The Logic of the Looking Glass: Representations of Time and Temporality in *Agaat and High Low In-between*

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Summary

This article explores representations of time and temporality in two contemporary South African novels in order to examine the salience of the Derridian *contretemps* in relation to contemporary South African society. As defined by Jacques Derrida, the *contretemps* is an experience of time and space that is essentially "out of joint" and is often used to represent anomie in a particular context. My close-reading of Imraan Coovadia's *High Low In-between* (2009) and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2006) thus reveals how the *contretemps* is employed to not only provide a sense of time gone awry, but also to outline how these narratives explore the *contretemps* as a potentially 'new' temporal modality for contemporary South Africa.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel verken voorstellings van tyd en tydelikheid in twee eietydse Suid-Afrikaanse romans ten einde ondersoek in te stel na die voorkoms van die Derridiaanse *contretemps* met betrekking tot die eietydse Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing. Die *contretemps,* soos gedefinieer deur Jacques Derrida, is 'n ervaring van tyd en ruimte wat wesenlik "uit die plek / gedislokeer" is en wat dikwels gebruik word om anomie in 'n bepaalde konteks voor te stel. My diepte-lesing van Imraan Coovadia se *High Low In-between* (2009) en Marlene Van Niekerk se *Agaat* (2006) toon dus aan hoe die *contretemps* gebruik word om nie net 'n gevoel van tydsverwringing daar te stel nie, maar ook om aan te toon hoe hierdie narratiewe die *contretemps* ondersoek as 'n potensieel 'nuwe' tydsmodaliteit vir die hedendaagse Suid-Afrika.

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> Over the decade, mortality had increased by a thousand a day. The government, of course, objected to these terms. First of all, who was counting? Second of all, who were they to define a day? Why should we simply accept the European definition of a day?
>
> It was the logic of the looking glass
>
> (Imraan Coovadia *High Low In-between*, p. 151)

In Imraan Coovadia's *High Low In-between*, it is possible to account for the trope of the looking glass world as representative of the temporal circumstances of contemporary South African society. In *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll narrates the story of Alice who enters the looking glass and reaches a world where everything functions in reverse – which is to say, contrary to expectation. Furthermore, during an exchange with the White Queen, Alice establishes that she now inhabits a world that is governed by a *contretemps* and is greatly confused and disoriented by her looking glass experiences.[1]

Similarly, Coovadia's appropriation of "the logic of the looking glass" (2009: 151) duly serves to portray a series of temporal, spatial, logical and moral reversals in South African society. This, however, is not specific to *High Low In-between*; temporal configurations in contemporary South African literature allow for much wider expression of the *contretemps*.[2] In this article, I examine representations of time and temporality in Coovadia's *High Low In-between* (2009) and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2006), limning not only the prevalence of the *contretemps* but also the very distinct possibilities these particular texts offer as a result of its emergence.

In my analysis of contemporary South African literature I grant the *contretemps* precedence over more "local" accounts of temporality such as Achille Mbembe's notion of "entanglement" (2001), Coovadia's non-fictional expansion on "historical time" (2009b) and Ashraf Jamal's "open

1. "I don't understand you," said Alice. "It's dreadfully confusing!"
   "That's the effect of living backwards," the Queen said kindly: "it always makes one a little giddy at first"
   "Living backwards!" Alice repeated in great astonishment. "I never heard of such a thing!"
   "– but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways." (Carroll 1998: 171-172)

2. The analysis of the *contretemps* is part of a larger body of research that also explores this phenomenon in texts such as Mark Behr's *Kings of the Water* (2010), Justin Cartwright's *White Lightning* (2002), Anne Landsman's *The Rowing Lesson* (2007) and Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006).

time" (2010). In contrast to the Derridian *contretemps*, these theorists appear to make typically postmodern judgements of the future; they deride its relevance and importance in the South African national imaginary. Evidently, their approaches are, in part, a reaction against the highly teleological nature of post-apartheid narrativity as they seek to account for alternative temporal modalities that belong to the *longue duree* of African time and experience instead. This is, however, a theoretical gesture that, in turn, performs an implicit negation of the present epoch where the future nevertheless features strongly as lacunae of loss and anxiety.

