

# Finding Oneself in Older Age: Affectivity, Existence, and the Nursing Home

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Geographical and environmental gerontologists have long drawn attention to the affective landscapes that shape the experiences of older people. On this view, older age is not so much an objective fact about certain bodies as it is a situation—a place where older people find themselves, charged with emotional and existential meaning. In this paper, I use the notion of emplacement to capture this confluence of place, emotion, and existential meaning in later life.

The paper explores the emplacement of older age through an existentialist phenomenological reading of Jacoba van Velde's 1953 novel *De grote zaal* (*The Big Ward*). Set in an unspecified Dutch city after World War II, the novel portrays the loneliness, absurdity, and existential anxiety of later life unfolding within a care institution. It tells the story of Geertruide van der Veen, a 74-year-old widow who relocates to a nursing home (*rusthuis*) for older women after suffering a stroke. As Geertruide's sense of being out of place intensifies, she develops a mortal fear of the big ward—the area reserved for the terminally ill and dying. Throughout the narrative, Geertruide engages with her environment in ways that transcend the common distinction between place, emotion, and existential meaning. The paper maps her emplacement at the nursing home by focusing on three prominent feeling-places: fearing—the big ward; sharing—the common areas; and grieving—the outside.

The analysis of Geertruide's emplacement is grounded in a close reading of van Velde's novel through the lens of Martin Heidegger's concept of *Befindlichkeit*. This concept captures the way human beings always already find themselves in an affective world, prior to its breakdown into subjective and objective reality. I demonstrate how a Heideggerian account of emplacement,

applied to *De grote zaal*, contributes to contemporary debates in geographical and environmental gerontology while deepening our understanding of existential homelessness in later life.

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Like few other places, the nursing home embodies the imaginary of the “fourth age,” marked by decline, illness, and dependence (Gilleard and Higgs “Aging without Agency”; Gilleard and Higgs “An Enveloping Shadow?”). In many ways, relocating to a nursing home signifies failure: the failure of individuals to “age successfully,” the failure of families to provide for their elders, and the failure of social systems to offer personalized care (Chivers 139). Naturally, the lived experience of nursing home residents and their caregivers is more nuanced than these narratives of tragic terminality, featuring not only the contraction but also the expansion of existential possibilities. This ambiguous position of the nursing home has been a consistent theme of literary imagination (see Chivers and Kribernegg; Kribernegg). A prominent example from the Dutch context is Jacoba van Velde’s 1953 novel *De grote zaal* (*The Big Ward*). Set in an unspecified Dutch city after World War II, the book explores the loneliness, absurdity, and existential anxiety of later life unfolding in a care institution. It tells the story of the 74-year-old widow Geertruide van der Veen who relocates to a nursing home (*rusthuis*) for older women after suffering a stroke. As Geertruide’s sense of being out of place intensifies, she develops a mortal fear of the “big ward,” the area reserved for the terminally ill and dying. Her engagement with the nursing home as a place of deep affective and existential significance forms the backdrop of this inquiry.

While reinforcing pessimistic narratives about the nursing home, *The Big Ward* also opens up a generative perspective, highlighting the entanglement of place, feeling, and existential meaning in later life. Like so many protagonists of care home narratives, Geertruide experiences her situation as a kind of imprisonment, from which she flees by migrating inwards. Literary scholars have noted the “cultural desire to escape the nursing home specter” (Chivers 135) at the heart of such narratives and have looked for alternative, more

nuanced renderings of the nursing home that avoid the stereotype of authentic, self-sufficient ageing in place (Jamieson; Life; Simonsen). The purpose of this paper is not to intervene in this debate on the representation of the nursing home; rather, I use the nursing home as a philosophical case study in order to illuminate the phenomenology of older age.

Based on a phenomenological reading of *The Big Ward*, I argue for the inseparability of place, feeling, and existential meaning in experiences of ageing. Crucially, Geertruide is not passively located in the nursing home, but moves around her environment, thereby inhabiting her older age in a particular way—a dynamic that underscores the significance of the nursing home as a “therapeutic landscape” (Milligan) and a “living arena of existential health” (Jacobson). In this paper, I examine how such ways of moving about the nursing home might add to our understanding of older age as always already emplaced. Emplacement, the way I interpret it, is irreducible to a person’s location in objective space; it forms an integral part of their existential situation and is intimately connected with affective and existential meanings. I derive this interpretation of emplacement from Heidegger’s (*Being and Time*) concept of *Befindlichkeit* and his account of human existence as being-in-the-world. Combining a close reading of *De grote zaal* with Heidegger’s conceptual corpus, this paper develops an existential phenomenological analysis of the emplacement of older age.

