need to retain a positive and unique sense of identity while being a grandmother. This can be seen when contrasting the almost resigned acceptance in 'we take it lying down' with the poem's attempts not simply to accept these negative stereotypes. The abiding dominance of these negative representations is conveyed by the fact that the speaking subject describes herself and 'Grandpa' (63) as being 'on the stoep' (63), and thus resembling the grandparents in the children's rhyme.

In the poem 'hormone sonnet', Krog investigates the way in which menopause has been pathologised into a political concern. In this poem, she explores the options available to women who are considering undergoing hormone replacement therapy (2006:18):

to hrt	1
or not to hrt	2
is a question	3
only for women	4
it implies: do you want to look younger, get cancer and Alzheimer's	5 6
or do you want to look old and live too long?	7 8

The poem starts off with an allusion to Hamlet's question in the famous play by Shakespeare. However, instead of questioning the nature of being and existence, here the question is presented as gendered, and is aimed directly at women undergoing menopause. This places the question in a broader literary framework, and indicates the magnitude of the implications this question has in relation to menopausal women's lives. Furthermore, the speaker's specific mention of the fact that this question is 'only for women' (4) shows that this is not something that ageing men have to undergo, and clearly posits her experience of ageing as being gendered.

Krog's description of the options available to women deciding whether or not to undergo hormone replacement therapy relates to the possible adverse side-effects associated with the treatment. These possible side-effects are a much contested debate in medical discourse. As Beverly Burrell (2009:216) has explained, 'Findings [...] have led, over subsequent years, to claim and counter claim on the merits and dangers of hormonal medication, particularly in respect of efficacy for symptom relief and in relation to coronary heart disease and breast cancer risk'. In light of this, while Krog says that when undergoing hormone treatment, one will 'look younger' (5), she also clearly states the possible risk of contracting 'cancer and

Alzheimer's' (6). Interestingly enough, she posits the alternative as meaning one will 'look old' (7) and 'live too long' (8). The focus on 'look[ing] younger' (5) or 'look[ing] old' (7) in Krog's consideration of the options may be related to Burrell's description of the way in which the menopausal woman is subject to an 'exhortation to stay young' which 'is perpetually naturalised as the full expression of female performative function' (Burrell:2009). Because of this, the aesthetic consideration of how the menopausal woman will look is presented right along with the serious medical conditions of 'cancer and Alzheimer's' (6). The implication of this is that neither option associated with the hormone replacement therapy question could be described as an attractive alternative for women.

In the next section of the poem, Krog contrasts her own experience of menopause with that of her mother's:

if I ask my mother about menopause	9
she looks at me as if I've said the word 'internet'	10
'didn't you ever get hot flushes?'	11
'my girl, when I sweated I assumed	12
it was from work and then I went	13
swimming or sommer took a shower'	14

This may be related to the way in which Stephen Katz and Barbara Marshall (2003:5) have described how the advertising industry has portrayed 'the new antiageist, positive senior as an independent, healthy, sexy, flexi-retired "citizen," who bridges middle age and old age without suffering from the time-bound constraints of either'. They continue to explain that '[w]ithin this culture, timelessness, impermanence, and simultaneity have become central and necessary assets because all activities from leisure to education to healthcare, including,

ironically, death and dying have become personal, consumerist, and “lifelong” experiences’ (5). This means that ‘a sophisticated technical vocabulary that transfigures the lifecourse into knowable, codable, and legible market trends, segments, and consumer profiles’ (8) has been developed. Burrell’s argument can be read in relation to this. She believes that ‘by employing scientific discourse medicine identified menopause as a disease experience because the potentially fertile female body had been established as both a norm and an aspiration’ (2009:213). Because of this, ‘[t]he course of nature in ageing women has been re-categorised as unnatural’ (212). My purpose is not to argue that hormone replacement therapy medication should be dismissed as merely being a by-product of the commercialization of menopause and old age. Neither do I wish to gloss over the negative and uncomfortable consequences of menopause. Instead, these points should inform our understanding of how menopause and old age have become defined in our contemporary consumerist and political context, and that this identification is something that has changed over the course of human history. These ideas can be seen in the final two stanzas of Krog’s poem. By conflating ‘menopause’ (9) with the word ‘internet’ (10), and by pointing out that the term ‘hot flushes’ (11) was not part of her mother’s generation’s vocabulary, she gives credence to the idea that menopause has become reshaped and redefined in modern society.

In conclusion, Krog’s attitude towards hormone replacement therapy can be described as decidedly ambivalent. This ambivalence can be seen throughout the poems in the collection: while ‘sonnet of the hot flushes’ does describe the agonising effects of menopause, ‘hormone sonnet’ alludes to the ways in which menopause has been politicized into a concern that is informed by consumerism and has been pathologised by modern medical discourse. This ambivalence can also be seen in the poems ‘when tight is loose’ and its Afrikaans counterpart

‘as vas los is’, and comes across in the fifth stanzas of both poems. In ‘when tight is loose’, the speaking subject ‘reads about the wane/ of oestrogen’ (26-27) in ‘the *Hormone Book* by Susan Mare’ (25), while in ‘as vas los is’, she does so in the ‘*Hormone Book*’ of Dr ‘Susan Love’ (25). Dr Susan Love is indeed the author of a book called *Hormone Book*, while ‘Susan Mare’ is not listed as the author of any book whatsoever. However, the word ‘Mare’ alludes to a form of ‘equine HRT (that is hormone replacement therapy which has been manufactured from mare’s urine’ (Cox:1996).¹⁸ While animal rights campaigners have expressed their outrage at the treatment of the pregnant mares¹⁹, Dennis Cox also reads this as an ethical question that involves moral issues concerning the prescription and the use of equine HRT. He states that ‘[f]rom the perspective of enhancing a patient’s autonomy [...] it could be argued that the patient who is prescribed equine HRT without having the issues explained to her is being denied a chance to exercise her full autonomy’ (1996:202). Furthermore, when looked at from the ‘standpoint of informed consent, [one] could ask whether a woman’s consent to take HRT is free and informed if she is not told about its mode of production’ (1996:202). Thus, two issues arise from the use of equine HRT: firstly, whether the benefits of taking equine HRT (rather than plant-based HRT) outweigh the damage done to the mares in its production; secondly, whether a woman deciding ‘to hrt/ or not to hrt’ (1-2) has access to all of the information which should inform her consent or decline. As a result, it is because of the power of translation that Krog is able to insert these concerns into her discourse on menopause and old age: had it not been for the blatant discrepancy between the two texts in this specific instance, it would have been extremely easy to overlook the word ‘Mare’ and assume that ‘Susan Mare’ is indeed the author of the ‘*Hormone Book*’. The difference

¹⁸Confirmed by the poet in personal correspondence.

¹⁹See: Ryan, S. 1994. ‘Horses suffer for menopausal pill’. *The Sunday Times*, Dec 4: 1 (cols 1-6).

between the texts prompts the reader to do further research and allows Krog to elaborate on her ambivalent attitude towards HRT medication.

In 'Dommelfei / crone in the woods' (2006:68), Krog presents an alternative reaction to menopause as well as an alternative representation of grandmotherhood and growing older. She does so from the perspective of arguably the most famous grandmother in literature: Red Riding Hood's grandmother in the eponymous fairy tale. Significantly, Red Riding Hood is only once mentioned briefly in the poem, and then not even by name: 'a red-hooded grandchild/ with sturdy legs is on the/ way towards her' (18-20). Furthermore, the construction of Dommelfei's identity in the poem does not merely rest on the qualities of grandmotherhood. Instead, the poem attempts to delve into her consciousness and to explain what it is like to be the 'crone in the woods' whose identity is not shaped by Red Riding Hood and who has a rich and full inner-life of her own. Krog cites 'Mario en die diere' by Waldemar Bonsels as her intertextual inspiration for the poem. Originally written in German and later translated into Afrikaans, 'Mario en die diere' details the experiences of a young orphaned boy who runs away into the woods after the death of his mother in order to escape being sent to an orphanage. Here, he meets Dommelfei, the crone in the woods, who takes him in and teaches him about animals and the woods. While it is clear that 'Mario en die diere' only serves as a very loose intertextual reference to the poem, the characterisation of Dommelfei does carry through into Krog's poem.

As is the case with much of Krog's poetry, this poem does not immediately appear complex, but rather reveals its complexity upon closer analysis. It is divided into two sections by an asterisk, and a thematic shift becomes apparent in each of these sections. The poem starts

off by listing the identity markers the subject of the poem can no longer claim as her own (my emphasis):

she <i>no longer</i> reads books	1
they have nothing to say	2
to her. she <i>no longer</i> listens	3
to music it makes her	4
restless and fills her with longing	5
she <i>no longer</i> watches television	6
as it witnesses a world	7
in which she <i>no longer</i> has	8
a say. no children	9
can come from her <i>any</i>	10
<i>more</i> and she refuses to raise	11
those of others	12

Significantly, this description rests on how the subject previously identified herself and why this identity is no longer available to her. The over-riding effect of this section is to highlight the ways in which she is cut off from a world she previously inhabited. This isolation from the world that she experiences can be seen in Bonsels's text, where Dommelfei takes great care to shun the society outside of the woods. However, the difference between the story and this poem is the modernization evident in the poem, as can be seen through its reference to the 'television' (6), marking the shift between it and the source-text. This, in turn, allows this poem to speak to the other poems in the collection that also deal with the representation of grandmothers and their identity. While this section is initially characterised by a script of negation, the fact that 'no children/ can come from her any/ more' (9-11) (alluding to society's conflation of feminine value and fertility), is mediated by her 'refus[al] to raise/ [the

children] of others' (11-12), which is an active decision defined by neither lack nor loss. Thus, at this point, she begins to describe the identity markers she rejects and refuses to assume:

she has no interest in the inner	13
power mechanisms of men	14
powerful men revolt her	15
young men they bore her	16
old men render her sad	17
a red-hooded grandchild	18
with sturdy legs is on the	19
way towards her. she has sloughed	20
the demands of gender and behaviour	21
like an apron	22
and rides her life out	23
like a song.	24

Here, Krog depicts older age as an escape from the 'demands of gender and behaviour' (21). While the first section above illustrates the ways in which Dommelfei's identity is no longer marked by the social and cultural mores of the world, her senescence is described in this section as not being mediated by identification with the world of men. Interestingly, the fact that 'old men render her sad' (18) seems to suggest that she feels a sense of comradeship towards older men that she does not feel towards men who are still embroiled in the machinations of power associated with youth. The poem's singular reference to Red Riding Hood can be seen in this section: 'a red-hooded grandchild/ with sturdy legs is on the/ way towards her' (18-20). This reference might appear perplexing because of the fact that the poem uses Bonsels's text as source material rather than this fairy tale. Krog's choice of article in '*a red-hooded grandchild*' (18; my emphasis) seems to resist a direct connection between Dommelfei and the grandchild: it is not "her" grandchild that is being described. This allows

for further disassociation from identity markers typically associated with grandmotherhood. Significantly, the original Dommelfei takes Mario in and looks after him not because he is her grandchild, but rather because she chooses to do so. Furthermore, this reference allows Krog to reconceptualise the original Red Riding Hood story so that the female figures now are resilient: the grandmother is no longer bed-ridden and helpless, but canny and powerful, and the grandchild moves securely on ‘sturdy legs’ (19) and is no longer innocent and vulnerable to predation. The reference to ‘rid[ing] her life out/ like a song’ (23-24) inscribes older age with sweetness and freedom, rather than decline and lack. The ‘apron’ (22) can be read as an apt reference to the burden of womanhood that Dommelfei’s older age allows her to ignore. After the asterisk, the negation of the first section gives way to a description of what does define her identity:

she gets up when it’s light	25
she goes to bed when it’s dark	26
she lives within the crush of stars	27
and the moon a luminous	28
presence on the stoep	29
for the withering of her ovaries	30
she uses mixtures of primrose oil, soya-	31
flakes and clover, with tinctures of	32
black cohosh and wild yams she	33
loosens the streptococcus from her glands	34
with ginseng she smoothes the knuckles	35
with bloulangkop and sweet sedge	36
she brews a special tea	37
to tap cancer from the breasts, she	38
wets her dahlias with early morning pee	39
a blue crane walks with her as she	40
picks wild geranium for unguents	41
forest sage for new infusions –	42
an eagle with a single wingtip	43
cuts her line of vision.	44