Arguably, Ashraf Jamal steps closest toward a specific account of current temporal circumstances: where Mbembe ignores the consequences of "emerging time" [3] and Coovadia reads the future as having been perpetually apocalyptic for South African-Indians,[4] Jamal argues that we must take seriously this failed hypothetical time of "future-anteriority" in order to account for the national psyche that "has never satisfactorily addressed a latent sensation that South Africa as a country suffers the unease of never having begun" (2010: 16). Yet having made this "diagnosis", Jamal's recommendations soon become increasingly curative and equally prescriptive: he deems the "lived time" of South Africa as schizophrenic, a swing from extreme optimism to current pessimism that narrows the parameters of subjectivity and experience. As a result, he conceives of "open time" where temporal interplay will make all allegiances impossible. Much like Mbembe's "entanglement", the theorisation of "open time" ultimately

3. In "Time on the Move", Mbembe – like Shakeer in the epigraph – does not "simply accept the European definition of a day" (Coovadia 2009: 151). Instead, he explores a ruptured network of temporalities, that negates linear and sequential models of time, as more reflective of lived African time. Yet despite noting a current disappointment with concepts of "emerging time" in Africa, he theoretically overrides rather than addresses these expressions of gloom and despondency regarding the future. Overall, in seeking a reading of temporal "entanglement" as an a priori or essentialist experience of the postcolony, Mbembe's restorative account of African experience appears prescriptive despite its aims.

4. In "Midnight", Coovadia insists that the Doomsday Clock (first conceived of by the Bulletin in order to monitor the fluxes of historical time in American society), is always set at five minutes to midnight for South African-Indians, meaning that the present "is always the beginning of the end" (2009b: 46). He marks the unethical relation that South African-Indians have consistently fostered in relation to their adopted homeland by arguing that they have always been culturally guarded and have thus always experienced the future as apocalyptic. Like Mbembe, there is a desire to read for an essentialised *longue duree* of temporal experience as opposed to something specific to the post-apartheid epoch.

negates the present it seeks to account for and thus fails to acknowledge the ethical potential that resides within it. By comparison, the *contretemps* offers no escape and does not seek an alternative temporal modality as anodyne. Derrida's formulation offers a paradoxical acknowledgement of the future that is both ruptured and restored in its very expression. It thus allows us to account, more suitably, for representations of time and temporality in contemporary South African fiction.

In *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international* (1994), Derrida relies on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in order to elucidate the *contretemps*. In Hamlet's declaration that "the time is out of joint" (Shakespeare 1974: 188), he reads an expression of "something in the present that is not going well, it is not going as it *ought to go*" (Derrida 1994: 23). The murder of King Hamlet is a loss of a personal nature, yet the *contretemps* is also induced by sociopolitical and nationalistic anxiety regarding the future of Denmark. The "untimeliness" of time, or dislocation in the present is, for Derrida, an expression of desiring a future that no longer seems possible. This example also does well to illustrate how affect and expectation find temporalised expressions, as Hamlet's miasmatic experience of the present lies in the disappointments of time. Furthermore, Hamlet's sense of temporal disorientation is also, as Derrida indicates, centered on the awareness of the claim that the specter of his dead father – as a vision from the past – is able to make upon him. Hence, Hamlet is caught in a *contretemps*. He inhabits a present that is not present (presence) at all: the past, present and the lost traces of the future all converge in an *untimely* and disordered fashion.

Derrida explains that for Hamlet, this amounts to a dilemma; he assumes that in order to seek justice he must set time "straight" again. He opines that because Hamlet expresses such reluctance in light of the present *contretemps*, it is Hamlet who is "out of joint" – converting a sense of the "disadjusted to unjust" (Derrida 1994: 20). Relying on Heidegger's distinction between *Dike* (right/order) and *Adikia* (disorder), Derrida explains how the presence of *Adikia* implies the absence of *Dike*. Hence, there is often – like Hamlet – the easy assumption that "disorder" implies the absence of order and therefore injustice. In other words, we very easily interpret the *contretemps* as the onset of anomie and seek ways to escape it.

On the contrary, Derrida asks − somewhat rhetorically − "what if disadjustment were on the contrary the condition of justice?" (1994: 19-20). Working against Heidegger, he maintains that the *contretemps* is the very means by which one gains access to justice and the modality of the future upon which it is premised. The *contretemps*, he argues, does not "destroy" the experience of the future, and the sense of justice we attach to it, but serves to protect it against overdetermined messianism that often limits rather than reveals the future to us. Instead, with the *contretemps*, the future

and its potential for justice are retained and employed as "untimely" arrivals that we must await in an act that is both active and passive.