The analysis will focus on three prominent feeling-places that feature in the novel: fearing—the big ward; sharing—the common areas; and grieving—the outside. In each case, I show how Geertruide *finds herself* at the nursing home, how she engages with her environment in ways that transcend the common distinction between affective and spatial experience (as indicated by my use of hyphens). I will then reflect on the implications of this perspective for the emplacement of older age and the debate on existential homelessness at the nursing home. Before diving into the analysis, however, I will briefly introduce Heidegger’s concept of *Befindlichkeit* and contextualize my reading of *De grote zaal*.

**BEFINDLICHKEIT: TO FIND ONESELF IN THE WORLD**

Heidegger's concept of *Befindlichkeit* can be seen as a precursor to recent "externalist" perspectives in the phenomenology of emotion, which challenge the idea that affective experiences occur solely within an individual's psyche. Instead, emotions are understood as extra-subjective fields distributed across people's living environments (Casey, *Turning Emotions inside Out*). This view is reflected in studies on affective atmospheres (Anderson; Griffero), affective arrangements (Slaby et al.), and affective milieux (Schuetze), all of which blur the conventional boundary between affective and spatial experience. While these studies bear a family resemblance to Heidegger's conception, they do not share his concern with the existential significance of spatial-affective experience.

*Befindlichkeit* plays a key role in Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of human existence. In his magnum opus *Being and Time*, Heidegger traces the peculiar movement of existence in its oscillation between involvement in everyday concerns (being-in-the-world) and the anxious realization of life's finitude (being-toward-death). The human being, Heidegger writes, is a being who wonders about the meaning of Being as such, which includes the meaning of one's own life (Carman 8). It "exists as an entity for which, in its Being, that Being is itself an issue" (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 458, translation by Macquarrie and Robinson). Conversely, as being-in-the-world, human beings are fully immersed in the living relationships with other beings and things that make up their worlds. They are in the world, not in the sense of spatial location, but in the sense of participation and involvement, in the way that one is "in love" (Dreyfus 43). Heidegger regards such immersive relationships as the raw texture of experience from which commonsensical ways of perceiving and thinking are derived. Where being-in-the-world presupposes the world as an undivided horizon of meaning and purpose, common sense posits it as a spatial container that holds discrete objects. In this framework, *Befindlichkeit* denotes a primary way of accessing the world, involving experiences conventionally referred to as feelings and emotions.

Alongside understanding (*Verstehen*) and discourse (*Rede*), *Befindlichkeit* discloses the world in its significance for a particular human being. Being notoriously difficult to render into English, the term has been variably translated as “state of mind” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translation by Macquarrie and Robinson), “affectedness” (Dreyfus), “attunement” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translation by Stambaugh), and “situatedness” (Aho). *Befindlichkeit* is a German neologism that plays on the double meaning of the verb *sich befinden*, which can refer to both location (as in “Der Hammer befindet sich in der Werkstatt,” “The hammer is in the workshop”) and mood/wellbeing (as in “Wie ist Ihr Befinden?,” “How are you?”). When Heidegger speaks of *Befindlichkeit*, he refers to the ways human beings always already *find themselves in the world*. To be *befindlich* is the characteristic feature of a being who is simultaneously situated, capable of feeling, and self-conscious. This conception radically differs from conventional ways of understanding affective experience as primitive and located “inside” the subject. Instead, it denotes an active, implicit understanding of one’s being in the world that transcends the distinction between a subjective “inside” and an objective “outside” (Gendlin).

Heidegger’s primary examples of *Befindlichkeit* are fear and anxiety (*Angst*). While they play different roles in his analytic framework, both disclose the world and are, therefore, constitutive of one’s lived reality. The constitutive elements of fear are that which is frightful (*das Wovor*), fearing itself (*das Fürchten selbst*), and that which is at stake (*das Worum*) (Heidegger, *Being and Time* § 30). To be in fear is to discern the frightfulness of an approaching threat that may or may not come to pass. It discloses both the world as a place of potential danger and one’s vital concerns, which are thus endangered. A human being can only experience fear because they care about something—that which is at stake. Who fears for their house and home, for instance, has an implicit understanding of such relationships of care. To the extent that fearing foregrounds relationships of care, which are the flesh and bones of one’s being-in-the-world, it holds deep existential significance. The same is true for anxiety, which enjoys an exalted position in Heidegger’s framework. In contrast to fear,

anxiety is not oriented toward any particular being in the world but toward (non-)being as such (Heidegger, *Being and Time* § 40). In anxiously being-toward-death, a human being is confronted with their eventual nothingness—the essential precondition for living an authentic life.

