

Traumatic memory, representation and forgiveness: Some remarks in conversation with Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*

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In light of Koos Vorster's recent work dealing with themes such as memory, forgiveness and reconciliation, this article underlined the argument that a critical engagement with literary texts can be valuable to clarify and enrich a theological response to questions related to these notions. More specifically, the article focused on Antjie Krog's profound and deeply moving engagement with the work and legacy of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in her book *Country of My Skull* (1998), that used the notion of forgiveness as lens for such an undertaking. Taking the cue from the poem with which the book ends, the article addressed questions such as 'To whom is the plea for forgiveness addressed?' and 'Who is asking for forgiveness, and what must be forgiven?' In the process attention was given to questions about the limits of representation and the need for an ethic of interconnectedness. The article suggested that these questions beg for further theological engagement.

Traumatiese herinnering, representasie en vergifnis: Enkele opmerkings in gesprek met Antjie Krog se *Country of My Skull*. In die lig van Koos Vorster se resente werk oor temas soos herinnering, vergifnis en versoening, het hierdie artikel die argument onderstreep dat 'n kritiese interaksie met literêre tekste van groot waarde kan wees om die teologiese gesprek oor hierdie sake te verhelder en te verryk. Die artikel het meer spesifiek op Antjie Krog se diepsinnige en ontroerende bespreking van die werk en nalatenskap van die Suid Afrikaanse Waarheids- en Versoeningskommissie gefokus. Die konsep van vergifnis is as lens vir hierdie ondersoek gebruik. Gegewe die aard van die gedig waarmee die boek afsluit, is vrae soos 'Aan wie word die pleidooi vir vergifnis gerig?' en 'Wie vra vir vergifnis, en wat moet vergewe word?' aan die orde gestel. In die proses is aandag gegee aan vrae rakende die beperkinge verbonde aan representasie van trauma uit die verlede en die noodsaaklikheid van 'n etiek van interverweefdheid. Daar is gesuggerer dat hierdie vrae ook om 'n teologiese respons vra.

Introduction

In recent years Koos Vorster has written several articles dealing with themes such as memory, forgiveness and reconciliation (cf. Vorster 2004, 2009a, 2009b). In his engagement with these interrelated notions Vorster often refers to the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). For instance, in an article titled 'An Ethics of Forgiveness' Vorster makes the important observation that in the execution of the Commission's mandate, it encountered issues that begged not only legal but also ethical questions, including questions related to repentance and forgiveness. He further points to the fact that in the recent past scholars from a wide array of academic disciplines had reflected on the socio-political meaning of repentance and forgiveness, and that South African Christians too are wrestling with these matters. Therefore he asks:

What is the significance of the Christian concept of forgiveness in a political transition signified by suspicion, racism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism and the violence caused by these phenomena? How can these core Christian concepts be translated into a socio-political praxis of restoration and reconciliation? (Vorster 2009b:366)

The value of Vorster's work on the theme of forgiveness and related concepts, in my view, lies in his commitment to ask how a Christian theological approach could contribute towards addressing these questions. I share this commitment, although in this article I want to underline the argument that a critical engagement with literary texts can be valuable to clarify and enrich a theological response to questions related to forgiveness.

Hence I find it revealing that one of the best theological books on forgiveness written in English the last few decades, Gregory Jones's *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, contains extended

discussions of texts such as Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* (Jones 1995). The conversation between some literary texts and an ethics of forgiveness indeed holds much promise. Not surprisingly some have argued that literature can help us deal with the trauma of the past. In their book *Narrating our Healing: Perspectives on Working through Trauma*, Chris van der Merwe and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2009), for instance, state that:

literary writers invent new narratives through which the traumatic memory of readers can be vicariously expressed, so that they can experience a catharsis. Literary narratives can help us to confront our traumas, to bring to light what has been suppressed; it also imagines new possibilities of living meaningfully in a changed world. (p. ix)

Whilst questions about the (im)possibility of adequate representation, as well as questions related to an ethics of representation remain, I am also of the opinion that literature has the power to express and represent traumatic memory and that it can play an important role in 'narrating our healing'.