This, however, is far from a romantic ethical stance of deferral. It is a radical ethic that carries us over the threshold of complacency and ennui into a dynamic relation to time. To assume one's (dis)placement in the *contretemps* is to acknowledge, as opposed to denying, the loss of the future and the rupturing of the present. For Derrida, it is better to accept the odds of a radical potential for justice (and the inherent potential to betray it) than to either deny the discomfort of this (dis)placement or to lament an already impossible desire to escape the *contretemps* altogether.

Moreover, I call the adoption of the *contretemps* a radical ethic because it appears to resonate well with Kierkegaard's conceptual usage of anxiety as the means by which one encounters freedom. In this view, anxiety must be embraced and navigated in order to reach the most creative moment of change (Salverson 2000: 72). As I ultimately seek to illustrate, the suggestion of a "false-start" as far as the future is concerned is indeed strong in these novels. There are clear portrayals of loss and anxiety as the hope of a post-apartheid future proves vulnerable to sociopolitical anomie. Yet, as these texts intimate, being displaced from temporal expectations can serve as its own opportunity to pursue different futures as a fundamental part of a dynamic society. Seemingly, the *contretemps* allows for compulsive creative improvisation with the future; it obviates the need – or the ability – to cling to a single projection by insisting on the seeming destruction of the future in order to sustain it.

In the prologue of *Agaat*, Jakkie de Wet has received a telegram from Agaat giving notice of his mother's impending death. He is making his first journey back to the farm, Grootmoedersdrift, after leaving South Africa in 1985. It is both the news about his mother and the prospect of having to head back to South Africa that induces a state of "inertia" for Jakkie who, in the prologue, wrestles with himself in the form of interior monologue. Van Niekerk makes his sense of temporal displacement clear by illustrating the discrepancy between the external time that records the systematic journey to the airport and the *contretemps* that he inhabits as he slips from the past to the present and future in a haphazard manner. Hence, despite moving forward in time, Jakkie is caught in "stop-start traffic" whilst being, "in two places at once" (Van Niekerk 2006: 1). He admits to being consumed by "the time of my childhood" (2006: 1) and also at the same time contemplating the "Hereafter" (2006: 1) which, he admits, is a "strange word in my head" (2006: 1).

Similarly, in *High Low In-between*, Shakeer returns to South Africa to attend his father's retirement party. But by the time he reaches home, his father has allegedly committed suicide and he is now in time for his father's funeral instead. As plans undergo rapid changes, Shakeer experiences time as halted or lacking; "everything happened with great suddenness. The

arrangements for the burial were made. It was necessary to complete the ceremony before sunset. Nobody could panic because time was short" (Coovadia 2009: 39). And this compression of time inevitably gives rise to feelings of chaos; "Shakeer disliked the disorder around him. A Muslim funeral was invariably haphazard, given the restriction on time" (2009: 40). He resents the rushed nature of the ceremony as he cannot keep up, eventually succumbing to a state of numbness or incomprehension where "time passed without consciousness" (2009: 55).

In *Agaat*, Jakkie's response to the onset of the *contretemps* is to attempt re-orientation by sieving through the past in order to reestablish both the "concrete" and linear qualities of time. His recalls his very first departure from South Africa and appears to use it to search for a stable 'beginning' of a sequential (and thus sensical) experience of time. As narrated, this journey happened "eleven years ago" (Van Niekerk 2006: 1) on a "fourteen hour flight" (2006: 1) when he had "a ten-day beard" (2006: 1). We learn that he left home "that morning, still dark" (2006: 1) and he further clarifies this time as "four o'clock in the morning" (2006: 1).

Significantly, Van Niekerk utilises the concrete signifiers of clock time in order to illustrate Jakkie's desire to escape the present *contretemps* by restoring temporal and narrative linearity. However, it is not long before the past fails to produce order and, instead, only exacerbates the *contretemps*. As Jakkie departs he realises that he is often consumed by the past. Now noting the irony of his return, he states; "fare forward traveler! Not escaping the past. *International Departures*" (2006: 4). The forward journey, he realises, has never been made: the memories of home are so pervasive that he feels trapped in an inescapable past. For Jakkie memory is not the anodyne that alleviates the burdens of past trauma and present dislocation. Instead it *is* the very trauma he wishes to escape, for its very romanticism keeps him from calibrating the present and, furthermore, making progress toward the desired future.