Here, the negative connotations of witchery associated with crones are broadened and redefined to suggest an affinity with and connection to the powers of nature. That ‘she gets up when it’s light’ (25) and ‘goes to bed when it’s dark’ (26) undermines mechanised ideas of conventionally organised time. Instead of being regulated by imposed conditions of linearity, Dommelfei’s habits are shaped according to a more natural allegiance to the rhythms of nature, as can be seen in the description of her living ‘in the crush of stars’ (28). Instead of undergoing hormone replacement therapy or subjecting herself to a hysterectomy, she makes use of natural ingredients to alleviate her menopausal symptoms. This additionally counters the conflation of crones with witches who cast spells or concoct malevolent potions. Similarly, representations of witches suggest that they are often accompanied by animal familiars that assist them in their magic. Here, ‘a blue crane’ (40) simply walks with Dommelfei as she gathers ingredients for her homeopathic ‘unguents’ (41) and ‘infusions’ (42). The reference to ‘bloulangkop’ (36) and the ‘blue crane’ (40) contextualises the poem as being South African and distances it from Bonsels’s original Dommelfei. The poem concludes on a disturbingly threatening note:

she’ll knead your thighs, she’ll minister your	45
upper arms with balms. your forsaking heart	46
your flaking skin, she’ll comfort. she’ll unfasten	47
your mind and preserve your tongue gently	48
in the lower jaw, and when she sends you	49
alone into the cold wind of ageing	50
you’ll be searing from the marrow-bone.	51

This last section starts off positively and turns self-reflexively to the reader, stating that Dommelfei will ‘knead *your* thighs’ and will ‘minister *your/* upper arms with balms’ (45-46, my

emphasis). This gains a slightly sinister undertone when the reader's 'heart' is described as 'forsaking' (46) and his or her 'skin' as 'flaking' (47). Nonetheless, Dommelfei will still provide him or her with 'comfort' (47). However, in the next section, the focus moves from the readers' physicality to elements associated with language and the readers' cognition, namely their 'mind' and their 'tongue' (48): Dommelfei will 'unfasten' their 'mind' and 'preserve [their] tongue gently/ in the lower jaw' (47-49). This uncanny separation of mind and body is a departure from the earlier positive descriptions, as it does not simplistically denote care and comfort, and instead introduces an element of danger into the reader's situation. Significantly, the poem finishes with what may be a reference to 'A Prayer for Old Age' by W.B. Yeats (1934):

God guard me from those thoughts men think	1
In the mind alone;	2
He that sings a lasting song	3
Thinks in a marrow-bone;	4
From all that makes a wise old man	5
That can be praised of all;	6
O what am I that I should not seem	7
For the song's sake a fool?	8
I pray -- for word is out	9
And prayer comes round again --	10
That I may seem, though I die old,	11
A foolish, passionate man.	12

In this poem, Yeats expresses his lifelong dissatisfaction with the dualism that separates mind and body in Neoplatonic thought, asserting that 'intellect by itself leads to barrenness, intellectual sterility [...] but a unity of thought and emotion instead prompts fecundity' (Bornstein:56). This points to Yeats's belief that it is 'the self's polarization of experience into the Neoplatonic divisions of pure and impure, bodily and spiritual, inner and outer that inhibits its attainment of completion' (Wilson:33). This is exemplified by his distinction

between 'think[ing]/ in the mind alone' (1-2) and 'think[ing] in a marrow-bone' (3). Thus, to Yeats, the 'marrow-bone' (3) becomes a symbol of the ways in which mind and body, and thought and emotion, should be unified rather than polarized. By stating that Dommelfei is able to 'unfasten' the reader's 'mind' and 'preserve' his or her 'tongue' (47-49), Krog locates her source of power in her ability to 'think[...] in a marrow-bone' (Yeats:1934). While the reader will be sent 'alone into the cold wind of ageing' (50), he or she will be 'searing from the marrow-bone' (51). The warm intensity of the word 'searing' stands in stark contrast to the 'cold wind' Krog associates with 'ageing' (50). This could also possibly account for the sinister undertone of the final section: Krog is not attempting to deny or negate the inevitable reality of ageing. Instead, she points out the existence of alternative reactions to senescence. As a result, it is possible to read the entire second section of the poem after the asterisk as evidence of Dommelfei's 'marrow-bone' thinking that eschews the practices of modern medicine in favour of alternative forms of knowledge and understanding. In this poem Dommelfei embodies this alternative wisdom and acts as evidence of its value and worth.

Krog broadens the scope of her exploration of older age in the three marital songs. In an interview with Michelle McGrane, she states: 'I also need to grow old in poetry, [...] to find the words to love someone that I have lived with for thirty years – not as symbols or metaphors, but as blunt, untransformed body' (Krog in McGrane:2006). As a result, these three poems attempt to describe the connections between language, the ageing body and the kind of senescent love described above by Krog. In 'marital song 1' (2006:9), the focus falls most strongly on language, and how the ageing body changes the experience of love and alters its vocabulary:

since	1
birth our faces have been turned towards each other	2
as one calls the names of friends in the dark	3
so we called until someone answered	4
laudable is the word which awakens weathered	5
laudable is the word which, unbeknownst, falls to a whisper	6
laudable is the sound in which we're together as 'you' and 'I'	7
praiseworthy is the word 'we'	8
we are learning how to decline love into dialects of light	9
we are learning how to translate empathy into saving parts of speech	10
'unconditional' we inscribe as a preposition	11
it has been written that all of us will change like words	12
in the future tense as well as in the past tense	13
in plural as well as in loneliness	14
we are into the perfect tense	15
and are learning how blood turns into blindness	16
when the heart shines into it – how the perplexed glow	17
of happiness pulses past participles	18

In this first section of the poem, ageing love is inscribed as something that is 'laudable' (5) and 'praiseworthy' (8). In the same way that the ageing body requires its own vocabulary, Krog seems to suggest that the experience of ageing love demands a diction of its own. The references to 'word[s]' (5, 6 and 8), 'dialects' (9), 'translat[ion]', (10), 'parts of speech' (10), as well as 'tense[s]' (14 and 15) show that this process is intrinsically informed by language, and may be related to Krog's need to find 'the vocabulary of old age' (33) in 'how do you say this'. Significantly, she makes the point that the mutability of language allows for the expression of this vocabulary. In the same way that the body becomes something else in the process of ageing, the words used to describe this process have the ability to shift and adapt in meaning. A word can 'awaken[...] weathered' (5), and 'unbeknownst, fall[...] to a whisper' (6). The word 'love' can 'decline [...] into dialects of light' (9), 'empathy' can be 'translate[d] [...] into saving parts of speech' (10) and 'unconditional' can be 'inscribe[d] as a preposition' (11). While the

use of words such as ‘weathered’ (5), ‘whisper’ (6) and ‘decline’ (9), introduces ideas of lack and loss, this is countered by the speaking subject’s emphasis on the fact that she and the object of her love are undergoing a process in which they ‘are learning’ (9 and 10) as well as her statement that they ‘are into the perfect tense’ (15). That the ‘perplexed glow/ of happiness pulses past participles’ (17-18) indicates the excess of meaning involved in the translation of ageing love into language: even though words are mutable, they cannot contain or describe the experience in its totality.

As in ‘marital song 1’, ‘marital song 2’ (2006:25) counters conventional representations of ageing love:

your everyday daily hand in mine	1
the silence of your thumb	2
and a palm that is always itself	3
your hand secretes a mildness	4
which I fail to name adequately	5
if you hold me I breathe	6
our love lords the place	7
as you weigh in with me until	8
words convert guile into a glow	9
of startling light; you can lift me on stilts	10
and so sterling, dearest, things seldom appear to me.	11
from the edges you pull me back	12
and convince me to here-ness	13
to righteousness	14
for nobody’s name’s sake	15
nobody humans language more than you	16
nobody ignites like you	17
across borders of leaving and loss	18
seamless you fathom, fearless you point	19

the rot. out of all you have chosen me	20
but in the meantime you have turned grey	21
and awkwardly vulnerable in your sheath	22
for myself you took me in and forged me legitimate	23
from deep within my lungs I care for you	25
your integrity fills the length of our love	26
my eyes open up all around you	27
I bequeath my mouth to you	28
you have searched me and known me	29
you know my downsitting and mine uprising	30
you understand my heart afar off	31
but your hand now, this afternoon	32
thoughtfully in mine, reveals	33
that we are one flesh and that	34
you will die, like me	35
and like me,	36
you will do it alone	37
and not even death, beloved,	38
can sunder us	39
in this	40

While most of the poem details the nature and origins of the love between the speaking subject and her partner, the ways in which this love has changed become apparent towards the end of the poem, as can be seen in the lines: ‘but in the meantime you have turned grey/ and awkwardly vulnerable in your sheath’ (21-22). In the ending of the poem, the speaking subject muses on death as the inevitable future of their love. However, instead of defining death as that which will eventually rupture the union between her and her beloved, the cold reality of having to die alone is ironically inscribed as the final process that they will share.

The focus on older age established in ‘marital song 1’ and ‘marital song 2’ becomes much more explicit in ‘marital song 3’ (2006:55). The first section of the poem details how the love

between the speaking subject and her partner has changed over the course of 'thirty years'

(7):

1.	
to think about you when you were young	1
when everything about you was unknown	2
your hair strange, your clothes new to me	3
your language, the smell of your tongue	4
but your face completely legible	5
and elatedly surrendering to me.	6
now, after thirty years our hair smells the same	7
our stomach linings growl around the same food	8
your face however no longer provides any corridors	9
we have become family. we are fighting	10
for survival together like two open mouths	11
we no longer know where which commences, when	12
what expires where within our most secret silences	13
at times we are still on rafts of birdsong	14
as if we form part of a procession of stars	15
as if autumn trees carry the colour of the soles of our feet	16
when I'm away I know the back of your	17
head and how impossible it is to overtake your torso	18
each word between us devotedly revenges itself	19
with the live weight of thirty years	20
nobody would call this a conversation	21
although my neck longs for your hands	22
and between my shoulder blades	23
at times lightly, your tongue	24

In the first section of this part of the poem, Krog continues elaborating on the connection between love and language: her beloved's face is described as having been 'completely

legible' (5), despite the newness of his 'hair' (3), 'clothes' (3) and 'language' (4). She further conveys the ways in which the sense of adventure and exploration of 'thirty years' (7) ago has dissolved in the face of their unity through directly comparing the smell of his 'hair' (3) then to the fact that 'now, after thirty years [their] hair smells the same' (7). Similarly, the comment that their 'stomach linings growl around the same food' indicates the extent to which they have become one person. Their connection can also be seen in the fact that they 'have become family' (10). Their shared vulnerability is shown in the simile that describes them as 'fighting/ for survival together like two open mouths' (10-11). This conveys the loss of the sense of adventure that characterised their earlier life together through the fact that his 'face no longer provides any corridors' (9) as well as by the admission that 'nobody would call this a conversation' (21). The reference to the 'autumn trees [that] carry the colour of the soles of [their] feet' (15) alludes to the senescence of their position, and the inevitable approach of older age. While the last section of this part of the poem indicates the speaking subject's longing for what has gone through describing how her 'neck longs for [his] hands/ and between [her] shoulder blades/ at times lightly, [his] tongue' (22-24), the second part of the poem counteracts the gloomy nostalgia of the first through inscribing older age itself as an adventure (albeit a frightening one) similar to that which characterised their earlier life together:

2.		
misspelt and imprecisely translated		25
we flame forward on the breath of a country		26
where ageing awaits us in what we own		27
we do not quite know on what we shall live		28
together we overflow more and more towards the vulnerable		29
for the first time the impossible has startled us		30

neither may leave now	31
the fears multiply incessantly	32
we are thrown upon each other	33

Again, the fact that they are ‘misspelt and imprecisely translated’ (25) alludes to the connections between love, language and senescence. Here this could relate to Krog’s struggle in *Body Bereft* to find an appropriate language in which to express her experience of older age, as well as showing the indeterminacy and uncertainty that she characterises as part of the experience of ageing itself. Despite the fact that her beloved’s face ‘no longer provides any corridors’ (9), ‘the impossible has startled’ them ‘for the first time’ (30). This new phase of their lives is thus marked by uncertainty, vulnerability and fear, despite the fact that they are described as ‘flam[ing] forward’ (26) towards it. In the last section of the poem, Krog urges her beloved not to give in to the meekness that old age has brought him (and by implication, her):

and your body has become a sad slope	34
your smile in my direction so incidental	35
that it hardly recalls a battle order	36
please do not forget the hollows of my arms –	37
let us live our degenerate old age to the hilt	38

The last two lines summarise the thematic concerns of all three marital songs. While her beloved must ‘not forget the hollows of [her] arms’ (37), they must also together ‘live [their] degenerate old age to the hilt’ (38). This approach acknowledges the presence and value of nostalgia but also highlights the necessity of looking to the future and living together in the

time remaining to them. The references to ‘a battle order’ and ‘the hilt’ indicate that the speaking subject experiences the approach of older age as an onslaught that must be fought. Significantly, the sense of nostalgia in the second last line does not present nostalgia as a totalising reaction to older age, but rather serves as one facet of the myriad reactions Krog presents. The invitation to her partner in the last line to ‘live [their] degenerate old age to the hilt’ (38) inscribes their experience of old age as belonging exclusively to them. The use of the word ‘degenerate’ (38) emphasises this idea, in that it opens up a space in which she and her partner are free to create the definition of what old age means to them, and subsequently ‘live’ (38) it as they see fit.