For the purposes of this article I want to turn to Antjie Krog's profound and deeply-moving engagement with the work and legacy of the TRC in her book *Country of My Skull* (1998), a book that Vorster himself refers to in a footnote as an 'impressive account of some of the stories told before the TRC' (2004:486). *Country of My Skull* developed out of Krog's award-winning work on the TRC as reporter for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (under the name Antjie Samuel). Whilst it is not the purpose here to place *Country of My Skull* in the context of Krog's life and work, one can recall the description of Krog by one of the narrators in J.M. Coetzee's polyphonic novel *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007):

On Antjie Krog

Over the airwaves yesterday poems by Antjie Krog read in English translation by the author herself. Her first exposure, if I am not mistaken, to the Australian public. Her theme is a large one: historical experience in the South Africa of her lifetime. Her capacities as a poet have grown in response to the challenge, refusing to be dwarfed. Utter sincerity backed with and acute, feminine intelligence, and a body of heart-rending experience to draw upon. Her answer to the terrible cruelties she has witnessed, to the anguish and despair they evoke: turn to the children, to the human future, to ever-self renewing life. No one in Australia writes at a comparable white heat. The phenomenon of Antjie Krog strikes me as quite Russian. In South Africa, as in Russia, life may be wrenched: but how the brave spirit leaps to respond (p. 199).

In this article I shall focus especially on how *Country of My Skull*, and more particularly the untitled poem with which the book ends, invites reflection and challenges the discourse on forgiveness and related notions. At the outset I need to mention that although forgiveness and concomitant concepts such as confession of guilt and reconciliation should not be confounded, one also ought to guard against any neat separation that obscures the interrelatedness of these notions.

Questioning forgiveness in conversation with *Country of My Skull*

In the 'Publisher's Note' introducing *Country of My Skull* we read that the Truth Commission 'has become an intensely illuminating spotlight on South Africa's past' (Krog 1998:viii). One can argue, in similar vein, that Antjie Krog's book, which was first published in 1998, enables a revealing perspective on the disturbing and deeply-human experiences surrounding the work of the TRC. As André P. Brink, another eminent South African writer, notes on the back cover of the book: 'Trying to understand the new South Africa without the Truth and Reconciliation Commission would be futile; trying to understand the Commission without this book would be irresponsible.'

In this article I shall look at Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* through the lens of forgiveness, a notion that was also at the heart of the work of the TRC, although one should mention that the term 'forgiveness' is not mentioned in the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (Act 34 of 1995), which states the conditions for amnesty for perpetrators. The Act thus did not require that perpetrators show remorse or victims offer forgiveness, only that they make a full disclosure of their actions and indicate that these actions were proportional and politically motivated. Nevertheless, it is true that, as literary critic Mark Sanders (2007) notes in his book *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission*:

from the beginning of the Truth Commission's life, a discourse, and counterdiscourse, on forgiveness surrounded it: there were perpetrators who apologized, and asked for forgiveness, and sometimes victims forgave or said that they are willing to do so under certain conditions; at the same time, there were those who did not ask forgiveness, ones who were unforgiving, and those who criticized the expectations that victims ought to forgive. (pp. 93–94)

In her book *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, Julie McGonegal (2009) also observes:

As the hearings unfolded, the language and ethic of confession and forgiveness saturated the speeches of many commissioners, not to mention the testimony of perpetrators and victim-survivors alike. It also infiltrated the public realm through the national and international press as well as through the production of dramas, visual artworks, films, memoirs, autobiographies, and fiction. (p. 154)

Given the fact that forgiveness is central to the work and legacy of the TRC, it is not surprising that it features prominently in a book like *Country of My Skull*. The American edition is even published with the subtitle *Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (Krog 2000a). Although it is a misleading reduction to call forgiveness 'the theme' of the book, one is nevertheless invited to read the book through the lens of forgiveness in light of the poem at the end of the book, a poem that ends with the words:

Forgive me
 Forgive me
 Forgive me
 you whom I have wronged, please
 Take me
 with you. (Krog 1998:279)

To whom is the plea for forgiveness addressed?