Jakkie imagined that exile would allow for certain liberties of identity. Much to his disappointment, he understands that he has been seduced by a false expectation of the future and he must now concede to failure in this regard. In relation to his Canadian peers, it is he who is "out of time" – always belated in terms of the future; "here the blood has long since been spilt. Cold. The massacres efficiently commemorated, functionally packaged, sanitized. Only I, more freshly cut by history, trying to find my own way in the cool archives" (2006: 2). Jakkie looks enviously upon the manner in which Canada (where indigenous aboriginal populations were almost entirely wiped out as a result of colonialism) is able to create an amnesiac effect about past suffering. As he notes, this historical "blank slate" leaves citizens open to the sensibilities of the future that have forever eluded him.

High Low In-between also highlights Shakeer's various thwarted expectations of time.

As per the *contretemps*, Shakeer assumes his father's death to be untimely; "his family was supposed to have turned the corner. His father had been recovering from the serious illness of the previous year. The transplant, performed by Mackey and David Gerson, had given him the chance to live. A kidney had been found in the nick of time" (Coovadia 2009: 46-47). Similarly, there is the sub-plot in which love is also deemed untimely: when Shakeer meets Leila, his ex-girlfriend from university, he begins to wonder why he had not married her. For him, the flaw is that of failed teleology; "but things were as they had developed rather than as they were intended to be. By the time you saw the drift the inertia was too great to move them back into a rational direction" (Coovadia 2009: 168). Shakeer recalls being rather fond of Leila and feels the tug of old attraction towards her. Now, however, she is already married with two children and the rectification of the "lost" trajectory of time seems impossible.

It is interesting to note how much Shakeer's narrative resembles that of Shakespeare's Hamlet. Shakeer's father has suffered due to political sabotage and his murder staged as a suicide. Feeling the injustice of having his father's good reputation tainted, Shakeer decides to pursue his father's murder case. And just as Derrida illustrates in *Specters of Marx,* in *Hamlet* the need for justice translates into a desire to restore the dislocation of the *contretemps*. Yet like Hamlet, this pursuit is futile and only leads further into the *contretemps*. Shakeer's earnest desire for justice is met with indifference, forcing him to acknowledge that "people had a different sense of time in Durban" (Coovadia 2009: 164). As he attempts to follow up on the case with the police he realises that he must instead concede to the inevitability of "a looking-glass society. Nobody and nothing was in charge. His nausea dissipated on remembering this fact" (2009: 103). In this regard, Coovadia makes a clearer description of the *contretemps* as caused by sociopolitical anomie rather than that which is exclusively bound to Shakeer's interiority.

Despite the fact that the murder is solved in the end (though entirely by his mother's wits) Shakeer perceives present day South Africa to be inhabited by a host of "looking-glass creatures" (2009: 170) who succumb to corruption, opportunism and greed. Finding that there has been a mere swapping of an old corrupt justice system for yet another, he exclaims with great exasperation; "how stifling it was, South Africa! How repetitive!" (2009: 96). This fatalistic surrender to the present *contretemps* can also be witnessed in the outcome of the subplot. When Shakeer initially meets Leila he is hopeful about rekindling their relationship. Shakeer begins his bold pursuit to win over a married woman but eventually gives in to doubt:

> Sharky imagined that for uncounted years the two of them had been sitting and standing in these positions, in this tiled kitchen with its saucepans, blocks of knives and ladles, and the sanded lozenge of the chopping board. In this imaginary kitchen they had become used to each other, had begun to fit

> into each other and become pieces in a single puzzle, which was the shortest definition of love. But it was impossible to return to what should have been normal. What had happened had taken the place of what should have happened. Now it had a claim of its own.
>
> (Coovadia 2009: 218)

When Shakeer visits Leila he imagines a different present and future for their relationship. However, he also learns – after they have sex – that Leila is not prepared to leave her unhappy marriage. Shakeer is disappointed by her need to invest in the status quo and he dismisses the unrealised potential for a better existence as an impossible fantasy.

The disappointments of time prove so dire that Shakeer lapses into notions of African temporal belatedness. In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe explores how Africa has often been perceived as "resistant to change [and] supposedly stationary" (2001: 4). Accordingly, Shakeer's great lament that "time improved nothing" (Coovadia 2009: 95) in South Africa is indicative of a world in which justice seems structurally impossible, as there is no longer a progressive future upon which it is premised. Ultimately, Shakeer grows to believe that "the future was as dark as the diviner's tea. So, now he came to think about it, was the present" (2009: 215).