The final poem in the collection, ‘Four seasonal observations of Table Mountain’ (translated into English by Andries Wessels), may be read as a summation of the thematic concerns presented in *Body Bereft*. In this poem, the speaking subject meditates on corporeality, mortality and senescence by using Table Mountain as a point of reference for her observations. Here, as in the rest of the collection, she situates the body as that which determines her being and identity (2006:85):

I am not	254
I, without my body	255
only through my body can I in-	256
habit this earth. My soul	257
is my body entire. My body	258
embodies what I am	259

However, the body cannot be read as a stable marker of identity, as the process of ageing (along with the inevitable sickness and physical degeneration that form part of this process) abjectly sunders the subject from her familiar body: ‘I want to [...] revive the wholeness that

was once mine/ I want to return with/ my previous body' (256-257). Instead, the now unfamiliar body becomes corporeal evidence of the inevitable onslaught of mortality:

do not turn against me, oh do not	260
ever leave me. do not	261
cave in around me, do not plummet	262
away from me, do not leave me with-	263
out testimony. I	264
have a body, therefore I am.	265

Instead of the unquestioning unity between self and body experienced by a healthy individual in youth, this onslaught means that the relationship between the subject and his or her ageing body is one characterised instead by alienation and betrayal. This can be seen in the speaking subject's reference in this poem to 'your body's insurgence/ against your body' (214-215), as well as in the poems 'when tight is loose' and 'softsift of the hourglass'. If, as Krog suggests, one's body determines one's identity, and if this ageing body becomes strange and unfamiliar, it follows that one's identity itself in older age becomes alien and unstable. In light of this, Krog questions her bodily origins in order to make sense of her senescent identity: 'I lift/ up mine eyes to the mountain/ whence cometh my body?' (81-83).

The poems in *Body Bereft* may be read as Krog's response to her own question. Throughout the collection, she attributes the construction of the ageing body to a number of sources. In the poem 'leave me a lonely began', the waiter who does not see the speaking subject in the closing coffee shop acts as an external force that compels her to regard her body as unfamiliar and in doing so construct it as an ageing, Other body. In 'softsift of the hourglass', a stroke causes a division between self and body in the subject, resulting in abjection,

alienation and a sense of betrayal. Here, it is a medical condition that prompts the construction of her experience of her ageing body. Similarly, in 'sonnet of the hot flushes', ageing is likened to a sickness that wreaks havoc on her corporeal sense of identity; while in 'hormone sonnet' Krog points out the ways in which menopause and older age have become pathologised by modern medical discourse. These four poems explore the complex differentiation between what constitutes a healthy body and a diseased body, as well as a youthful body and an older body, teasing out the ways in which the lived experience of menopause intersects with and contradicts the construction of the menopausal body in western medical discourses. In 'God, Death, Love' the arbiters of the literary canon are shown to mute and negate the construction of ageing bodies in literature. Similarly, 'manifesta of a grandma' locates the source of the ageing body in the popular imagination as resulting from the stereotypical representation of grandmothers, and closely links this with children's perceptions of their grandparents. This is shown to be the direct result of the reproduction of newspaper articles, pictures, songs and stories that portray ageing bodies in certain ways: as a result, the ageing body in this poem is constructed by the subject's simultaneous internalisation and rejection of societal forces. In contrast to this, 'Dommelfei / crone in the woods' presents the construction of an ageing body that is not influenced by contemporary dominant ideologies, and which is rather shaped by alternative wisdom and other approaches to growing older.

Throughout the collection, however, it becomes evident that for Krog the dominant factor in the construction of the ageing body is language. As bodies grow older, she seems to suggest, the words with which we describe them should also change: new modes of being require other methods of representation. In 'leave me a lonely began', she presents poetry itself as a

defence against the ravages of age, but inscribes this defence as something that is impermanent and problematic. The visual layout of 'softsift of the hourglass' mirrors the speaking subject's experience of her condition. Similarly, the diction of 'sonnet of the hot flushes' matches its thematic content. Despite managing to defy death metaphorically here through poetry, the defiance is again shown to be unable to withstand the bereft nature of her body in older age. In 'marital song 2', Krog shows that even though words change as bodies change, they can never contain the totality of the experience of growing older. It is only in 'how do you say this' that Krog is able to liberate the ageing body from being a self-enclosed marker of identity.

Through the simultaneous publication of *Body Bereft* and *Verweerskrif*, Krog is able to undermine monolithic representations of senescence. In the same way that she refuses to depict ageing in binary terms as something that is experienced either positively or negatively, the translation of the collection from Afrikaans to English becomes a crucial tool with which she 'eke[s] out the vocabulary of old age' (2006:29), as translation allows her to open up creative spaces in which she can make social comments on ageing (as seen in 'when tight is loose', for example). However, it is the impetus behind her desire for translation that resonates most clearly with her construction of the ageing body: Krog believes that 'it is crucial for people in a country with such a divided, separated past to translate one another in order to begin to form some kind of coherent and undominated consciousness' (Krog in McGrane:2006). As a younger poet, Krog wrote exclusively in Afrikaans, but was keenly aware of the political ideologies associated with the apartheid government that underpinned her mother-tongue (Krog in McGrane:2006):

I was fortunate to be born into a language that had a young yet solid literature. It had publishing houses, newspapers and other media reviewing books, readers reading it, etc. I could function in totality in that language. I could live in a house in it, I could study maths in it, I could go to university in it, and I could analyse and relate to my complete world in it. So, being part of the ruling white community, I could start out in total confidence and became the kind of poet I could be. The problem was that one felt oneself part of a community other than the ruling white one. And to access that community, translation was, thank God, a wonderful tool.

In light of this, she now sees English as ‘the language in which all South Africans can, for the first time, talk as (un)equals to one another’ (Krog in McGrane:2006). If, for Krog, the experience of inhabiting an ageing body demands new modes of expressing and representing an identity that is similarly in flux, the decision to translate *Verweerskrif* and release it simultaneously with *Body Bereft* marks her most powerful expression of a new mode in which to construct and represent the ageing body and its senescent consciousness.

'One small minute, redeemed from a stringent hour': Reconceptualising value in *The Mistress's Dog*

It has been argued that the socio-political instability of South Africa's transition to democracy is a historical moment best captured in literature by the medium of the short story. Andries Oliphant (1996:59) explains that the 'short story's concentration and focus [...] renders [sic] it uniquely appropriate for capturing disparate moments and events' such as the 'fluid and transitory' nature of South Africa's liberation from apartheid. According to Oliphant (59):

This view is sustainable on the grounds that the short story, when compared to the novel, apart from its length, does not require the same degree of stability in the order of things, or continuity between past and present, for its operations. This makes it extremely flexible and enables it to focus on fragments and fractions of everyday life without forfeiting any of the efficacy of narrative to describe imaginary or real events and illuminate their causal relationship. The short story is therefore an important epistemological apparatus through which a wide range of insights embracing the aesthetic, a variety of forms of social intelligibility, as well as discernible and as yet indiscernible shifts in sensibilities can be made accessible through narration.

He is, however, careful to note that it is nonetheless problematic to view the 'proliferation of short-story writing' (59) during South Africa's transitional years as a new phenomenon that is somehow divorced from the country's earlier literary history. Instead, he argues for a 'broader framework incorporating the ongoing dialogue between past and present narratives that bridges the discontinuities and distances which range between' (62). David Medalie (2010:35) makes a similar point in commenting on a 'utopian tendency in post-apartheid criticism, which tends to be extremely proscriptive and frequently takes the form of telling writers that they should be making great leaps into new vistas of the imagination'. This critical impulse, according to Medalie (36) 'bears little relation to the actual concerns and

characteristics of much post-apartheid literature, which is not only dystopian, but inclined rather to a preoccupation with the past than an embrace of the future'. He explains that 'the imperative which urges a complete transformation of the imagination, an entirely new type of literature to meet the making of a new society, seems to be misplaced'. This is because in 'historical periods, which feel strongly their own transitional status (the Edwardian age in Britain is a good example) there is an inclination to look at the present with dismay, the future with trepidation and the past with nostalgia' (36).

These comments by Medalie and Oliphant point to the danger of viewing South Africa's transitional years, and the literature which emerged from them, as unique or exceptional. Thus, while this chapter argues that the transitional period allowed for an opening up of the possibilities for the literary representation of older age in South Africa, any model that attempts to sever the ties between the past, the present and the future needs to be regarded with a great deal of circumspection. Indeed, this idea is typified by the necessarily ambivalent position of the ageing individual in transitional South Africa. While David Medalie's collection of short stories, *The Mistress's Dog*, is indeed an excellent example of the ways in which the birth of democracy allowed for the representation of the older individual to be liberated from its close association with the dying order, his ageing characters nonetheless occupy an uneasy position in relation to what he has elsewhere described as 'a pervasive rhetoric of new beginnings and social and historical emancipation which greeted the end of apartheid' (2010:35).

Medalie's representation of older age in *The Mistress's Dog* differs from the representation of older age in the first two texts analysed by this study in that his narrative is not driven by the political impetus demanded by the approaching demise of apartheid. Set in the post-apartheid years immediately following the advent of democracy, his stories exemplify the ways in which 'literatures of the [...] decade [following the birth of democracy] record a steady retreat from the strident, public and political character of writing to a more private, introspective, and confessional mode' (Irlam:698). Indeed, the 'tension [...] between the strident voice of political protest and the private voices of individual consciousness' (699) that can be seen in both *Age of Iron* and *Agaat* has given way in *The Mistress's Dog* to an entirely different kind of political consciousness. The experiences of the elderly protagonists in both *Age of Iron* and *Agaat* gain full meaning only when seen directly alongside the political changes reflected in these novels. Medalie's short stories, however, prioritise the personal over the political in such a way that the main narrative thrust is not as dependent on the political for its meaning. This is not to say that individual experience is irrelevant in *Age of Iron* and *Agaat*, or that *The Mistress's Dog* is an apolitical text, but rather that its representation of the relationship between the personal and the political is governed by a less stringent political imperative.

The short story 'Recognition' displays most cogently this altered relationship between the private and the political, as well as the tension between the past, the present and the future. In this short story, the unnamed elderly widow of Kobus, a prime minister of the apartheid regime, is invited by the first democratic president of South Africa to a luncheon, along with other political widows. Ostensibly, this luncheon symbolises the spirit of reconciliation that

dominated the transition to democracy. As Magdalena, the narrator's friend, explains, the 'President wishes to make peace with the past, [...] this is his way of showing that reconciliation can take place' (Medalie:175). However, the narrator is suspicious of these ideologies of newness, as she feels that South Africa 'has become a young country' (173) and that she herself has 'become something left over from the past' (173). This statement of hers captures most explicitly the uneasy relation between the ageing subject and the ideologies of newness that characterise transitional South Africa. Significantly, she does not consider herself a 'political person' (174) and harbours ambivalent feelings towards South Africa's previous government or towards the remnants of it that have survived the transition, as she feels that 'the Party is no longer the one that [her husband] represented so loyally, and that he would not approve of some of the directions it has chosen' (174). The effect of this is to emphasise the ways in which the narrator's loyalty is not to the cruel and overt domination associated with the apartheid regime, but rather to her husband and everything he represents to her.

It is significant that her disapproval of 'the Party' does not arise from her personal opinion regarding it, but rather from what she believes her husband would have thought. She explains that her husband 'taught [her] a great deal' and that he 'taught [her] more as a father teaches his child than as a man teaches his wife' because she 'knew so little, even though [she] had been to the Teacher's Training College' (175). As Mary West (2009:4) explains, '[W]hite women have necessarily occupied an uneasy space, falling somewhere between the phallogentricity of Cartesian subjectivity and the iconographic other of western imperialism'. This is particularly pertinent to the South African context in general and to

'Recognition' in particular: even though the narrator occupied a privileged position as a white citizen during the apartheid years, Medalie emphasises the ways in which she was subjected to the patriarchal ideologies that governed apartheid South Africa. According to West (2009:4), 'The hierarchical relationship that patriarchy established may not be as powerful and as destructive in the twenty-first century as it has been in the past, in advanced western societies (which influence the mores of white South Africans), but it is nonetheless still hierarchical and women have not entirely escaped the objectification that such a relationship has inculcated'. This uneasy subject position can also be seen in the narrator's explanation of how she is sometimes 'used' (Medalie:175) by 'the Party' to represent the past. Even though she states that she does not 'want to be used by any group of people for their own political ends' (175), she does not seem to mind the party's using her as 'they are the last people who still cherish all that [Kobus] fought for' (174). This places her in an ambivalent position in relation to both the previous regime and the new democratic government, as it highlights the manner in which she views politics in a personal light.

However, now that apartheid has been dismantled, and now that her husband is deceased, she finds herself in new and unfamiliar terrain where she is not sure how she should define herself without her husband's guiding presence. As a result, she feels that she has 'a responsibility towards Kobus's memory' (173) and is 'protective of his reputation' (181). She explains this sentiment by saying that there 'is a kind of loyalty that must be suspicious of things that are new' (173). She feels that the 'stability' (175) of her life derives from what she has learned from her husband, meaning that her identity in her older age at the start of the short story derives from the past, and not from the present or the future. However, the

invitation to attend the luncheon for political widows forces her to re-evaluate herself in relation to the ideological changes occurring in the present.