When one reflects on the end of Krog's poem – and indeed on the poem as a whole – the question of the addressee of the poem comes to the fore. This question is closely intertwined with the question of whom the book is addressed to. On a certain level *Country of My Skull* can be viewed as an attempt by the author 'to find an interlocutor, an addressee, an other for whom her own story will cohere' (Sanders 2007:149). Who is this interlocutor, addressee and other? In her interesting article 'They Never Wept, the Men of my Race': *Antjie Krog's Country of My Skull and the White South African Signature* Carli Coetzee (2001) has argued that it is quite significant that *Country of My Skull* is signed with the name 'Antjie Krog' and not the name 'Antjie Samuel' (her married name which she used as a reporter). By signing the book with the name associated with her as Afrikaans poet, she:

thus captures the attention of her Afrikaans-speaking readers, who are called on to take notice, and are forced to read the book alongside, or on top of, the other work produced under this signature. (pp. 686–687)

However, the idea that the text is written merely for fellow-Afrikaners, addressing them, is misleading. The poem at the end of the book, with the line addressing 'You whom I have wronged,' indicates another addressee as well. The same can be said about the revealing dedication, which reads:

for every victim
 who had an Afrikaner surname on her lips. (Krog 1998:iii)

Whilst this dedication does not imply that the victims, like those Black women who testified before the TRC, are the only addressees, it does point to the strong identification between Krog's signature and 'every victim who had an Afrikaner surname on her lips.' Through her gendered dedication, Krog seems to be calling her Afrikaner readers to witness her addressing a Black woman on whose lips one finds the names of Afrikaner perpetrators. As Carli Coetzee (2001:686) observes:

the audience that Krog's book invokes is not a unitary one. She is speaking to black South Africans, explicitly in front of (and thus also to) fellow whites, but not only to them/us. So the text remains aware that the brothers and fathers are watching, but it does not address them exclusively, nor does it use the language of the Afrikaner ancestors. The men who did not cry have to listen, but also listen to the daughter addressing someone beyond them.

Whilst *Country of My Skull* does not claim any easy identification with the victims, it does aim to show hospitality to the words of the witnessing victims, thus 'giving the domain of words over to the other' (Sanders 2007:150). The plea for forgiveness is addressed to the victims, but it is also addressed in front of (and thus also to) fellow

White people, including those sceptical of the commission. The TRC was mostly met with negativity and suspicion in White Afrikaans-speaking circles, including in religious communities, and Krog even received hate mail from people who saw the Commission as an attack on Afrikaner identity. Whilst *Country of My Skull* is by no means a romanticising of the TRC, it can be read on one level as a manifesto in which Krog adds her signature to the defence of the legitimacy of the TRC. This act of legitimisation is seen, for instance, in the concluding paragraphs of the book that place the poem in the context of experiences on a boat returning from Robben Island. In this space between the place where Nelson Mandela and others were incarcerated, on the one hand and the mainland where the Parliament is located (the seat of power where the first scene of the book is situated), Krog is filled, in her words, 'with an indescribable tenderness towards the Commission' (1998:278). She acknowledges the shortcomings of the Commission, 'the mistakes, its arrogance, its racism, its sanctimony, its incompetence, the lying ... the showing off' (Krog 1998:278). She praises, however, the Commission for keeping alive the idea of a common humanity and carrying a flame of hope. The strong identification with the Commission is seen in her wish to 'sign' the work of the Commission: 'I want this hand of mine to write it' (1998:278). And then follows the poem that has subsequently also been published in English and Afrikaans versions as part of a cycle of poems titled 'Country of Grief and Grace' and '*Land van genade en verdriet*' respectively (cf. Krog 2000a, 2000c).