This is comparable to Jakkie's impressions of South Africa. In the Epilogue, when Jakkie recalls his trip to South Africa, his private sense of being caught in the past is directly transposed onto the sociopolitical conditions of post-apartheid South Africa. Jakkie refers to Agaat as an "Apartheid Cyborg" (Van Niekerk 2006: 677) who carries 'old' habits into the future. He states that Agaat urges everyone to sing *Die Stem*, the old national anthem of South Africa, at the funeral because "she would have no truck with the new anthem" (2006: 675). He is appalled to witness that farm labourers are still driven around in the back of a bakkie, realising that his personal "standards have shifted, of civilization, of human dignity" (2006: 677). South Africa, he concedes, is stuck with the oppression of the past without much hope for change.

Considering the above analysis, both *High Low In-between* and *Agaat* offer bleak renditions of the *contretemps*. Yet they simultaneously make the ethical possibilities of the *contretemps* apparent through the use of dialectical form. These narratives appear to draw inspiration from Socratic dialogue as characters with opposing ideologies dramatise the current contestation around the *contretemps* in the national imaginary. In each text, there is an account of a mother-son relationship that is developed through the use of dual narration: in *Agaat*, Jakkie de Wet narrates the Prologue and Epilogue while his mother, Milla de Wet, narrates the body of the narrative. In *High Low In-between*, Shakeer and his mother, Nafisa, narrate alternative chapters of the text. As readers we are invited into the rhetorical disproving of the dystopian or pejorative perception of the *contretemps* held by Jakkie and Shakeer and more persuasively guided towards the female characters who

actively seek out the *contretemps* as a temporal modality for future engagement in their South African context. More significantly, these characters, unlike their émigré sons, choose to stay in South Africa, reiterating the salience of the *contretemps* in relation to contemporary South African culture.

In the narrative present, Kamilla (Milla) de Wet is on her deathbed and is being nursed by Agaat. Initially, Milla has her own version of utopia that must be forcefully compromised in order to illustrate a necessary "birthing" into the vulnerabilities of time and, more specifically, the *contretemps*. For Milla, utopia lies in the intricate maps of the family farm that she has inherited from a long lineage of ancestors. She finds great comfort in looking at the maps precisely because they convey a sense of hermeneutic pleasure; "what is fixed and where? What real? If only I could once again see the places marked on the map, the red brackets denoting gates, cattle-grids, sluices, the red is-equal-to sign of the bridge [...] Maps attend lifetimes. What is an age without maps?" (Van Niekerk 2006: 81). The maps are heralded for their ability to offer spatial and temporal fixity. To look over the maps is to find confirmation of a perfectly ordered world that has not changed and is not subject to change.

Significantly enough, it is Agaat who denies Milla a viewing of these maps. Throughout events in the narrative present Milla is trying to direct Agaat's attention to the maps; "there, behind the little blue books, lie the maps that I want to see. And you may have dominion over my hours that you count off there and apportion with your devious little snake-hand and your white casque in front of the clock face, Agaat" (Van Niekerk 2006: 65). Here Agaat is perceived to be the vengeful keeper of time who denies Milla the maps that link her to her desired utopia. Agaat makes it impossible for Milla to experience the timeless "nowhere" of the maps. Milla must instead enter the discomfort of the *contretemps* where the re-evaluation of the past becomes central to the creation of new temporal orders.[5]

5. Other tropes in the text that suggest a relinquishing of utopian frameworks are that of Milla's garden and the rainbow that Agaat embroiders for Milla. As a young woman, Milla dreams of a garden on the farm that resembles "paradise" (Van Niekerk 2006: 458) but by the end of the narrative Agaat has taken over the arrangement and planning of this garden and Milla has little control over and access to it. Ostensibly, van Niekerk uses the image of the rainbow to take a dig at the utopianism of post-apartheid narrativity. When Agaat finally reveals the large piece of embroidery that she has been working on, Milla is filled with pity. Milla imagines that Agaat labored over this embroidered rainbow in order to fill her "empty time" (2006: 217) but Milla considers it "a waste of time" (2006: 218). Milla is averse to the image's "perfection, purity, order. Adversaries are they all, the devil's own little helpers. How my heart burns to tell her things! Not that I can see it. Now that it's too late" (2006: 219). Instead, the new hope at the end of the novel is to understand that "now is the time when she should be improvising