The fact that the luncheon takes place at the President's residence is extremely significant, as this had previously been the narrator's home. As a result, it is possible to view the President's house as the concretised representation for the narrator of the site on which the past, the present and the future collide. Furthermore, it signifies the intersection between the personal and the political. This is because of the fact that homes usually signify the domestic and, thus the personal. However, because this is the new President's home, and because the narrator's husband used to be the Prime Minister, this house is associated with both the personal and the political. The narrator herself articulates this when she comments on how 'the sight of [the] redecorated room affected [her] more than all the other changes [she] had seen' (178), and wonders why they had not kept the 'Pierneef or the Van Wouw sculpture' (178). She naïvely explains that 'there was nothing political about them' (178). Furthermore, she says that she 'had redecorated [the room herself] a few months after Kobus became Prime Minister' (178). It could be reasonable to assume that her own reasons for having redecorated the room were not political, yet she assumes that whoever redecorated the room after the transition to democracy did so for what she feels are mistakenly political reasons, rather than for the reasons that led her to redecorate. While the question of whether seemingly apolitical works of art are in fact political is debatable, what is of significance here is the fact that the narrator does not recognise that even though the works of art may not be political to her, others might perceive them differently. Towards the end of

the story, however, the narrator is able to discard, to some extent, her egocentric position, as will be elaborated on later.

In this short story, Medalie seems to problematise the concept of reconciliation. He achieves this through contrasting the narrator's circumspect response to attending the luncheon with her friend Magdalena's enthusiastic and glib embrace of everything that is new. As the narrator says, 'There was something cringing about [Magdalena], [...] a smallness in her gratitude' (177). When Magdalena meets the new president, the narrator remarks that her friend 'was not behaving in a dignified manner' and that she 'was gushing over him, not permitting him even to complete his words of welcome' (177). The emphasis on 'the television cameras and microphones [that] were focused upon her' (180) furthers the lack of sincerity in her response. In contrast, the narrator finds the experience so difficult that she has to 'think deliberately about her pride before [she] went in – how much pride [she] would wear, how [she] would wear it' (177). The implication of this is that the narrator realises that Magdalena's enjoyment of the attention means that she is relinquishing the past entirely and thoughtlessly and that this detracts from the sincerity of her response to the President's gesture. The narrator feels that because her past has shaped who she is in the present, she cannot with good conscience act as though she is severed from it. However, she is moved by the graciousness of the President's sentiment. She indicates that she 'wanted to do more than thank him for inviting [her] to the luncheon. [She] wanted to thank him for the gesture, for the symbolism' (180). She desires to be 'worthy of that important thing that had been entrusted to [her] and that others, despite their own importance, were prepared to recognise in [her]' (177). This causes her to experience a sense of conflict as 'gushing like

Magdalena' means 'yielding something up to him that [she] was supposed to keep from him' (180). Even though the narrator appreciates the gesture the President is making towards her, she still feels as though she has to retain her loyalty towards her husband, and towards the past. If she acts in the way in which Magdalena is acting, she would be betraying this loyalty, yet she still desires to express her appreciation of the President's humility. The result of this is that she is caught between two emotional ties that respectively pull her towards the future and lock her in the past.

This dilemma encapsulates the unstable position of the white ageing subjects explored in the transitional and post-transitional era which is the focus of this study. In *Age of Iron*, Vercueil represents everything that is new and unknown to Mrs Curren. She has to reconcile the ethical duty she comes to believe she owes him with her previously stable sense of self. In doing so, she has to rewrite the ways in which she views her identity as well as her past. However, she cannot entirely let go of who she used to be. This reaching out to the Other can be likened to a reconciliation of sorts. In *Agaat*, the narrative circles around the possibility of Milla's and Agaat's making peace with each other. However, Milla finds it extremely difficult and continuously reverts to the negative patterns of behaviour and thought that have become habitual over the course of her lifetime. Like the narrator in 'Recognition', she recognises the need for reconciliation, but struggles to navigate her way towards it. The implication of this is that these three authors all problematise the glib and thoughtless embrace of newness and represent it as detracting from the sincerity of a subject's response to attempts at reconciling divides between individuals. Their representations of their elderly white protagonists highlight their reluctance to view the past and the future as discrete

entities. While the age of their protagonists allows them to bring this reluctance into sharper focus, this also allows them to make more general comments on the spirit of reconciliation demanded by the ideologies of newness that characterise transitional South Africa.

Significantly, the narrator in 'Recognition' explains that '[p]eople are not satisfied with changing the present nowadays, they want to change the past too' (174). She feels that she has 'to protect what [she] know[s]' and that she has 'become strangely jealous of [her] own life' (174). Because of this, she is caught in a liminal position in which she desires to reciprocate the humility displayed by the president as well as to hold on to the past that has shaped her into who she is. However, she is unable to act towards the President in a way that both honours her appreciation of his intention as well as articulates her aversion to Magdalena's glibness. She states that she 'was not very pleased with [her] responses' as she feels that 'they were a little ungracious' (180).

In contrast to this, she is indeed able to make an honest gesture to the woman seated next to her at the luncheon. For most of the lunch, she is unaware of the fact that the woman is the widow of an activist who had died in police custody while her husband had been Minister of Justice. When she discovers the identity of the woman, she feels 'the need to say something, something appropriate to the occasion, but it was difficult to know what to say' (181). First, she repeats to the woman what Magdalena initially expressed to her on the telephone. She says that the President 'has done a great thing' in bringing them 'together so that [they] can make peace with the past and recognise [their] common humanity' (181). Seeking to establish a connection with the woman, she states that they 'are all widows' and that '[e]ach

of [them] has suffered a loss' (181). In response to this, the woman 'seemed to stare at something behind [her], something in the far distance' (181) and asks her whether she came to the luncheon 'to make peace with the past' (182). The narrator realises that '[i]f there was one gesture [she] could make, it was to tell her the truth' and that it 'was a relief to do so' (182). She tells the woman that she 'came to make sure that no one is going to take the past away from [her]' (182). The narrator is only able to connect with the woman seated next to her in an honest manner when she discards the politically correct kind of stock phrases that Magdalena thinks the occasion demands. This can be seen by the fact that when the narrator tells the woman the truth, the woman 'looked directly at [her]' (182), rather than 'star[ing] at something behind' her (181) as she previously had. True reconciliation, Medalie seems to suggest, relies on the idea of recognition. Significantly, he is careful not to discount the value of grand reconciliatory gestures, as can be seen by the narrator's appreciation of the President's invitation. However, the characterisation of Magdalena in this short story points out how easily responses such as hers can become hollow and meaningless, when these responses are severed from one's acknowledgement of the past. Reconciliation should not mean relinquishing the past that has shaped the present, but rather recognising the ways in which one's own past cannot be denied or erased. The point is that to 'recognise [their] common humanity' does not necessarily mean that they have to 'make peace with the past' (181). This hinges on an understanding of the tension between the private and the public. Magdalena, in her gushing and glib embrace of the discourse of reconciliation, removes herself from the past. Because of this, she comes across as insincere and superficial. However, when the narrator makes her private, small gesture of reconciliation towards the woman seated next to her, and in doing so exposes a sentiment that could be regarded as selfish and as contrary to the discourse of reconciliation that governs the occasion, she

connects with the woman in an honest and sincere manner. Significantly, Medalie is careful to emphasise that such gestures cannot automatically erase all the differences between individuals, as it is ‘impossible [for the narrator] to know what to make of the expression’ (182) on the woman’s face. However, when the woman states that they ‘perhaps [...] have something in common after all’ (182) it becomes apparent that reconciliation does not necessarily have to involve denying the past or erasing all differences, and that recognition may perhaps be more valuable than ostensible reconciliation. Recognition, in this context, relates to the way in which the narrator sees herself in the other woman’s pain, and to the way in which she makes herself vulnerable in revealing her own pain to the woman. While reconciliation is an impulse that binds individuals together, it inevitably involves compromise. In contrast, to recognise oneself in someone else means to acknowledge the common thread of humanity that connects all people, despite differences in race and political belief. While reconciliation glosses over the compromises that have to be made, recognition acknowledges the inevitability of differences while simultaneously searching for that which connects one to others, despite these differences.

Medalie’s choice of an elderly individual as protagonist of this short story is particularly appropriate, as the narrator’s age allows him to bring into sharper focus the reconfiguration of identity demanded by the transitional period. However, he does more than simply use the ageing individual as an apt symbol through which to portray the societal tensions that govern democratization – he imbues his protagonist with sufficient agency to regulate the conditions under which she rewrites her previously stable identity. His representation of old age in ‘Recognition’ furthermore highlights the ways in which the transition to democracy allowed

for an opening up of the possibilities for the depiction of senescence in South African literature in general. This is achieved by liberating his elderly protagonist from the close association with the dying order that characterises the depiction of ageing in both *Agaat* and *Age of Iron*. The narrator in 'Recognition' is not a symbol for the demise of apartheid. She lives neither exclusively in the past, nor entirely for the future. Nor is she represented as being obsolete in relation to the ideologies of newness that characterise the new South Africa. Her attempt to reach out to the other woman does not demand that she relinquish who she is and what she believes. The value of this representation lies in Medalie's careful negotiation of past, present and future. While the narrator's sense of identity primarily derives from the past, her recognition of this allows her to enact personally and in miniature her own application of the discourse of reconciliation that dictates the socio-political climate of her present. Because of this, the narrator, despite her conservatism and, in some respects, her moral blindness, does not emerge as a caricature. As a result, Medalie's nuanced depiction of the aged narrator allows him to inscribe older age with social currency but also to represent its potential as a period of personal growth and value, without undermining the sincerity of the individual.

While 'Recognition' is a short story that explicitly deals with older age in a political context, 'The Mistress's Dog' questions the possibility of agency and choice in later life. This short story details a day in the life of an elderly woman, Nola, faced with the unfortunate task of caring for the pet dog of her deceased husband's mistress. Ironically, the dog symbolises both her past, as it serves as a reminder of her husband's infidelity, as well as her present and future, as its physical degeneration mirrors her own. Indeed, Medalie's description of the dog

reflects to some extent some of the characteristics of how older age is represented in the other texts analysed in this study. The helpless aged dog's life has been reduced to biological functions – he struggles to perform ablutions, cannot eat much, because '[m]ost of his teeth were gone' (2), he is 'almost blind, more than a little deaf, suffering from heart failure' (4), and vomits on the supermarket floor when he accompanies Nola on a shopping trip (7). Even though it is not as explicit as the abjection that characterises the depiction of older age in *Age of Iron*, *Agaat* and *Body Bereft*, it is nonetheless possible to detect the same transgression of corporeal borders in Medalie's description of the dog. That the dog reflects Nola's own inevitable future seems to suggest that she too will eventually succumb to the abject helplessness of the protagonists in the other texts. If abjection is 'what life withstands' and 'the border' from which '[m]y body extricates itself, as being alive' (Kristeva:3), then the dog represents to Nola that which she has to thrust aside in order to live.

The vet has offered to euthanase the dog 'at any time' (Medalie:4), because of the decrepitude of its condition. He has assured Nola that she 'need have no qualms' about it, and that it 'would be perfectly appropriate; even humane' (4) to do so. However, Nola feels as though she 'couldn't bear the responsibility' (4) of having to make the decision. This makes her reconsider all the choices she has made over the course of her life, in particular the manner in which she chose to tolerate her husband's infidelity. She wonders what it says about her that her husband's mistress's dog is her 'last companion' (10) and whether she had 'ended up with him by default because she had not, during her life, made the wise, the adroit choices' (10). She indicates that she has always felt 'the pressure to choose as a weight that lay upon her, squeezing and stifling her' and that the 'act of choosing had in itself been an

agony' (5). Significantly, she feels that her old age should mean that 'the anguish of having to make choices ought to be fading at last' (5). The dog, however, 'threaten[s] her with the choices associated with his death' (5).

The question is whether Nola has any agency in her older age or whether her old age is the inevitable outcome of her life's choices. Indeed, she is only faced with the choice of whether or not to euthanase the dog because she tolerated her husband's infidelity in her earlier life. The narrator cites the occasion when her husband asks Nola whether or not they could take in the dog after the mistress moves to a retirement village as 'one of the few occasions in their marriage in which [she] had had the power, the absolute power, of decision' (9):

The choice was truly hers. If she persisted in saying no, the mistress's dog would have remained in Johannesburg, and, no doubt, would have been euthanased. It was an opportunity for revenge such as she had never had before.

But it had come too late. The powerful man had gout, an enlarged heart and a flickering memory. The mistress was no longer robust. They would never see each other again. It was too late, far too late, to triumph over them.

In light of this, even though the choice had been 'truly hers' (9) as her husband would have abided with whatever decision she made, the narrator's statement that 'it had come too late' (9) seems to indicate that even this choice had not truly been any choice at all. Similarly, the narrator, reflecting her thoughts, also states that not wanting to choose whether or not to euthanase the dog is a choice in itself. She wonders whether she is 'keeping him alive [...] simply because she was too cowardly to make the choice' (4). This may be related to Mrs

Curren's plea in *Age of Iron* for a language in which she can articulate more than 'yes' or 'no'. Medalie's depiction of Nola seems to imply a similar sentiment. The decisions she faces with regard to the dog and its mistress – whether or not to tolerate the affair; whether or not to allow her husband to take custody of the dog; whether or not to euthanase it in its old age – are far more complex than the difference between deciding whether or not to take action.