In modes of *Befindlichkeit* such as fear and anxiety, the spatial element is only implicit. While finding oneself means to be situated somewhere, takes place somewhere, Heidegger does not explore this side of his concept at any length. He also does not demonstrate a great interest in the specificity and richness of affective experience beyond fear, anxiety, and—in another work—boredom (Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*). Following these loose threads, I take the concept of *Befindlichkeit* somewhat beyond Heidegger's original formulation. In my reading, *Befindlichkeit* reveals not only the deeply affective nature of human existence, but also the integration of feeling and place. Focusing on the unity of lived experience in this way offers helpful tools to rethink the existential situation of older age as portrayed in *De grote zaal*.

#### **SITUATING *DE GROTE ZAAL***

Jacoba van Velde published *De grote zaal* in 1953. The book is set in an unspecified Dutch city after the Second World War. It tells the story of the 74-year-old widow Geertruide who relocates to a nursing home (*rusthuis*) for older women after suffering a stroke. Geertruide struggles to adapt to her new life at the institution, where she is exposed to the constant presence of others and the increasing frailty of her body. She narrates the story from a first-person perspective, meandering between observations of the everyday goings-on at the nursing home, reflections on the past, and worry about the future. Her account is occasionally interrupted by observations of her daughter, Helena, who has come over from Paris to help Geertruide ease into the new situation. Geertruide and Helena “loved each other helplessly” (Velde 64). Marked by great intimacy, their bond also contains a sense of tragedy. Mother and daughter both realize that, living a Bohemian life abroad, Helena does not have the means to care for Geertruide or otherwise improve her lot. Despite her best intentions, she is bound to leave her mother behind in a state of latent despair. Geertruide's

profound unhappiness is a reflection of the bleak hospital environment that encloses her. Passing through the spaces of the nursing home, she shifts between different affective situations, such as fear, anxiety, loneliness, solitude, and grief. The book ends with Geertruide's transfer to the big ward, the area reserved for the dying and terminally ill. She dies there shortly afterwards with Helena by her side.

When *De grote zaal* was published, the Dutch elder care system was still in its infancy. The end of World War II had marked a dramatic shift in the country's welfare policy, with the first pensions being issued in 1947 (Deen). Large living and care facilities for older people promised a solution to two interlocking problems: the housing crisis and the rapidly ageing population (Jonkhoff). Cultural values were also shifting, as care for older people was increasingly perceived as a burden on their children. A 1963 law facilitated the construction of retirement homes (*bejaardentehuizen*) by the government, and it was only then that elder care facilities in the modern sense entered the scene—a decade after the publication of *De grote zaal*. In the 1970s, reports of widespread elder abuse in care and retirement homes caused a public scandal. As a result, the focus of the government shifted to extramural care in an attempt to stimulate ageing in place—a trend that continues to the present day. In 2013, the government initiated a major overhaul of the elder care system. Today, elder care is mostly provided at home by family members, district nurses, and other professionals, whereas access to institutional care is severely restricted (Coolen). In hindsight, the reforms have done little to avert the oft-cited care crisis that the country is presently facing—an acute shortage of care professionals that increases the pressure on informal caregivers (Voort & Bruurs).

The reception history of *De grote zaal* reflects the shifting realities of elder care in the Netherlands. Van Velde's novel clearly hit a nerve when it was first published, receiving enthusiastic reviews from audiences in the Netherlands and abroad (Blom). Since then, the novel has served as a reference point in the historiography of the care home in the Netherlands (see Jonkhoff). It was therefore no surprise that the initiative *Nederland leest* (today *Heel Nederland leest*, “All of the Netherlands reads”) picked *De grote zaal* as its yearly giveaway

in 2010, greatly boosting its visibility. The choice of *Nederland leest* can be linked to the debate on the viability of the care home system that took place at the time. Now and then, *De grote zaal* speaks to the persistent stereotype of the care home as a place of alienation and decline.