The poem that ends *Country of My Skull* opens with the words:

because of you
 this country no longer lies between us ... (Krog 1998:278)

Who is this indefinite 'you'? The comparable Afrikaans version of this poem in Krog's book of poetry *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie* does not use 'you' but begins: '*vanweë die verhale van verwondes*' ('because of the stories of the wounded') (Krog 2000a:42) – the translation does not capture the alliteration, suggesting that these are the narratives of the traumatised victims that have changed her relationship to the country and others. Later we read:

... by a thousand stories I was scorched
 a new skin. (Krog 1998:279)

The Afrikaans reads:

... 'n duisend woorde
 skroei my tot 'n nuwe tong (literally, 'a thousand words scorch me to a new tongue'). (Krog 2000a:42)

The poem, addressed to the victims but with a wider audience in mind as well, is on one level a testimony by the author that amidst the vulnerability of language, the stories of victims have enabled a new language and a new identity, albeit through a painful process. In a sense the poem also contains a call to fellow South Africans to open themselves up to new projects of identity formation. As Anthea Garman (2008) has argued in her article 'The Mass Subject in Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*':

Krog's TRC-inspired text is not only the second-person performance of the ethical listening to the thousands of new and previously silenced voices, but also a means to enable the third-person readers to join Krog and the first-person speakers in an imaginary "new South African" subjectivity. (p. 224)

Through the modelling of hurt, affectedness and apology *Country of My Skull* 'provides a hermeneutic vehicle for those seeking a new understanding of – and place within – a new collective' (Garman 2008:226).

Who is asking for forgiveness, and what must be forgiven?

The question, to whom the plea for forgiveness in the poem is addressed, can be supplemented with the question, or cluster of questions: Who is asking for forgiveness? And what must be forgiven? One can argue that the weighty three-fold plea for forgiveness in the poem signifies not merely identification with the victims, but also a strong sense of being in a relationship of complicity with the perpetrators. Forgive *me*. The plea for forgiveness is thus linked to historical complicity.

Moreover, one can argue further that the request for forgiveness is tied to the vulnerability and failure of language. *Country of My Skull* is painfully aware of the limits of language in representing the trauma of the past. The haunting fragments of testimonies recounted in *Country of My Skull* are introduced with the words that testify to the vulnerability of language, but also show the commitment to find language to counter oblivion and death:

To seize the surge of language by its soft, bare skull
Beloved, do not die. Do not dare die! I, the survivor, I wrap you
in words so that the future inherits you. I snatch you from the
death of forgetfulness. I tell your story, complete your ending –
you who once whispered beside me in the dark. (Krog 1998:27)

The physical and psychological impact of reporting on the TRC is also linked to language:

... reporting on the Truth Commission indeed leaves most of us
physically exhausted and mentally frayed.
Because of language. (Krog 1998:37)

Krog (1998) continues by saying how she struggled to find language to report during the second week of the hearings:

I stammer. I freeze. I am without language ... The next morning
the Truth Commission sends one of its own counsellors to
address the journalists. 'You will experience the same symptoms
as the victims. You will find yourself powerless – without help,
without words.' (p. 37)

Trauma creates a crisis of language – for reporters and victims. When Krog (1998) recalls the testimony of Nomonde Calata, whose husband was one of the 'Cradock Four' who were murdered by the security police, she comments on Nomonde's piercing crying:

The academics say pain destroys language and this brings about
an immediate reversion to a pre-linguistic state – and to witness
that cry was to witness the destruction of language into a time
before language ... was to realize that to remember the past of
this country is to be thrown back into a time without language.

And to get that memory, to fix it in words, to capture it with
the precise image, is to be present at the birth of language itself.
But more practically, this particular memory at last captured in
words can no longer haunt you, push you around, bewilder you,
because you have taken control of it – you can move it wherever
you want to. Maybe this is what the Commission is all about –
finding words for the cry of Nomonde Calata. (p. 42, 43)

But trying to find words to do justice to the trauma of the past is not a task that leaves you unaffected, physically and mentally. In response to a request to send a sound bite mentioning immense atrocities, Krog (1998) writes:

My hair is falling out. My teeth are falling out. I have rashes.
After the amnesty deadline I enter my house like a stranger. And
barren. I sit around for days. Staring. My youngest walks into a
room and starts, 'Sorry, I am not used to you being home.' No
poetry should come forth from this. May the hand fall off if I
write this. (p. 49)

Later in the book Krog returns to the question of language, poetry and the representation of trauma. In an imagined conversation she puts the following words in the mouth of her German interlocutor:

Every educated German knows the line: '*Der Tod ist ein Meister
aus Deutschland*' you explain. After the Second World War it was
said in Germany: it is barbaric to write a poem after Auschwitz.
Yet Paul Celan wrote this indescribably beautiful Fugue of
Death. The reception of the poem was ambivalent ... In the
end Celan himself felt this ambivalence and asked anthologists
to remove the poem from their books. (Krog 1998:237; cf. also
Sanders 2007:147–148).