However, the episode in which the dog vomits on the supermarket floor seems to contain something of a resolution to this dilemma. Nola chooses not to creep away and leave 'the misdemeanour to be discovered later' (7). Instead, she reports the incident to the cleaning staff and 'returned to the aisle, standing guard over the vomit, warning people not to tread in it' (7). After some time someone arrives to clean up the mess. Medalie's description of the 'sullen' and 'resentful' (7) supermarket employee is extremely revealing. Firstly, he explicitly describes the woman as 'young'. Secondly, throughout Nola's interaction with her, he emphasises the woman's own physicality. She is described as 'big', and her uniform as 'too tight for her' (7). Her face has a 'greasy sheen' when she 'heave[s] herself to her feet' (7), and her face 'came perilously close to Nola's as she brushed past her' (7). This is important because even though Nola is 'as contrite as the circumstances demanded [...] something also made her want to put in a plea, to soften [the] thick resentment' (7). She tells the supermarket employee that 'he's a very old dog'; that '[t]hese things happen when you're old' and that '[w]e all get old' (7). Through focusing on the physicality of the young supermarket employee, Medalie points out that she too will grow old and eventually die, and in doing so, makes explicit the connection between her, the dog and Nola. This connection relates to the inevitability of senescence and death. Nola's plea seems to be for a recognition

of the interconnectedness between people. Because the short story seems to imply that the dog is the concretisation of her own inevitable future, despite what it might symbolise about her past, she is able to regard him with compassion, and this compassion is what grants her authority and agency in her older age.

However, the employee appears to disregard Nola's plea for compassion, commenting that '[t]hey must shoot [her] first' (7). This brusque remark draws attention to a prejudice against the elderly that exists in society. In this episode, the prejudice appears to result from what the employee perceives as the dog's (and by implication Nola's) loss of bodily vigour. This alludes to the fact that society privileges a contained and controlled body as the norm. By drawing attention to the fact that senescence and bodily degeneration are unavoidable realities that everyone has to face, Medalie deconstructs the roots of this prejudice, and appears to posit compassion as its countermeasure.

In the short story 'Small', an elderly woman, Stella, lives in a retirement village ironically called Horizon. This short story encapsulates Medalie's preoccupation with the inner-life of his characters and with their ordinary experiences. As the title suggests, the plot of the story is uncomplicated. Stella is befriended by a pompous woman called Gwen. She finds the friendship stifling. She meets Gwen's son, Vernon; the two begin to confide in each other, and Stella begins to enjoy her life more. Gwen becomes jealous of her son's divided attention, and her friendship with Stella dwindles. Stella longs for an impossible closer intimacy with Vernon. She believes this will come to pass if an occasion presents itself for her to save his mother's life. Vernon, however, has a seizure while visiting his mother, and Gwen

goes to Cape Town to be with her son. Stella comes to view Gwen with compassion, rather than with judgement. This causes her to see her own life in a new light. However, the story has power not despite but because of the smallness of its plot. In 'Small', Medalie captures the possibility of powerful emotions and reactions existing in miniature. As Michael Titlestad (2010:xii) suggests in the 'Foreword' to the collection, 'this story captures how events, even "small" events, can express worlds of meaning and consequence'. This is particularly pertinent to an analysis of senescence, as the ostensible barrenness and diminishing prospects of Stella's older age conceal her complex and rich inner-life. In this short story, Medalie simultaneously presents older age as a time of limited potential and explodes these limitations through detailing his protagonist's intricate subjectivity.

From the beginning of the story, the smallness of Stella's life is emphasised. She feels that 'now that she ages, her life grows even smaller' (24). The smallness of her flat in the retirement village symbolises this (25):

[B]athroom, tiny kitchen, bedroom and sitting-room combined. It was all she could afford. She has an armchair and a wooden chair with a straight back next to her bed; if more than two people come to visit, she has to sit on the bed. But very few people visit, so it's not a problem. She's not dissatisfied with her bed-sit: there's something about it which reiterates the course of her life. If nothing else, it's an honest home.

The 'bald facts' of her life are simple: 'she was a hospital administrator for many years, never married, has no surviving family' (24). The fact that she has no surviving family is significant, as the story emphasises the importance the residents of Horizon place on visits from family. If

Stella's life could be described as small, Gwen's would be described as big. She is 'not short of money' and lives in a 'large cottage' that 'reminds Stella of a furniture salesroom' (25). She regales Stella with stories of her life, 'her husband the mining engineer, the double-storey house, the terraced garden, the huge dinner parties she hosted, the servants dressed to welcome the guests in cummerbands and white gloves, the ice sculptures, the violin quartets, the Mediterranean cruises' (25-26). Stella finds Gwen overbearing and arrogant, and is shunned by the other residents because of her association with the woman. However, she is unable to extricate herself from Gwen's stifling friendship.

It is possible to read this short story in relation to Gary Kenyon and William Randall's model of narrative gerontology with its description of the temporality of old age. Significantly, Gwen's identity in her older age derives almost entirely from memories of her younger life. In light of this, her identity is shaped by the idea of backshadowing, as she is 'oriented primarily towards the past' (Randall & Kenyon:336). Stella later learns, however, that Gwen's recollections of her past are not entirely accurate, as Vernon tells her that the house Gwen often brags about 'became a bit dilapidated in later years' (Medalie:34). The importance Gwen places on her past, Stella begins to suspect, derives from the fact that '[e]ven Gwen cannot pretend that her present life is large' and that '[n]othing can hide the fact that she's an elderly widow, living in a cottage in a retirement village' (26). Gwen's reaction to the diminishing prospects of her older age is 'to construe increasingly hyperbolic fantasies of importance within the social hierarchy of the retirement village' (26-27). 'Her isolation,' she tells Stella, 'is evidence of the awe in which she's held: people know who she was, who her husband was, and are intimidated' (27). Because of this, Gwen constructs her sense of identity in older age through combining 'backshadowing' with what Randall and Kenyon refer

to as 'sideshadowing', which refers to 'a *middle realm* of real possibilities that could have happened even if they did not' (2005:336, emphasis in original). This is because she uses her memories of the past to define who she is in the present, but also attempts futilely to draw the imaginary trajectory of what she sees as her past importance into her diminished present.

In contrast to this, Stella, whose life presented only promises of satisfaction that never materialised, derives at the beginning of the short story her sense of identity in her older age from the present. Because of this, it is appropriate that this short story is written in the present tense. However, when Vernon begins visiting his mother at the retirement village, Stella's sense of identity starts to shift. He causes her also to experience, as will be elaborated on below, the idea of 'sideshadowing'. Before meeting Vernon, Stella already decides that 'she dislikes him intensely' because he 'seems to have dedicated his life to achieving the pomposity his name promised him' (27-28). When she does meet him, however, she finds in him an unexpected friend and ally. She discovers that his face contains 'no trace of the smugness or the hubris which she has long despised' (31). She begins to cherish his presence and 'counts the days until every second Sunday afternoon' (31) when he visits his mother. Vernon is also 'pleased to have her there' (31) as he finds his mother's pomposity 'a strain' (32). The idea of Stella's sideshadowing reveals itself in the most poignant passages of the short story, where insomnia causes her to question the nature of her relationship with Vernon (37):

She would like more, but she cannot begin to hope for it. There is not a chance that Vernon will fall in love with her. It's not only beyond the bounds of everyday possibility – it lies even beyond the reach of dreams. He can never

desire her as she desires him. He's full of affection, of respect, of deference, but that's as far as it goes – as far as it will ever go. To imagine more, even within the tight silence of clandestine longings, is to permit dreams that are absurd even to her.

Here Medalie gives voice to the often unarticulated desires of the elderly. Stella's longing for Vernon is clearly sexual, as she takes note of 'the fine blond hairs on the back of his hands, the way he crosses his long legs, the beautiful leather shoes' (36). She is even able to smell 'his aftershave in the darkness of her bedroom' (36), but the narrator is then careful to state that this is 'a room he has never entered' (36). In *Body Bereft* Krog presents the reader with a sexually-aware, sexually desiring older body. In contrast, the idea of sexuality in older age is not explored in Van Niekerk's representation of Milla in *Agaat*. While there might be some hints of sexuality in Coetzee's depiction of Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* in the passage in which she and Vercueil sleep in Buitenkant Street as well as in his final embrace of her, these encounters are laden with symbolism, and cannot be read in isolation of the novel's political thread. While Krog's collection is written from a menopausal perspective, Medalie's protagonist in 'Small' has presumably already entered the territory of deeper old age. Because of this, she would experience more stringently the societal taboos against sexuality in older age. Krog has been lauded by some and criticized by others for what may come across as the gratuitous crudeness and obscenity of her poetry.²⁰ In light of this, her blatant expression of the sexuality of older age in *Body Bereft* could be seen as the natural progression of her style of writing. However, the explicitness and frankness with which she sexualises senescence are arguably not qualities that always reflect the lived experience of many of the elderly.

²⁰ See Gray (2006) for his indictment of what he views as Krog's gratuitous crudity, and Viljoen (2009) for a discussion of how Krog's use of obscenities may be seen as upholding feminist ideals.

In contrast, Medalie is a writer much more circumspect and delicate in sensibility. His portrayal of Stella's reluctance to indulge in sexual fantasies of Vernon is thus appropriate in relation to the characterisation of the smallness of her life throughout the short story. In Medalie's stories, as Titlestad (2010:xiv) comments in his 'Foreword' to *The Mistress's Dog*, '[t]here is always something potentially epiphanic at the horizon of characters' understanding: it remains blurred, though, its true power residing in being simultaneously eruptive and elusive'. In light of this, Medalie's portrayal of Stella's thwarting of her sexual longings for Vernon is deeply resonant. As the narrator comments, 'The smallness of her life is bad enough. Much, much worse, she finds, is the smallness of her dreams' (37). Instead of allowing herself to acknowledge the sexual desire she feels for Vernon, she hopes for a 'lasting friendship' (36) with him, and that she will become his 'chief confidante' (36). What he represents to her thus is extremely interesting in relation to the manner in which she constructs her identity in her older age, and may be related directly to Randall and Kenyon's idea of 'sideshadowing'. Firstly, because of his age, and because of the fact that he is Gwen's son, he represents to her the son she could have had but does not. Secondly, his interest in her and her past causes her to view her life with a new sense of her own importance and significance. Thirdly, her barely acknowledged sexual desire for him speaks of the way in which during her entire life she was content with leaving her desires unarticulated. Lastly, it is important to read what Vernon represents to Stella in relation to how she views Gwen. Throughout the short story, her attitude towards Gwen is one of indulgent condescension – she disparages Gwen and almost seems grudgingly proud of the barrenness of her own life when compared to Gwen's. She thinks that Gwen is not 'grateful' for what she has, and that it rather 'has made her feel entitled' (24). She overhears other residents discussing her friend, and calling her 'impossible' and 'overbearing' (24). In contrast, the narrator states that

Stella ‘has never borne over anything or anyone’ and ‘has always been too possible for her own good’ (24). Vernon’s confiding in her seems to validate to her the smallness of her life before she meets him. Furthermore, his confessing that he finds his mother’s pomposity a ‘strain’ (32) heightens Stella’s appreciation of her own lack of arrogance. In all of the points discussed above, Vernon causes Stella to reimagine who she is and who she might have been. He leads her to experience what Randall and Kenyon refer to as ‘sideshadowing’, as he opens up to her the ‘*middle realm* of real possibilities that could [happen] even if they [do] not’ (2005:336, emphasis in original). It is significant that for the duration of the story neither Stella’s nor Gwen’s identities in their older age derive entirely from their present realities. Instead, Gwen uses her memories of her past to reimagine who she is in the present, and Stella struggles to bring herself to reimagine who she is in the present, and where this could lead her in the future. This interplay of reality and imagination, and past, present and future is what characterises Medalie’s portrayal of identity in older age in this short story. It is appropriate that neither character fully manages to envision a coherent sense of the future, as this state of inbetween-ness is what characterises both Medalie’s fiction and the uncertainty associated with the condition of ageing.

As with Van Niekerk’s use of flowers to symbolise the beauty and potential of older age in *Agaat* (Van Niekerk:489), Medalie too uses flowers and plants to symbolise the changes Stella undergoes in ‘Small’. In the beginning of the story, Gwen tells Stella of ‘the rose propagated in her honour and bearing her name: Gwennie’s Pride’ (Medalie:26). Stella describes Gwen’s attempts at gardening at Horizon (26):

In the garden of Gwen's cottage and on the stoep, in terracotta pots, there are new shrubs and flowers. But although she spent a lot of money, the garden doesn't look good. Gwennie's Pride was not alone in dying almost immediately, and even those plants which survived seem to be struggling. Gwen attributes it to the poor soil, but Stella thinks there's something else that turns the leaves yellow and makes the buds drop unopened to the ground.