As the inducer of the *contretemps*, Agaat consistently employs time and temporality as "weapons" against Milla and thus positions herself as a temporal adversary in the text. Consider the early paragraphs of Chapter Two and Chapter Four, which opens with the clinical narration of clock time over which Agaat presides; "half past nine on the alarm clock. Punctual to the second" (Van Niekerk 2006: 39) and "Agaat doesn't need an alarm. Every morning just before the grandfather clock chimes the hour, she awakens. By then I have been lying awake for a long time" (2006: 76). Milla's observation of Agaat's timely precision is a common narrative technique − the ardent display of functional-time evidently serves to make a mockery of a subject who has ceased to function at all; "what is the time? I don't want to know. In the front room the grandfather clock ticks. My room limns itself from hour to hour, completes itself everyday. My room is a perverse painter. I am the still-life" (Van Niekerk 2006: 102-103).

From Agaat we mostly get a sense that the mastery of time is a matter of personal pride but Milla positions Agaat as her antagonist in this game of temporality and her careful nursing is often met with disdain; "what an ado about nothing everyday!/ What a farce!/ Pastime, Agaat calls it sometimes" (Van Niekerk 2006: 152-153). Here the play on "pastime" is indicative of both the useless passing of time and the fact that the present, for someone who is all too aware that she is dying, already feels like the past.

Yet Agaat does not merely employ her mastery of clock-time in the functional present to antagonise Milla – the future is also strategically leveraged to cause upset. When Milla expresses a desire to see the maps of the farm in Chapter One, Agaat interprets or actively misinterprets as she pleases and rather snidely reads from a *Farmer's Weekly* magazine instead:

> New developments in the practice of crop and pasture rotation: The south-western districts after 1994? Nay what, you know all about that. What about: The future of small-grain cultivation in South Africa? That's just up your alley, Ounooi, the future […]
>
> The future. She placed her finger under the words.
>
> No, I signaled with my eyes, no, no, don't come with your silly games now
>
> (Van Niekerk 2006: 12)

The consideration of the future is an equally cruel proposition for a dying Milla and Agaat appears to be aware of the effect that it has on her. She pushes this temporal marker, quite literally, towards Milla in order to give expression to the sense of vacuity that it arouses. Moreover, this serves as a

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with me, instead of nursing me singlemindedly, but she can't grasp it. Once upon a time she could, but she taught herself not to. I taught her not to" (2006: 65). The narrative treatment of these tropes, much like the maps, suggests a need and desire to perceive experience without the phantasmagoric presence of overwhelming utopias.

reminder that post-apartheid South Africa is not likely to spare Milla's utopic view of her farm, Grootmoedersdrift.

Agaat's temporal "tyranny" thus achieves the desired effect of enforcing the *contretemps* upon Milla as a disjointed "map of days, a calendar, that I have and that she writes on every day. But I can't see that far any more. And what do I care for time? One day is like another in this decoction she has devised for me" (Van Niekerk 2006: 158). Milla experiences the present as a series of indiscernible shifts as "time that streams away backwards, time that ticks on ahead, being wound up for the running down" (Van Niekerk 2006: 64). And in a state of clear discomfort, Milla exclaims that it is "that time again on Grootmoedersdrift! Yes-and-no time!" (2006: 305). Unable to talk, Milla must succumb to conveying messages with her eyes. In this particular incident, Milla tries to direct Agaat's attention to the itch that she wants her to scratch on her body. Agaat, however, cannot read Milla's mind and she grows frustrated with Milla's inability to communicate clear meaning to her. It is interesting to note that this break-down in communication is here presented in temporal terms of undecidability which marks the desire for a more linear structure that will result in a more definitive trajectory of meaning.

Derrida's exegesis on the links between temporality, ontology and communicative meaning in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1987), prove useful here. In this rather expansive text, the 'envois' section serves as an epistolary preface that employs the letter as a vehicle for its own deconstruction. Derrida writes a sequence of letters that are penned by JD to an audience that ranges from Plato to Freud to an anonymous addressee. These letters are presented as items in an aneconomic exchange as Derrida's text operates as both narrative event and philosophical critique. In the "envois", despite all the hyperbolic playfulness and endless digressions, Derrida nevertheless de/constructs a clear picture of the discourse of the letter for us. The discourse of the letter, he argues, is governed by what he terms "The Postal Principle". This principle gives rise to the three posts (stations) of the post: the letter relies on the sender, the system of transmission and lastly, the destination. What "The Postal Principle" assures us, according to Derrida, is the determinism that leads us to believe that a letter will always arrive at its destination. By regulating the three stations of the post, the letter always arrives with meaning that is clearly communicable and always already discernable (*The Post Card*). It is in this manner that the "epoch of the post" gives rise to a closed system in which the letter always arrives. The value of "The Postal Principle" is that it operates in an anticipatory mode that always ensures the future arrival of the message. It modulates time in a linear and sequential manner such that the message does not go astray. Hence, communicative logic always relies on the future in which meaning arrives.