The remark stating that it is barbaric to write a poem after Auschwitz (which is by Adorno although the text does not name him), challenges Krog the poet to consider whether it is not also barbaric to write poetry after apartheid. Therefore the conversation continues:

That is precisely why I say that maybe writers in South Africa
should shut up for a while. That one has no right to appropriate
a story paid for with a lifetime of pain and destruction. Words
come more easily for writers perhaps. So let the domain belong
to those who literally paid blood for every faltering word they
utter before the Truth Commission. (Krog 1998:237,238)

This statement from Krog invites the question of whether her remarks are the result of the fact that she cannot find a form for dealing with the past, to which she replies – recalling a conversation she had with the Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman: 'I often write pieces down from memory, and when I check the original tape, it is always, but always better than my own effort' (1998:238). But the question remains, in Dorfman's words in the hosted dialogue: 'How else would the story be told?' (Krog 1998:238).

This dialogue gives rise to the question: Is the plea for forgiveness in the poem at the end of the book not also a plea to forgive the failure and inability to do justice to the testimony of the victims through literary representation? Is a book like *Country of My Skull* not also barbaric, including the concluding poem?

Forgiveness – the limits of representation and an ethic of interconnectedness

Yet, it seems, the author who signed the book in the name of an Afrikaans poet, cannot do otherwise but to end her book with a poem:

because of you
 this country no longer lies
 between us but within

it breathes becalmed
 after being wounded
 in its wondrous throat

in the cradle of my skull
 it sings, it ignites
 my tongue, my inner ear, the cavity of heart
 shudders towards the outline
 new in soft intimate clicks and gutturals

of my soul the retina learns to expand
 daily because by a thousand stories
 I was scorched

a new skin.

I am changed forever. I want to say:
 forgive me
 forgive me
 forgive me

You whom I have wronged
 take me

with you. (Krog 1998:278, 279)

This poem testifies to the vulnerability of language in witnessing to the trauma of the past and in doing justice to the voices of the victims ('after being wounded in its wondrous throat'). However, the stories ('a thousand stories') do not merely point to the vulnerability and impotence of language. The poem speaks of the birth of a new language, which enables hearing, feeling, seeing ('The retina of my soul expands'). But this seeing is not separated from being scorched, contributing in the process to new identification ('a new skin').

The threefold plea for forgiveness at the end of the poem, one can argue, is also linked to the commitment to a common journey and a common future. This points to what I have called elsewhere a timeful understanding of forgiveness, in other words a view that does not abstract forgiveness from truthful memory and hopeful vision (Vosloo 2001). There is a real temptation to use forgiveness and the confession of guilt as part of a clever strategy to achieve political or moral gain. Such accounts are often not interested in a truthful engagement with the past or a close identification with a common future, displaying in the process a static account of forgiveness and reconciliation. One can further point to the significant space between the phrases 'take me' and 'with you' in the poem. This open space underscores the difficulty of forgiveness, of asking for forgiveness, of offering forgiveness and of claiming that you are forgiven, even pointing to the moral need to hesitate in making this plea.