The highly suggestive name of the rose and its inability to flourish in Gwen's garden at Horizon imply that her pretentiousness and pride are misplaced in the context of her new reality as 'an elderly widow, living in a cottage in a retirement village' (26). The sterility of Gwen's garden appears to mirror for Stella what she perceives as the ironic smallness of Gwen's character. As the narrator states, she initially sees 'their reluctance to thrive as a comment on their owner, on the poverty of her pretensions' (41). However, after Vernon's seizure, Stella learns that he has an inoperable brain tumour. She struggles against a grief so intense that it 'feels as if what has happened is so devastating that it will wipe out every sadness [she] has ever experienced' (40). At other times, it feels as though it is 'more like the culmination of everything that has ever made her unhappy, as if her life were a long apprenticeship in loss and now, only now, is her training being put to the test' (40). What is significant in both of these responses to Vernon's condition is the fact that Stella focuses only on how the news makes *her* feel and how it affects *her*. However, she does realise that 'in all the time Gwen has been away, no one has been watering her plants' (41) and takes it upon herself to do so. Seeing the dying, wilting flowers, she suddenly 'finds them deeply affecting'. Instead of seeing them as a symbol of Gwen's deficiency in character, she realises that '[t]hey're full of pathos, not of judgement' (41) and that 'she's come just in time to rescue them' (41). Seeing Gwen's 'bedraggled' and 'dusty' (42) plants brings her to an understanding of the other woman's sorrow in what has happened, and causes her to acknowledge that

Gwen's suffering 'is no smaller for not being her own' (42). Medalie uses an interesting image to express the new sense of perspective and relativity that Stella achieves (42):

Her own tragedy seemed so huge that it stretched from horizon to horizon. And so it is: the biggest thing ever. But she feels also how small – a pillbox, embossed with mother-of-pearl – is the receptacle in which have been gathered all her private and engrossing griefs, her solitary and tender disappointments.

The beauty and delicacy of the pillbox suggest that the disappointments it contains have become to Stella special things to be treasured. Furthermore, a pillbox usually contains medicine that one takes to fight off disease and sustain life. The use of this image suggests the way in which Stella has come to rely on grief and disappointment to define her identity. The juxtaposition of her own tragedy as stretching 'from horizon to horizon' (42) with its simultaneously being able to fit inside a pillbox alludes to the relativity of perspective that she has now attained. The result of this is that she notes that '[w]hen Gwen gets back from Cape Town, she will need a friend' and that '[m]ore specifically, she will need compassion' (42). Medalie, however, is careful not to present Stella as undergoing a sudden and drastic change in character, and is circumspect in his depiction of the sustainability of her epiphanic experience. After sleeping well the night before Gwen's return, Stella wonders: 'Is it [...] the start of something new? Or merely a respite?' (42). This may be related to Titlestad's comment that Medalie's stories 'do not push through to resolution' and that they are 'simultaneously profound and imprecise' (2010:xiv). The 'repose' the experience affords Stella is described as 'one small minute, redeemed from a stringent hour' (Medalie:42). Similarly, this short story allows Medalie to allude to the possibility of growth and change in older age, even if it is unclear whether or not this possibility is fully realised.

All of the elderly characters analysed in this chapter thus far are portrayed as having difficult and even painful relationships with the past. While Libby is not the protagonist of the short story 'Tussenfontein', she is nonetheless extremely interesting to look at regarding her relationship with the past. Libby, an elderly woman Sam has known all his life, has emigrated to Australia but still visits South Africa annually. From the opening passages, the story emphasises that she is 'famous' (12) and 'notorious for nostalgia' (13). Haizam Hazam (1994:31) comments on the fact that older individuals are frequently stereotypically associated with nostalgia, and that 'we are often told that in order to understand and communicate with them it is imperative to appeal to their nostalgic recollections'. In this sense, Medalie's depiction of Libby seems to reinforce this stereotype, as the elderly woman is shown to understand the world through her nostalgic remembering of the past. However, as the story progresses it becomes clear that rather than trapping Libby in the past, her nostalgia functions to imbue her with access to a limited sense of futurity, as I will demonstrate. Bonnett and Alexander (2013:294, emphasis in original) comment on the fact that the 'spatial working of memory and nostalgia has long attracted the attention of geographers' because 'the yearning for the *place* called home provides the most characteristic trope of the nostalgic imagination'. It is thus appropriate that Libby's nostalgia centres on Tussenfontein, the farm on which she used to live. Libby's nostalgia for Tussenfontein is furthermore sparked by her relocation from it, because nostalgia functions by 'emphasising distance and disjuncture' both in time and in space (Cunningham Bissell:216). Because of this, her emigration to Australia may be seen as fuelling her nostalgic disposition.

Libby's presence causes Sam to relive his own past. The reader learns that Sam's first erotic feelings in his youth centre on Libby's handsome and charismatic adopted son, Danny. From Danny, however, Sam learns not only of 'desire' but also of 'the cruelty of unequal affections' (Medalie:18). One day the boys are swimming and Sam longs for Danny's attention, but Danny disregards his presence. In turn, Sam ignores Danny's quiet and reserved brother, Wayne. The rebuffed boy attempts to get Sam's attention, and 'slips as he jumps in and hits his head on the side of the pool' (18). Wayne acquires a permanent 'large whitish scar on his forehead' and even in his adulthood 'suffers from migraines and seizures' (19) as a result. Many years later, he and Sam become lovers. The past that Sam remembers is clearly very different from that about which Libby is so fondly nostalgic. Their contrasting recollections of and responses to the past allow Medalie to make a more general comment on the way in which nostalgia functions in the South African context, and the implications this has for the future.

Throughout the story, Sam attempts to account for and understand Libby's nostalgic disposition. In doing so, he questions whether or not nostalgia is a valuable emotion. At times he feels that 'Libby is wise. She knows that nostalgia is what helps us find our way back – it's all we have' (12). But at other times, he thinks that 'nostalgia is just a story we tell ourselves so we don't have to admit that we will not be able to find our way back' (12). Sam is particularly perplexed by Libby's nostalgia because of the fact that her past is also filled with pain and displacement. The love she has for the past has 'been able to survive a widowhood when [she] was in her forties, her having to sell Tussenfontein, the move to Johannesburg, the emigration to Australia' (13). Yet her memories remain 'sturdy children'

(13). In contrast, Sam cannot 'slip in and out of the past' as it 'wants to hold him in an awkward embrace' (13).

According to Jill Bradbury (2012:343), '[n]ostalgia is commonly defined as the painful longing for a lost home, a yearning to return'. Critical work on nostalgia accounts for it in a number of ways. It is 'frequently portrayed as a reaction or response to more general forces' (Cunningham Bissell:216). It is understood in this regard as a 'sociological category' that 'identifies a particular sentiment as a symptom, and uses that symptom to diagnose and explain an underlying social malaise' (Worby & Ally:460). Because of this, nostalgia is often described as 'a discourse sparked by transition and discontinuity' (Cunningham Bissell:221). This is particularly significant in the South African context, as the transition to democracy was a momentous shift in national character that should, according to this definition, have sparked a proliferation of nostalgia. However, nostalgia for the past in the discourse of South African history becomes a fraught issue, because of the hatred and anger associated with apartheid governance. As Medalie comments in 'The Uses of Nostalgia' (2010:36), 'Backward glances are suspect because there is a possibility that they may be deemed a reactionary response to change. This is, of course, even more so when the past which provides the source of the nostalgia is apartheid South Africa'. The furious reaction by some individuals to Jacob Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia* exemplifies this idea. Combining autobiography with critical examination, Dlamini provocatively expresses nostalgia for Katlehong, the apartheid township in which he grew up. His nostalgia is for his childhood and the community he grew up in; it is emphatically not for apartheid. Despite this, Eric Miyeni (2011), a columnist for *Sowetan Live*, writes that he finds the premise behind the book 'so sickening' that he

‘decided never to read it’. As Judith Coullie (2013:1) explains, however, *Native Nostalgia* ‘follows convention by contending that apartheid was without virtue; it defies the norm by insisting that the life that Dlamini lived in Katlehong is worth remembering with nostalgia [...] because it was an ordered world in which ethically laudable principles governed social interactions, principles and practices’. The temporal structure of the relationship between older age, the past and the future complicates the manner in which nostalgia functions in the South African context. If, as Hazam argues, older age is characterised by a temporal aporia in which the past gives meaning to the present, and if nostalgia is a dangerous practice in the post-apartheid South African context, then the condition of the nostalgic individual becomes doubly problematic. This is because the older individual would then be denied access to both the past and the future. However, the manner in which Medalie presents Libby’s nostalgia seems to suggest that remembering the past may be seen as an enabling activity that has the potential to reconfigure both the past and the future. Medalie gives expression to these issues through contrasting Sam’s and Libby’s relationships to the past in ‘Tussenfontein’.

Bradbury (2012: 343, emphasis in original) comments on the fact that ‘the longing for home, for the past [...] pivotally entails a *longing for be-longing*, for insertion into networks of people’. In light of this, Libby’s nostalgia can be seen as a positive phenomenon, as it serves as a connection between her and the people with whom she shared her past. Furthermore, Sedikides et al (2008:307) write that ‘[r]egarded throughout centuries as a psychological ailment, nostalgia is now emerging as a fundamental human strength’. It could thus be possible to read Libby’s nostalgia as her way of navigating her present, and by implication her future, in that it allows her to come to terms with her new and strange life in Australia. It

additionally serves to help her navigate her way through the 'new' South Africa to which she returns, as it mitigates her discomfort with the changes that have taken place in her absence, such as the 'electrified fences' and 'security systems' (Medalie:15) many South Africans feel compelled to install.

Svetlana Boym (2001:5) differentiates between what she refers to as 'reflective' and 'restorative' nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia involves a critical engagement with the past, while restorative nostalgia idealises that which has been lost. Seen in this light, Libby's use of nostalgia to mitigate her response to the new South Africa can be read in a negative light, as it emphasises her inability to deal with the present, and causes her South African self to be stuck in the past. This detrimental aspect of her nostalgia can be seen in the narrator's comment that Libby knows the new South Africa only as 'a disparaging, unimpressed tourist' (Medalie:15). Sam is astonished that despite her love for Tussenfontein, she has 'within a relatively short time, [...] transformed herself into an inhabitant of another country' (15). This seems to him like a 'double proprietorship: Libby owning the new, just as she possesses the past' (20). This clearly alludes to the ways in which Libby may be associated with the present as well as the past.

The idea of Libby's *possessing* the past is revealing, as it implies that her nostalgia almost grants her a monopoly on the past at the expense of other versions of the past belonging to others. Sam's suspicion of her nostalgia allows Medalie to present an alternative to Libby's monolithic narrative of the past, as his memories of Tussenfontein are darker and more painful. This suggests that the past should rather be seen as something fragmentary and

elusive, shifting in meaning in relation to who is doing the remembering. Libby's nostalgia effectively divorces past from present, while Sam's circumspection alludes to the ways in which the past is inextricably woven into the present. In 'The Uses of Nostalgia', Medalie (2010:43) points out the differences between what he refers to as 'an evolved nostalgia' and 'lesser forms of nostalgia'. The former 'may serve to fashion a dialectical relationship between the utopian and dystopian impulses which proliferate in South African literature' (43), while the latter reveals 'a present still in thrall to the past' (43). Because of this, it should be difficult to consider Libby's nostalgia as belonging to the reflective, healthier kind. However, reading the story's depiction of her senescence contradicts this idea, and seems to imply that her nostalgia should indeed be viewed as enabling her as an individual. When she visits South Africa, she may be unwilling to engage in its present reality and resultantly resorts to nostalgic recollections, but this nostalgia has not prevented her from moving forward with her life and crafting a new identity for herself in Australia. While Medalie does seem to criticise Libby for her uncritical preoccupation with the past, he nevertheless uses her to undermine stereotypical notions of older age as being oriented entirely to the past and never to the future. He achieves this through depicting her as having agency and mobility in her older age and through undermining the perception of the past, the present and the future as being discrete entities. The ways in which he depicts them as being enfolded upon each other gesture towards the potential for change and growth that may be available in older age.

Medalie's depiction of older age in *The Mistress's Dog* highlights the manner in which he liberates his ageing protagonists from the close association of old age with the demise of

apartheid that can be seen in *Age of Iron* and *Agaat*. He achieves this through showing the ordinary and everyday realities experienced by the elderly. It could be argued that Medalie's short stories reclaim the representation of senescence in South African literature from the sceptre of apartheid in a way that finds resonance with Njabulo Ndebele's writings on rediscovering the ordinary. Writing in 1986 of the danger of the spectacle in protest literature, Ndebele (1986:156) comments that if it is a 'new society we seek to bring about in South Africa then that newness will be based on a direct concern with the way people actually live'. He explains that it 'will be the task of literature to provide an occasion within which vistas of inner capacity are opened up' (156). While Ndebele's argument relates specifically to protest literature written before the demise of apartheid, his emphasis on literature as moving away from the spectacle of apartheid and towards the ordinary lives of people presages Shaun Irlam's observation, quoted earlier, that 'literatures of the [...] decade [following the birth of democracy] record a steady retreat from the strident, public and political character of writing to a more private, introspective, and confessional mode' (2004:698). In light of this, Titlestad's comment that each story in *The Mistress's Dog* depicts 'the quiet inner and domestic lives of those formidably haunted by the past' (2010:xii) is particularly appropriate.