Van Velde herself considered the fact that her novel is set in a nursing home to be less relevant than its exploration of universal human themes. As she stated in an interview: “That home is just [a] setting. We are all in the same boat” (Blom 107). *De grote zaal* seamlessly integrates a big existential theme (the meaning of human life in the face of death) with a minute description of the care home’s materiality—a feat that is due not least to van Velde’s style of writing. Commentators have praised the lurid power of van Velde’s prose and have drawn parallels to existentialist philosophy as well as Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (Steenbeek). The affinity with Beckett’s absurdist theatre is not coincidental, given that van Velde was a close friend and translated several of his plays into Dutch. Apart from the existentialist mindscape of the postwar period, *De grote zaal* was heavily informed by van Velde’s personal life, with the character Geertruide being modelled on the author’s late mother.

Being clearly informed by van Velde’s historical situation and her somewhat bleak world view, *De grote zaal* nevertheless offers compelling material for a phenomenological analysis of older age. The book foregrounds the protagonist’s affective life and existential struggles as they unfold in the confines of the nursing home. Geertruide’s story *exemplifies* the emplacement of older age—not in the way a token represents a type, but by acting as a bridge for intersubjective understanding. Focusing on the concrete details of her lived experience, I employ an empathetic reading strategy that does not take for granted a shared world of older age but attempts to reconstruct such a world with the help of phenomenological concepts (see Ratcliffe, “Form of Empathy”).

The fact that Geertruide’s experience is fictional does not diminish its phenomenological value. Phenomenology is fundamentally concerned with uncovering the meaning of phenomena from a first person perspective. Even though Geertruide’s story does not stem from an actual person, it still provides

a vivid, embodied viewpoint. For a phenomenologist, such a fictitious account is especially compelling because of its coherence, depth, and intimacy, difficult to achieve through conventional qualitative interviews. In this context the line between reality and fiction matters less than whether readers can recognize in Geertruide's voice a possible lived experience. Admittedly, this approach carries the risk of misrepresenting the lived realities of real nursing home residents. I argue, however, that the risk is minimal here because this paper does not aim to represent historical realities. Instead, it explores the spatial-affective-existential meaning of life in a nursing home as plausibly rendered in *De grote zaal*.

My approach is in line with established phenomenological practices of using literary examples and fictionalized texts to investigate general structures of experience (Casey, "Literary Description"; Manen 153-57). Conversely, phenomenological concepts and methods have a firm place in literary analysis (e.g., Felski). As these sources suggest, phenomenological approaches do not only illuminate the "emotional landscapes" of literary characters (Kudale and Kotte 7); they also reveal shared cultural understandings about older age and its emplacement.

## EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

### *Fearing—the big ward*

The big ward is the larger of the nursing home's two dormitories. It houses the sickest and frailest residents, those nearing the end of their lives. Mentioned only occasionally, the big ward nevertheless casts a long shadow over Geertruide's daily experience. It is the subject of unsettling reports from other residents and the vanishing point of fears and anxieties. Residents who are transferred to the big ward seem to drop out of existence, being absorbed into its atmosphere of anonymous suffering. Jacoba van Velde had meant this bleak vision to symbolize human existence more generally: irrespective of age or health, we all find ourselves in the big ward, doomed to die alone. At the same time, there is something very specific about the big ward and its visceral horror, which illuminates the nursing home as a spatial-affective-existential situation.

While Geertruide avoids the big ward as much as possible, it always looms somewhere in the margins of her attention. Sometimes she hears groans and other sounds emanating from there. On one occasion, she enters the big ward to visit Ms. Blazer, another resident. Passing by a row of beds, their occupants meet Geertruide with wordless stares. In a nearby mirror, she catches a glimpse of herself: “a little old lady, stumbling with difficulty, and leaning heavily on her cane” (Velde 47). The subsequent conversation with Ms. Blazer is punctuated by the groans of a dying woman nearby, which brings up the subject of dying in the big ward: “First they go to the room where you are now, then they come here, and then ... it’s over,” Ms. Blazer explains ominously (Velde 48). The visit unsettles Geertruide and instils in her a mortal fear of the big ward. As she later notes, “I no longer have any desire to live, but I am also fearful of ... the big ward” (Velde 88).