In addition, the call to 'take me with you' points towards a notion of forgiveness that is not separated from an understanding of interconnectedness (for a further elaboration of what Krog calls an ethic of interconnectedness, see Krog 2009). In an important essay published in the *South African Journal of Philosophy*, significantly entitled "'This thing called reconciliation ...'" forgiveness as part of an interconnectedness-towards-wholeness' (which was written during her fellowship at the *Wissenschaftskolleg* in Berlin), Krog (2008) clearly positions her understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation within a broader African communitarianism and relates it more specifically to the more localised Southern African concept of *ubuntu*, the idea that a person is a person through other persons. For Krog (2008) this concept of interconnectedness-towards-wholeness suggests that forgiveness and reconciliation cannot be neatly separated. She writes about these notions:

They are not only closely linked, but also mutually dependent: the one begins, or opens of a process of becoming, while the other is the crucial next step into this becoming ... It is important that the Xhosa word for reconciliation in the concept of Truth and Reconciliation, is forgiveness (*uxolelwano*). The TRC literally means in Xhosa: the Truth and Forgiveness Commission. When looked at from a human rights view, one can say that forgiveness was forced on people through this name. When looked at from an interconnected view, the word indicates the first step towards changing into a more humane self that would include both victim and perpetrator. (pp. 355–356)

This focus on a more humane self is also seen in the quotation taken from the testimony of Cynthia Ngewu, the mother of Christopher Piet (one of the 'Gugulethu Seven'), which provides the heading for Krog's essay, and was also quoted at the beginning of the chapter 'Reconciliation: The Lesser of Two Evils' in *Country of My Skull*:

This thing called reconciliation ... if I am understanding it correctly ... if it means the perpetrator, this man who killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back ... then I agree, then I support it all. (Krog 2008:356, 1998:109).

For Krog (2008) these words make clear what interconnectedness-towards-wholeness entails and the role of reconciliation in it. She comments as follows on Cynthia Ngwenwa's remarkable words:

Her words, firstly, mean that she understood that the killer of her child could, and did, kill because he had lost his humanity; he was no longer human. Secondly, she understood that to forgive him would open up the possibility for him to regain his humanity; to change profoundly. Thirdly, she understood also that the loss of her son affected her own humanity; she herself had now an affected humanity. Fourthly and most importantly, she understood that if indeed the perpetrator felt himself driven by her forgiveness to regain his humanity, then it would open up for her the possibility to become fully human again. (pp. 356–357)

Krog (2008) further tries to untangle what she calls 'interconnected-towards-wholeness' from the other driving forces of the TRC discourse, such as Christianity, human rights language, liberation politics, et cetera. The question can be asked, however, whether she should not have put a stronger emphasis on the continuity between these discourses and

an ethic of interconnectedness. For instance, she juxtaposes forgiveness instituted by Christ and forgiveness inspired by interconnectedness-towards-wholeness:

Christian forgiveness says: I forgive you, because Jesus has forgiven me (*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespassed against us*). The reward of this forgiveness will be in heaven and also holds the possibility that one can forgive without reconciling ... Furthermore, Christian forgiveness also has the possibility of reconciling without forgiving: one can live in peace with sinful neighbours without forgiving them their deeds.

On the other hand, interconnected forgiveness says: I forgive you so that you can change/heal here on earth, then I can start on my interconnected path towards healing. The effort is towards achieving full personhood *on earth*. This means that forgiveness can never be without the next step: reconciliation, and reconciliation cannot take place without it fundamentally changing the life of the one that forgave as well as the forgiven one. (p. 357)

I think that this binary opposition drawn by Krog between Christian forgiveness and what she terms interconnected forgiveness is too stark. Whilst one should certainly be aware of possible discontinuities in this regard, one should not, in my view, see Christian forgiveness (informed, amongst other things, by words from the Lord's Prayer) as necessarily separated from an ethical imperative towards reconciliation on earth. In an interesting article 'On earth as it is in heaven: Eschatology and the Ethics of Forgiveness' Andreas Schuele (2009) has argued that it is important to note that in the Lord's Prayer – with its emphasis on the expectation of God's kingdom to arrive on earth ('your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it already is in heaven') – the one human activity that is mentioned is forgiveness. He further notes:

Matthew was certainly not of the opinion that there was anything that human beings could do to accelerate the arrival of this kingdom or, conversely, to prevent it from coming. But this seems to be precisely the reason that Matthew is interested in how human beings can and should live toward the arrival of this kingdom. (p. 198)

The focus is thus on the transformation of human life. The clearing of past sins needs to display the 'fruits of repentance' (Schuele 2009:196).