Titlestad (xii) also notes that the stories 'present a portrait of contemporary South African experience. Most tack between the private and the public, between the subjectivity of their characters and the social realities of our present'. While both *Age of Iron* and *Agaat* do portray the everyday difficulties faced by their elderly protagonists, the main narrative thrust of each novel gains its driving force from the symbolic association of the protagonists with

issues surrounding apartheid and its demise. In contrast to this, aside from 'Recognition' and less explicitly so, 'Tussenfontein', none of the stories featuring elderly protagonists in *The Mistress's Dog* is directly thematically related to apartheid. As Titlestad (188) observes:

[T]he relation between the political and the personal in South African fiction has shifted. While writers continue to engage issues of social and economic injustice, many are centrally concerned with the interiority of their characters, their relationships and their lived experience. It would be banal to suggest that significant South African writing ever neglected the individual and the personal; it is, except in the cases of the most pedantic social realism or brittle allegory, impossible to reflect oppression and the prospect of liberation other than through the lens of subjectivity. But the balance has shifted: contemporary writers need not apologise for emphasising the inward turn of their characters, rather than the march of history or the crushing realities of exploitation. The private has gained in legitimacy, and with it a new range of existential, emotional and even spiritual preoccupations.

This shift in balance between the personal and the political can be seen most clearly in Medalie's representation of older age in *The Mistress's Dog*. When read as a whole, this collection of short stories paints a portrait of what it could mean to be an elderly white subject living in contemporary South Africa. Medalie both explores the challenges faced by the elderly in their lived experiences, as well as challenges prevailing stereotypes surrounding the ostensible barrenness and diminishing prospects of older age.

In *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren suffers from cancer, and in *Agaat*, Milla is bedridden because of Motor Neuron Disease. In these novels, both authors seem to conflate the diseased older body with the state of the nation. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren's cancer becomes a metaphor for the ways in which apartheid infects South Africa. Milla's paralysis in *Agaat* speaks of the

in-between-ness which characterised the transition to democracy. In contrast, Medalie's older characters are curiously free from disease. In 'Recognition', one of the widows of the prime ministers has 'Alzheimer's disease' and 'doesn't even recognise her own children' (175) and another 'had had a hip replacement [...] and other health problems' (176). The elderly Mr Frank in 'Crowd Control' suffers from emphysema and is on a ventilator (63). This does allude to the fact that older age comes with inevitable health problems. However, in more than one of the stories in the collection, the older characters outlive their younger counterparts: 'Small' alludes to the likelihood that Vernon will almost certainly die before his mother does (41); in 'The Wheels of God', Glenda dies in a car crash (77) while her elderly mother survives, and 'Toothless Tiger' suggests that its protagonist, Paula, will die of cancer, leaving behind her octogenarian father (88). While it may be problematic to read too much into this, it is nonetheless interesting to note that Medalie is neither overtly nor wholly concerned with disease and death as being the inevitable outcomes of older age. Instead, he seems more interested in the way older people live, and in the ways in which they interact with society. This opens up interesting possibilities for the depiction of older age in post-apartheid literature.

In another example of the ways in which Medalie details the ordinary experiences of the elderly, he gives voice to the mistress's dilemma in 'The Mistress's Dog' when she is unable to take her pet with her to the retirement village because of its "no pets"-policy. The mistress does not have anyone else who could take care of the dog, and '[i]f she takes it to the SPCA, they will put it down' (8). This highlights some of the difficulties the elderly experience upon their relocation to retirement villages. Similarly, he illustrates the manner in which ordinary

tasks become more difficult in older age, as can be seen when Nola finds the trip to the supermarket a trial (6):

The supermarket was not far away; still, Nola found the trip arduous. Even when she kept to the speed limit, other motorists seemed to be annoyed with her for travelling too slowly. And when she backed into a parking-space, someone hooted at her – she was doing that too slowly too. A young man knocked against her as she walked into the shopping-centre and didn't even apologise. He was talking on a cellphone.

This passage seems to suggest that Nola feels out of place in the fast-paced modern world. Her keeping to the speed limit implies that she values law and order, while the other motorists do not. The fact that the young man who knocks against her does not apologise for doing so further alludes to this, as the implication is that Nola would have expected him to apologise. In her worldview, this would have been the courteous, correct thing to do. It is significant that he is talking on a cellphone, as the elderly are commonly perceived as struggling to adapt to what they see as the younger generation's lack of etiquette regarding modern technology. Something similar can be seen in 'Small' when Gwen's grandchildren's visits are a 'conspicuous failure' as they are 'bored and listless, taciturn to the point of discourtesy' (32), sending messages on their cellphones rather than interacting with their grandmother. This alludes to the ways in which different generations struggle to communicate with each other and to find common ground. In 'Small', even Vernon initially does not visit his mother that often, because he finds her presence 'a strain' (28). This difficulty can furthermore be seen in both 'Toothless Tiger' and 'The Wheels of God'. In 'Toothless Tiger', the elderly Tony finds his grandson effeminate and foreign (92), while in

‘The Wheels of God’, Glenda’s mother Ina struggles to accept her daughter’s homosexual lifestyle (75).

Neither Milla in *Agaat* nor Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* suffer from financial difficulties – from an economic perspective, they are able to organise their older age as they please. Similarly, Gwen in ‘Small’ is relatively well-off, and in the short story ‘Crowd Control’, the retired Harold has no financial constraints and can choose to live where and how he pleases (58). In contrast, Stella in ‘Small’ struggles to be content with the limited options her monetary affairs afford her, and in ‘The Mistress’s Dog’, the mistress is unable to pay for her own retirement and has to rely on Nola’s husband for support (8). Similarly, Mrs Frank, the owner of the antiques shop in ‘Crowd Control’, has to look after the shop on her own in her old age to pay for her husband’s medical expenses (63). While none of these characters can be described as living in dire poverty, it is nonetheless interesting to note the way in which the variety of economic positions Medalie affords his characters breaks away from the tendency to view the aged as an homogenous group. Furthermore, this individualization of older age finds resonance with Pat Thane’s statement that this ‘stage of life [...] encompasses a greater variety than any other’ and includes ‘people aged from their fifties to past one hundred; those possessing the greatest wealth and power, and those the least; those at a peak of physical fitness and the most frail’ (2005:193). When viewed as a whole, *The Mistress’s Dog* allows Medalie to capture this range of identities, and in doing so, break away from the perception of the aged as being equal in their desires and needs. Arguably, it is the fact that this text comprises a selection of short stories that allows Medalie to give a unique voice to

the variety of experiences that constitute older age in the contemporary South African context.

The explicit South African-ness underlying this collection may be seen as informing and shaping how some of the characters experience older age. While Simon's exact age in 'Free Range' is unclear, the story details his obsessive attempts at achieving a healthy old age, through eating healthily, exercising and avoiding situations in which his safety may be compromised. In the story, he becomes involved in a community initiative to seal off his neighbourhood and restrict entrance to residents, because of the threat of crime. The proposal is met with mixed reactions, but Simon's involvement in and approval of it increase. Ultimately, he receives death threats because of this. In reaction to this, he eats 'what he had ignored for years' (56), and watches a thriller on television, something he has never done 'as a matter of principle' (56). The story concludes with an ominous description of how the 'television cast rushing shapes and shadows on the wall behind him' (56). The implication of this is that preparing for old age becomes problematic in the South African context of crime and violence. Even though Simon does everything in his power to ensure that his experience of senescence passes as smoothly as possible, the danger and threat associated with living in contemporary South Africa are beyond his power to mitigate. Similarly, as has previously been discussed, Libby in 'Tussenfontein' struggles to adapt to life in the new South Africa, with its emphasis on 'electrified fences' and 'security systems' (15). Significantly, she posits life at Tussenfontein, in the apartheid era, as the safe counterpart to this culture of fear. However, as has been discussed, nostalgia for the past in the South African context is a fraught issue, and she seems completely unaware of the political ramifications of her longing

for the past. She also mentions that in Sydney she can ‘walk alone at night’, ‘take public transport’ and ‘go wherever [she] want[s]’ (15). She says that in ‘Australia they really look after their old folk’ and that it is ‘a very caring, humane society’ (15). While these statements of Libby’s function in the story to heighten the irony of the nostalgia she expresses, the implication nonetheless is that while old age is already a difficult enough process, growing older in a country in which one fears for one’s personal safety becomes doubly difficult. In light of this, it is significant that Medalie uses an elderly white man and woman to make this point, as it indicates the manner in which the South African threat of crime affects even those perceived as being relatively well-off and comfortable in their older age.

It is a well-worn axiom that the changes occurring after the advent of democracy, including the proliferation of crime, have led to many individuals deciding to emigrate from South Africa. This can be seen in Medalie’s representation of older age in *The Mistress’s Dog*. Both Libby in ‘Tussenfontein’ and Monty and Doris in ‘Indian Summer’ choose to leave South Africa. However, what is interesting to note about both cases is that the elderly characters leave the country to follow their children overseas. This points to the ways in which the family circle and older age are affected by socio-political events. Specifically, it alludes to the fact that while Medalie does represent these elderly characters as mobile, and as able to uproot themselves and relocate their lives, this relocation is necessitated by factors beyond their control. Significantly, both ‘Tussenfontein’ and ‘Indian Summer’ express how this drastic disconnection shapes the ways in which the characters experience their older age. As has previously been discussed, Libby’s move to Australia reinforces her already-nostalgic disposition. In ‘Indian Summer’, Laura has misgivings about whether Monty’s and Doris’s son

will 'care for them in that strange place' (152) before they leave for America. At the conclusion of the story, Doris wonders 'whether [she] shall grow to love the birds in America' as she does in South Africa, and asks 'whether they have crickets there' (152). Set at the brink of their departure for the new country, the story provides no indication of how exactly the move to America will shape their identity in their older age, but simply suggests that such a move will require a profound reworking of how they see themselves as they grow older. Significantly, Laura's misgivings cast an ominous shadow over the upcoming event, and point out how vulnerable the move makes the elderly couple. This alludes to the inevitable dependence the elderly experience in society, and highlights the seeming loss of agency that can come with older age.

In contrast to this, Marcus in 'Toothless Tiger' has remained in South Africa while his daughter and grandson have moved to England. The disconnection the move causes him to experience from her and his grandson becomes abundantly apparent. Tony's lack of knowledge about the South African bush galls Marcus (94), and when Paula drives too quickly he tells her that '[j]ust because [her] pounds buy [her] a lot of rands doesn't mean [she has] to waste them' (91). The narrator, reflecting Paula's thoughts on her father's attempts at controlling her, comments (91):

He was dried up within himself, but the carapace of him remained, the obdurate shape of his maleness. The substance of his power was gone: in this case the clothes were there but there was no emperor. He was no longer the bank manager, the husband; he was scarcely the father any more, considering how far away he was and how little he had to do with her life. Yet he still took for granted the entitlement of a brisk instruction or a sharp retort. It never occurred to him that his authority came from somewhere. He simply had it,

that was all; and, having had it for most of his life, it never occurred to him that he could ever lose it.

While it is self-evident that this loss of control Marcus experiences in his older age stems from a complex variety of factors, the story nonetheless points out how the physical distance between him and his daughter, resulting from her emigration, does play a significant part. Because of her emigration and his subsequent lack of involvement in her life, he struggles to relate to her and his grandson. Furthermore, this lack of involvement coupled with his age means that she no longer takes him seriously and is able to defy the authority he still attempts to exert. All of the above serves to highlight the ways in which issues relating to the contemporary South African socio-political context, such as crime and emigration, shape the ways in which these elderly characters come to define their identities in their older age.

It is interesting to note the way in which Medalie portrays the decline of Marcus's authority as a man in relation to his lack of power in older age. When the older man attempts to admonish two youths for playing their music too loudly in the game reserve, he comes across as feeble and ineffectual. Significantly, they call on the physical signs of his ageing to undermine his power. They tell him: 'Keep your hair on – the bit that you've got left' (95) and one of them 'push[es] his hand down the front of his shorts' (96), in a crude pantomime of the emasculation he associates with Marcus's older age. The loss of Marcus's authority as a male, they seem to suggest, derives from what they assume to be the decline of his status as a sexually capable man. A useful connection could be made between this and *Age of Iron*, where Mrs Curren relates what she feels to be her irrelevance to the fact that '[f]or twenty years [she has] not bled' (Coetzee:64). In the same way that Mrs Curren attributes the loss of

power she experiences in her older age to ideas of sterility and asexuality, 'Toothless Tiger' too seems to suggest that Marcus's dwindling patriarchal power is related to his sexual decline. Paula witnesses the encounter, and the narrator comments that Marcus had been 'a man going out to scold the boys, and they had made an old codger out of him' (Medalie:96). Keeping with the wildlife imagery that characterises the short story, she thinks that the 'snapping young males had challenged the aged leader of the pack and forced him to face his own toothlessness' (96). Because the short story is not narrated from Marcus's perspective, it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern the effect the encounter has on Marcus himself. However, the suggestion seems to be that Marcus's role as a father to Paula and a grandfather to Tony is altered drastically not because of his old age alone, but rather because of the loss of patriarchal stature it implies. The story seems to suggest that his frustration at his inability to control his daughter is heightened by the fact that she is female and he is male. Furthermore, he is represented as being intolerant towards Tony's effeminate nature throughout the story. This could, perhaps, be read in relation to his feelings towards his own lack of masculine dominance. The characterisation of Marcus allows Medalie to make a poignant comment on the ways in which the decline of manhood associated with older age results in a loss of authority and stature, as well as on forms of patriarchy and conservative notions of selfhood and maleness associated with patriarchy.