This is far from what Milla experiences in the *contretemps*; "that's my technique nowadays. Progress through misunderstanding. I just had to get the misunderstandings going first. The first would lead on to another until I had reached my goal. It's a retarded kind of logic. Gone are the days of the shortest distance between A and B. Now we're doing the detours, Agaat and I" (Van Niekerk 2006: 11-12). The linear or sequential chain from A to B has been severed and so Milla must travel off-course. As the narrative progresses, Milla finds that she must abandon the hope of "arrival" and succumb to the detours and misunderstandings as the prospects of arriving at meaning no longer bears any promise. Indeed, this is similar to Shakeer who experiences great isolation in the realisation that "there was no means to convey a message from one to another, or if there was, it was transmitted by the logic of the broken telephone so that it was garbled on arrival" (Coovadia 2009: 51). In the *contretemps*, where no communicative act allows for suitable arrival, we again bear witness to the failure of destinal logic. Yet, in Milla's case, the acceptance of the discomfort of the *contretemps* does not amount to abandoning a teleological arch but reconfiguring it in the hope of a different version of the future.

At the outset, Agaat has torn out and stuck the first page of Milla's old journal on the reading stand to upset her. As Milla is paralysed, she cannot turn away from this forced confrontation of her own version of the past. Burning with shame, she states that

> I was young. And it was not the first entry. The real beginning of it all I never wrote down.
> Never felt up to revising those depths.
> Not after I'd found out what I'd brought upon myself.
> Where, in any case, does something like that begin? Your destiny? Where does it begin?
>
> (Van Niekerk 2006: 10)

In *Agaat*, much of the narrative is devoted to acknowledging that the perception of the past is "false" and needs to grow more inclusive of what it has previously marginalised. In the case of Milla, it is the violent obliteration of Agaat from her account of family history. However, as can be discerned here, the contestation of the past must happen because the version of the past that exists is a dysfunctional "beginning" and has thus created a discordant understanding of the present and a failed future. For without a clear understanding of where the past begins, the entire trajectory of journeying towards and arriving at a destination are similarly compromised. Hence the novel, in its entirety, serves to account for Milla's submission to Agaat's inquisition of the past. For in a finding a different "beginning", they can re-establish a temporal framework that will, once again, allow for the re-habitation of the future.

In *High Low In-between*, Nafisa finds the current political environment particularly disheartening. And like Shakeer, she begins by vocalising her sense of grave disappointment; "seeing the speed at which that world receded brought Nafisa's heart to a halt. So much of their lives, so much life and energy, had gone into opposing the old government" (Coovadia 2009: 21). The present that she inhabits is clearly one of squandered expectations and in effect, produces a dismal outlook of contemporary South African society.

Like Milla, Nafisa's experience is also rendered in temporal terms. At the outset, Nafisa states that she has been living through "a difficult year" (Coovadia 2009: 11) and her sense of mourning is distinctly related to the future as "her ready tears were pre-emptive, the prediction of some circumstance of which she had no knowledge. Since her husband's operation she had sensed some catastrophe waiting to show itself" (Coovadia 2009: 11). As her circumstances bear down on her, Nafisa becomes increasingly anxious about the future that now spirals out of her conceptual control. Hence she describes herself as "slow, she knew, to work out what happened around her. Others were rapid" (2009: 27). And feels herself to be subject to spatio-temporal dislocation; "however fast she drove, they seemed to be motionless" (2009: 37).