Whilst one can agree with Krog that the idea of interconnectedness-towards-wholeness should be disentangled from other driving factors (such as Christianity, human rights discourse, etc.) in order to arrive at a more complex interpretation of the TRC process, the challenge also remains to ask questions about possible continuities and correspondences. Krog ends her article by saying: 'Sustained scholarship into the formation, sustainability, integrity and moral compass of interconnectedness-towards-wholeness could lead to a more informed discourse around events happening on the African continent' (Krog 2008:365). In a similar fashion one can say that more sustained theological work – also from a Reformed perspective – that focuses on a Christian ethic of forgiveness is needed too, also in conversation with the challenges posed by literary texts such as *Country of My Skull*, and more specifically by the views on forgiveness and reconciliation that this text and Krog's

subsequent reflections point towards. Vorster's more recent work on forgiveness and related notions offers a valuable resource for such an undertaking.

Conclusion

Difficult forgiveness

In his monumental work *Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, translated into English as *Memory, History, Forgetting* the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2004) is concerned with the vital but complex question of the representation of the past. In a long epilogue to his extensive discussion of memory, history and forgetting, Ricoeur turns to the notion of forgiveness. This epilogue has the apt heading 'Difficult Forgiveness' (Ricoeur 2004:457). At the heart of Ricoeur's discussion of 'difficult forgiveness' lies what he describes as the asymmetrical relationship or the disproportion that exists between the poles of fault and forgiveness. He therefore speaks of 'a difference in altitude, of a vertical disparity, between the depth of fault and the height of forgiveness' (Ricoeur 2004:457). It is this asymmetry that constitutes the equation of forgiveness: 'below, the avowal of fault; above the hymn of forgiveness' (2004:457). The experience of what Ricoeur calls 'fault' points towards the fact that we are accountable for our actions. For there to be forgiveness, we must be able to accuse someone of something and declare them guilty. This accountability links the act to the agent. The descent into 'the depth of the fault' makes the term 'unforgivable' applicable. Moreover, Ricoeur does not only speak of the depth of fault, he also refers to the height of forgiveness. Hence a counter-proclamation can be heard: *There is forgiveness*. This 'there is' (what Emmanuel Levinas called *illéité*) is the height from which forgiveness is announced. This 'voice from above' is not a mute voice. Its form of discourse is that of the hymn; it is a discourse of praise and celebration. According to Ricoeur, this voice says: 'There is forgiveness as there is joy, as there is wisdom, extravagance, love ... Forgiveness belongs to the same family' (2004:467). The hymn of forgiveness is for Ricoeur akin to St. Paul's famous hymn dedicated to love (1 Cor 13).

Ricoeur's reference to the 'hymn of forgiveness' displays something of the fact that although forgiveness is difficult to give and receive, as well as to conceive of, our language about forgiveness (and related notions) is nevertheless always seeking form and genre. We certainly should avoid cheap speech when it comes to forgiveness, also for theological reasons; nevertheless, the need remains to find words and gestures to deal with the past – a past that is always hauntingly present. Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* powerfully testifies to the limits and power of language in representing the trauma of the past. Moreover the book, and more specifically the concluding poem, links traumatic memory – the need and limits of representation – and forgiveness in a way that breathes pain and promise.

We have no indication in the text that the plea for forgiveness and a common future expressed in the final lines of *Country of My Skull* is countersigned by the victims, or by others witnessing her plea. It is thought provoking to note

though, as Mark Sanders has done, that one of the strongest acknowledgements of literature by the TRC is evident in the fact that Krog's poem has been used as an epigraph to Volume 7 of the TRC Report. This volume, of over a thousand pages, 'lists the name of every victim recognised by the commission, along with a brief account of the human rights violation that he or she suffered' (Sanders 2007:114). And in the page across from Krog's poem in Volume 7 we find the signatures of 15 of the truth commissioners (cf. Sanders 2007:146). Perhaps this reception of Krog's poem suggests in some small way that amidst the sense of the vulnerability of language in representing the past we should also hold fast to the idea that words too can do surprising things. This insight also invites theological commentary.

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