While *The Mistress's Dog* portrays many of the difficulties experienced by the elderly, Medalie is also careful to represent other instances in which older age is neither a burden nor a challenge. While some of the elderly characters are portrayed as being trapped in their situations (such as Stella in 'Small'), others are represented as being mobile and still

functional members of society, despite their senescence. While it may be a challenging expedition for her, Nola in 'The Mistress's Dog' is still able to drive herself to the supermarket (6), and the narrator in 'Recognition' overcomes the difficulties of travelling by taking a taxi to the luncheon (177). Similarly, Libby in 'Tussenfontein' truly exemplifies a mobile senior citizen – not only does she relocate to another continent with ease, but she also makes trips back to South Africa by herself and visits a variety of friends and family members. These characters undermine the stereotypical notion of older age as being a time of immobility and stagnation. In addition to this mobility Medalie affords some of his older characters, he also represents some of them as still finding enjoyment in life. Nola in 'The Mistress's Dog' does not deny herself small luxuries like her 'dry sherry', 'honey nougat' and 'slices of camembert on poppy-seed crackers' (1) and Libby in 'Tussenfontein' is still an avid baker (11). The residents of the Horizon retirement village in 'Small' have an intricate social hierarchy, and have tea parties, go shopping and to the movies (33). Similarly, Harold in 'Crowd Control' enjoys eating out by himself, going to the library and shopping for antiques. All of the above highlight the ways in which Medalie presents older age as being a time of personal enjoyment and growth, and counteract the tendency to view this period only in terms of diminishing prospects and ill-health.

Titlestad (2010:184) comments that '[i]t is premature to begin mapping the post-apartheid literary terrain: we are not yet in a position to extricate ourselves from the field, and to achieve an overview of its contours and features'. Nonetheless, he posits the short story as the form most suited to capturing the fragmented nature of South Africa's transitional period (191-192):

The smaller canvas of the genre compels an author to devise situations and moments of interiority (recognition, resignation, hope or aspiration) that distil the swirling realities of the world. [Medalie's] short stories are never pedantic; they never resolve the matters they raise, but rather leave both their characters and their readers on the brink of a recognition that remains – for all its powerful implications – somewhat inchoate, just out of reach. In a transitional context like ours, in which most of us experience the world as difficult to read, this hesitation, this modest authorial purview, seems entirely apt.

Indeed, this 'crisis of thinking and being' that makes the transitional and post-apartheid worlds 'difficult to read' (192) resonates with how Medalie represents his older characters in *The Mistress's Dog*, as they attempt to navigate their way through the unfamiliar and confusing terrain of older age. Furthermore, this makes his choice of the short story format even more appropriate, as the short story is able to capture both the disjointed nature of older age and its confusing backdrop of South Africa's transitional socio-political landscape. This points to the ways in which the 'in-between condition' that Titlestad (191) ascribes to both the nature of our transitional and post-apartheid national consciousness, and to Medalie's short stories, captures the uncomfortable and liminal literary position of the elderly individual in contemporary South Africa.

However, it is only when *The Mistress's Dog* is read as a whole that its true power emerges. As Andries Oliphant (1996:59) comments, 'The fractured and discontinuous articulations which a body of short stories produces over a particular period further provide the reader with a field of multiple perspectives on the divergent perceptions and experiences'. When read in isolation, each story constitutes a poignant snapshot of an individual elderly

character's experience of becoming older. When read in relation to each other, the stories are able to capture a range of disparate and often contradictory perspectives on and perceptions of what it means to become older in the South African context. This variety of experience allows Medalie to liberate his ageing protagonists from the close association between older age and the demise of apartheid seen in both *Age of Iron* and *Agaat*.

Conclusion

A recurring description in criticism of literature written during South Africa's interregnum makes use of Antonio Gramsci's statement that the crisis of transition lies in the fact that while 'the old is dying, [...] the new cannot be born' (1971:556). Much has been written about the fact that especially towards the end of the apartheid era, writers were increasingly faced with the imperative to produce politically committed literature based on what has been referred to as a 'rhetoric of urgency'. As Pauline Fletcher (1993:12) comments, 'In a very real sense, [...] South African literature has been held hostage to apartheid'. Similarly, Jane Poyner (2008:105, emphasis in original) notes that '[a]partheid necessitated an active struggle by writers against the state, with questions of accountability and responsibility to one's subject made more urgent: writing under these conditions became a *profoundly* political act, especially given the extensive legislation in place to curb and suppress writers' freedom'. It should not be surprising, then, that the remains of this imperative for literature to be politically engaged may be seen in both *Age of Iron* and *Agaat*, considering their proximity to South Africa's transition to democracy, nor that these texts imbue the representations of their ageing protagonists with political ramifications.

Johan Jacobs (2012:72) has commented on how the 'figure of the stricken and dying old woman recalling her personal story in the context of the national history has been employed by a number of South African novelists during and after the transitional period to structure their self-reflexive fictional negotiation of the past'. As has been demonstrated, in *Age of Iron* (written before democratization), the dying body of the elderly Mrs Curren is to a significant extent conflated with the death of the apartheid regime, and in *Agaat* (first published in

Afrikaans in 2004, but set in and immediately after the transition to democracy), Milla's body becomes the site on which the political ramifications of her relationship with Agaat are played out. In both cases, the elderly body is presented as being highly politicized, and furthermore, both authors suggest that before their deaths, their protagonists need to undergo a process in which they come to an understanding of and attempt to atone for the crimes of their past and the privilege of their whiteness. In both novels, this involves an interaction with a marginalised figure of alterity.

Significantly, while both of these novels conclude with their protagonists' deaths, *Age of Iron* is unable to imagine fully the world that will succeed Mrs Curren's death, and *Agaat* only does so to a limited degree. While the narrative of *Age of Iron* concludes immediately prior to Mrs Curren's death at the moment of her final embrace with Vercueil, *Agaat* ends with Milla's son's disassociated account of his mother's funeral while returning on an aeroplane to his life as an exile in Canada. As will be elaborated on below, their failure to imagine this world that is to come may be related to the political uncertainty which imbues much of the literature associated with this period. Elleke Boehmer (1998:45) identifies this 'suspension of vision' as characteristic of novels written during the late-apartheid and early transitional period:

A writer was in theory in a position to anticipate, foretell, predict, descry, yet did not ultimately feel capable of doing so. Novels thus give us deaths or near deaths, and escapes, but without clear destinations, departures which are headed for culs-de-sac, caught in a void. [...] Often, therefore, tales are end-stopped by social breakdown, exile, leave-taking, by the insistent imperatives of commitment to the struggle, or simply by resistances to the novelistic imagination, to envisioning the future, imposed by the apartheid world.

Boehmer's statement appears to be supported by the facts that *Age of Iron* concludes with a moment of death, and *Agaat* with a death and a return to exile. Ending at the moment of Mrs Curren's death, *Age of Iron* refuses to envision a coherent sense of the future. The same could be said, albeit to a slightly lesser degree, of *Agaat*. While Van Niekerk does allude to what Agaat's life will be like after Milla's death, the younger woman could also be said to exist in the 'cul[...]de-sac' to which Boehmer refers: through her former foster-mother's death, she has lost her last link to identification with whiteness, yet she remains unable to integrate herself in the coloured community. Jakkie, too, is described as being trapped in an ambiguous position in which his South African identity renders him unable to become fully part of Canadian society.

André Brink (1998:15) writes that the 'very urgencies of a struggle against apartheid encouraged the imposition of other silences [...] and produced a sense of priorities which made it very difficult for writers – even for writers who refused to be harnessed to any "cause" – to write about very ordinary human situations [...] without inviting accusations of fiddling while Rome burns, of suppressing more "urgent" issues, of avoiding "reality", or of self-indulgence'. These 'other silences' to which he refers may be regarded as including the representation of older age in literature written during and after the transition to democracy. This may be so because the political imperative demanded by apartheid and the way in which this seems to have necessitated a conflation of the death of the ageing figure and the demise of apartheid could be said to have subsumed the possibility of alternative representations of senescence. However, both Coetzee and Van Niekerk are careful to present this conflation in

very complex, layered and nuanced ways. As has been explored, both authors point to the ways in which their ageing protagonists struggle to move beyond the ageing body as only being representative of the body of the nation.

In the wake of the transition to democracy, the representations of older age in *Body Bereft* and in *The Mistress's Dog* give voice to multivalent potentialities for the representation of older age. In *Body Bereft*, Krog counters stereotypical notions of older age that denigrate it by representing it as consisting solely of narratives of decline, lack and loss. In doing so, she presents the ageing female figure as still being an indomitable force. Her translation of the text from Afrikaans to English also opens up a space in which she can liberate older age from being defined in monolithic terms, and in which it may rather be inscribed with the potential to contain various, and sometimes contradictory, meanings. Her belief that the practice of translation 'is crucial for people in a country with such a divided, separated past [...] in order to begin to form some kind of coherent and undominated consciousness' (Krog in McGrane:2006) means that her project is one with significant political implications. Similarly, Medalie's intricate exploration of the interiority of his elderly characters in *The Mistress's Dog* allows for an alternative representation of senescence not wholly determined by the political, or by the morbidly ill ageing body. Furthermore, he foregrounds the fact that older age could still be a time of enjoyment and personal growth, and should not only be read in relation to diminishing possibilities. His emphasis on both the positive and the negative aspects of ageing enables him to present a deeper and fuller account of what it could mean to grow old in the post-transitional South African context. Significantly, however, both these writers take great care not to sever the past from the present, and not to deny the reality of

historical pressure and culpability, emphasising, rather, the complex manner in which the personal and the political are entwined. This is similar to the ways in which both Coetzee and Van Niekerk construct the ageing body as a complex conflation of the personal and the political.

The purpose of this study has been to analyse the representation of older age in this particular socio-political context in order to work towards illuminating the meaning we ascribe to older age in general. Given the contradictory and multi-faceted nature of older age, it should not be all that surprising that no clear answers have emerged. Across these four texts, however, some general trends have come to light. These texts all highlight the necessity of viewing the construct of older age as one marked by continuity (of the past, present and future; of the personal and political; of old age and youth) rather than regarding the aged as a discrete group, marooned in a separate temporal experience. These four texts further emphasise the ways in which older age can only ever be understood in embodied terms. Even when seen in relation to the social, the political or the personal, the construct of older age relies for definition on the ways in which the older individual inhabits his or her ageing body. While it might seem reductive to view this aspect of human experience as essentially corporeal, the spectre of the body haunts the limits of the potentialities of older age, in the lived experience as well as in the literary representation thereof. However, as I have shown, the older body may contain the potential for both the re-creation and the destruction of identity, as well as the attainment and inhibition of agency.

Since the general societal attitude towards older age is frequently characterised by feelings of guilt and distaste, it is difficult in a study such as this (as well as in literary works that focus on the elderly) to resist resorting to value-driven ideologies that attempt to 'rescue' the representation of older age from being associated with negative stereotypes. Indeed, these negative stereotypes are so firmly entrenched in the ways in which we think about older age that it becomes difficult to conceptualise this period other than in binary terms that, for example, designate particular examples of its representation as either being associated with decline and loss, or with the attainment of wisdom. Furthermore, it is impossible to define the point at which stereotypical attitudes bleed into lived behaviour (and, by implication, into literature), or whether this indeed happens. I have tried, however, to emphasise the ways in which the performance of older age, in any socio-political context, is underpinned above all by a profound sense of ambiguity. This means that older age as a construct should be seen as inherently fluid and in flux, rather than stable and fixed. The elderly characters analysed by this study demonstrate the ways in which identity in older age is contingent on the ways in which the political and the personal blur and overlap, reflecting the sense of liminality that characterises South Africa's transitional period.

In some way, it may be possible to conclude that the full liberation of the representation of the older individual from the burden of apartheid is not yet complete, reflecting perhaps the contours of a society that is itself still attempting to find ways of rendering the past meaningful. In all four texts analysed by this study, however, the authors point to the ways in which older age outgrows itself and extends itself beyond having only individual significance.

Instead, they seem to suggest, understanding what it means to grow old in any socio-political context has profound implications for how a society as a whole functions and defines itself.

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