In the novel, the unknown future event that Nafisa fears is her husband's murder. Thus when she walks into the bedroom, her husband's dead body is not met with shock but with uncanny recognition; "she recognized the scene just as if she was remembering it from the day before. There was nothing in the room to surprise her. She could understand exactly what had happened. She had known about this in the morning. She had known about it the day before, the month before, and in fact since the moment of her birth" (2009: 38). Despite the fact that time has now met her fearful expectations of the future, Nafisa still appears to be disoriented as she begins to trace time in a backwards motion – all the way to her birth. However, we see that this is, for Nafisa, the first time that she gets to experience a form of temporal coherence that has eluded her since the outset of the novel. She is able, once again, to trace time – albeit in a backwards trajectory. In turn, this signals her entry into the looking-glass world; "for she was Alice and has been Alice from the first breath she took" (Coovadia 2009: 185).

In the looking glass world, Nafisa quickly realises that she must relinquish her previously held notions of the future; "the future, Nafisa thought, belonged to the Roses"[6] (2009: 178). Her sense of hopelessness makes her feel arbitrary in the space; "Nafisa couldn't regret these alterations. She wasn't nostalgic. The place never belonged to her" (2009: 238) and so she decides that "she would unload all her burdens. She would sell the house

6. Rose being an incorrigible nurse with whom Nafisa has had many abrasive encounters in the hospital.

and leave the country behind" (2009: 181). In the looking glass world, she succumbs to the perverse reversals of time, order and justice which eventually lead to a form of hysteria. Yet, unlike Shakeer, she cannot escape. Instead, like Milla, the uncomfortable entry into the *contretemps* eventually results in a breakthrough, leading to a celebration of her tardy awakening that

> tomorrow would mark the beginning of the future. Tomorrow she would have her first tomorrow …. She has grown up late in life. It had taken such a quantity of experience, more than was allotted to a lifetime, but she had blossomed into sympathy with every creature in the universe.
>
> (Coovadia 2009: 247)

By the end of the novel, Nafisa finds it impossible to leave South Africa as she embraces the "tomorrow", to which she re-commits herself, as radically altered. The reaffirmation of teleology as an open-ended – and decidedly more modest – prospect is similar to the affirmation made by Milla in Van Niekerk's *Agaat*.

As texts that encompass characters who actively choose to remain in South Africa, it is interesting to note how these authors suggest that they *must* challenge the affective pitfalls of the *contretemps* in order to do so. This is in direct comparison to the temporal sensibilities of émigré characters such as Jakkie in *Agaat* and Shakeer in *High Low In-between* who view the *contretemps* with despondency and use this as the very means by which they maintain distance from South Africa. Instead, the female characters choose to live with the ruptured temporality of the *contretemps* and, as evidenced in this article, this is by no means an anti-messianic stance. Rather, there is the retention of the future as a temporal modality but in a manner that is significantly less prescriptive.

These ideas appear to resonate with Elleke Boehmer's earlier argument that post-apartheid South Africa must remain "a projection of multiplicity" that

> broadly sketches a possible future set-up, but the sketch remains exactly – and crucially – that: broad, provisional, amorphous. In 1992, though our predictions may be clearer, if less idealistic, than in 1990, the future remains as unimaginable, and as provocative to the imagination
>
> (1994: viii)

This declaration alludes to the fact that future expectations were already undergoing rapid alteration during the transition years and exhibits further prescience in its anticipation of the rigid "future" that post-apartheid narrativity would subsequently introduce. In response, Boehmer asserts that the current "sketchiness" of the future need not be read as symptomatic of the transition years but rather as crucial mode of reading the post-apartheid

future. She highlights that the future must protect its ability to work in hypothetical and creative strains, implying that it requires the temporal conditions of the *contretemps* to allow for constant re-evaluation. Moreover, as is the case with the *contretemps*, Boehmer implies that the anxiety of provisionality is a necessary one. This creative anxiety helps to understand that the future is always an imaginative exercise at which the national imaginary will fail, but to which it will nevertheless return.

And, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel is the most appropriate place in which to perform exercises of this kind as "the more actively and consciously it moves into the future the more tangible and indispensable its inconclusive-ness becomes […] time and world lose their completedness as a whole as well as in each of their parts" (1981: 30). Here Bakhtin comments on the Enlightenment that brought with it a new kind of writing and a new kind of novel. It is the novel, he argues, that becomes a vehicle for temporal and social expansion taking place within society during this period. More generally, Bakhtin opines that the novel has the ability to investigate the moment when the future is being pursued in any sociopolitical context and, in doing so, must present its creative vision as an inconclusive temporal narrative. Hence, on some level, the current employment of the *contretemps* by South African novelists should strike us as less surprising, as they make active use of the inherent possibilities of the novel in order to provide keen expressions of our current temporal and sociopolitical context.

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