Geertruide’s involvement with the big ward recalls Heidegger’s analysis of fear and anxiety. Through fearing, Geertruide finds herself in an inhospitable world oriented around the big ward as a frightful object. It monopolizes her attention and, by endangering her vital concerns, discloses them. The impressions and stories she gathers serve as reminders of mortality and as prophecies of abandonment and suffering. What is at stake in these moments of existential realization is the integrity of Geertruide’s personhood, the value of being someone instead of something. Fearing the big ward, she faces the prospect of being reduced to a failing body—a worry that comes alive in Geertruide’s brief encounter with herself as “a little old lady.” As Geertruide becomes more and more absorbed into the inhospitable world of the big ward, her fear gradually morphs into anxiety. In anxiety, Geertruide no longer encounters the big ward as an object in the world; instead, she is confronted with the baselessness of the world as such. Everyday objects and orientations cease to “make sense” as a profound sense of uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*) seizes her (see Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*). This shift from fear to anxiety turns the big ward into an all-encompassing atmosphere, making it progressively more difficult for Geertruide to envisage an escape from her present *Befindlichkeit*.

*Sharing—the common areas*

Geertruide's life at the nursing home unfolds almost entirely in the small ward and in the sitting room. It is in these spaces that she sleeps, eats, chats, and receives care. As common areas, the small ward and the sitting room are shared among the residents. They are hyper-transparent spaces of constant contact and exposure. The sitting room, especially, is a centre of social activity. It is described as small and cramped, hardly sufficient when the residents are joined by occasional visitors. The garden is another common area at the nursing home, though it is suffused with an entirely different atmosphere. Geertruide ventures there on one occasion, after conquering a forbidding flight of stairs. It is the only place at the nursing home where she finds a sense of peace and manages to relax into her situation.

For Geertruide, daily life at the nursing home is marked by futility and dullness: "For us, one day after another passes in monotonous dreariness. In the morning, we get up, get dressed and go to the sitting room. Every day we sit in that small space for hours and hours. We look outside, talk occasionally, but have nothing to say to each other" (Velde 87-88). Not only does she suffer from the lack of meaningful activities; she also frequently references the exposure to the prying eyes of others. Suffering from the near total lack of privacy, Geertruide finds herself in a constant state of "oversharing." Apart from a small cupboard for personal belongings, everything at the nursing home is held in common with others. Sharing the same physical space, however, does not necessarily lead to emotional intimacy. For the most part, the resident exchanges remain superficial, even though privately Geertruide often feels sympathy for the misfortunes of others. By contrast, the garden affords brief moments of connection and genuine intimacy. On her only trip there, Geertruide makes contact with a curious young boy across the fence and listens to one of the more withdrawn residents sharing a painful secret.

During her little garden retreat, Geertruide experiences a richer sense of "sharing" grounded in solitude. As Hannah Arendt (476) writes, there is a crucial difference between solitude and loneliness: "In solitude [...] I am 'by myself,' together with my self, and therefore two-in-one, whereas in loneliness

I am actually one, deserted by all others.” Enjoying the sunlight and engaging with others in meaningful ways, Geertruide finds herself in company with herself. This sense of two-in-one starkly contrasts with the dispersion of herself in the other areas of the nursing home. In those zones of loneliness, Geertruide finds herself both scattered and emptied out by the constant demand of the others’ presence. The two different spatial configurations—the sitting room and the garden—represent different ways of sharing, different modes of *Befindlichkeit*. In the common areas of the nursing home, Geertruide thus encounters alternative possibilities of sharing her life with others.

*Grieving—the outside*

While Geertruide settles into the nursing home, Helena stays at her old studio and frequently visits her mother. Before heading back to Paris, Helena takes Geertruide on a trip to the beach promenade. A horse carriage takes the two women to the sea, where they enjoy some moments of privacy and togetherness. It is the only time in the novel that Geertruide physically leaves the nursing home. More frequently, she ventures out in her imagination, as her thoughts meander back to the home studio that she used to share with her husband and daughter. Helena’s temporary stay at the studio serves as an anchor for Geertruide’s imagination, allowing her to picture herself in a familiar environment together with her daughter. This imaginative refuge collapses, however, when Helena returns to Paris. As Geertruide laments:

Now my home is no longer there for me either. As long as Helena still lived there, I could think of her in familiar surroundings. [...] I would sit in the armchair next to the divan, occasionally asking her something or pouring her a cup of tea and it would seem as if I was really with her. Although I resided here [at the nursing home], in my thoughts I still lived mostly with her in my studio. (Velde 65)

Before Helena’s departure, Geertruide’s daydreams often take her back to her old studio, her personal belongings, and the memories associated with them: the fire-stained sideboard where Willem had once left his cigar; the letters they

had written each other; the chairs where they had sat one anxious Saturday morning waiting for Helena to return home. Geertruide feels at home in this storehouse of memories, much more than at the nursing home. She gradually realizes that she will not be able to return to her old studio—a loss of home that is completed with Helena’s departure. Like the studio, the beach promenade is suffused with the presence of Geertruide’s daughter, which lends it a special sense of intimacy. In the tranquillity of the sea, the two discuss how Geertruide is actually feeling at the nursing home. They agree that even though the situation is intolerable, there is no alternative. As Helena puts it movingly: “we loved each other helplessly” (Velde 64).

At the imagined studio and the beach promenade, the assurance of home exists side by side with its loss. While finding great comfort in Helena’s presence, Geertruide is painfully aware that their moments of togetherness are fleeting. Soon, her daughter will be far away in Paris, and she will be left to fend for herself. For Geertruide, then, the outside areas are sites of grief. Grieving the loss of her old home, Geertruide directs much of her attention at to the relationship with her daughter. She revisits their earlier differences and misunderstandings, gradually embracing Helena’s bleak vision of human existence:

What did Helena say again? Human beings are so terribly lonely, my dear little mother. Some, most, are unaware of it. Once in a while, in great sorrow, when no one and no reasoning can help any more, they have an inkling of it. But usually they forget about it again, and maybe that’s a good thing. [...] We are condemned, she said, and don’t know why. Why did she have to understand this terrible truth so young? (Velde 75)

From Geertruide’s new vantage point, Helena’s words ring true: human existence is indeed profoundly lonely. What used to be a point of difference between mother and daughter has turned into a shared worldview. On other issues as well, Geertruide develops a more intimate understanding of Helena’s perspective. Paradoxically, their physical separation seems to bring about an

affective approximation. This work of grieving is reflected in the place where Geertruide finds herself.

As the imagined studio and the beach promenade show, the nursing home is not a closed situation; it opens up to a constitutive outside, framed by the formative relationships of Geertruide's life. Grieving is Geertruide's way of finding herself outside the nursing home, with the people, practices, and places that she continues to hold dear, despite having lost them. This outside is not mechanically opposed to an inside. In Geertruide's lived experience, the two are rather dynamically integrated; they form an open-ended situation in which people, objects, and events can hold several positions at once: Helena can be simultaneously close by and far away; Geertruide can reside in the nursing home and still inhabit her old studio. Grieving, as a mode of *Befindlichkeit*, is the unfolding of this spatial-affective-existential ambiguity. It is an active engagement with change and an attempt to remake a lost home within a new situation.

### **THE EMPLACEMENT OF OLDER AGE**

In the following two sections, I situate the insights from the foregoing analysis in the literature on emplacement and existential homelessness in older age. Having shown how different feeling-places shape the experience of the novel's protagonist, I argue that emplacement is inextricably linked to affective-existential experience as well as to the phenomenology of at-homeness. Reading *De grote zaal* through the lens of *Befindlichkeit* indeed provides material for rethinking the emplacement of older age. From an existential point of view, older age is irreducible to a person's chronological age, their state of health, or their social position; rather, older age reflects the entirety of a person's orientations toward the world, including their relationship with place. The example of Geertruide illustrates this point vividly: the confined space of the nursing home confronts her with some of the painful realities of growing older—increasing frailty, the loss of loved ones, becoming an “old woman” in the eyes of society, and facing one's own mortality. Each of these realities makes manifest the impermanence and suffering that form an essential part of human

existence. Geertruide approaches these predicaments not through pure reflection, but through concrete bodily movements at the nursing home. Moving by being moved, the nursing home directs her toward certain affective objects and away from others (see Ahmed). As such, the nursing home is both the backdrop to and an actor in Geertruide's existential drama—it is by inhabiting the nursing home that she inhabits her older age.

The analysis of *De grote zaal* points to a model of emplacement centered on the existential-affective meaning of place. Different models of emplacement have been proposed, some highlighting the affective meaning of place and others focusing on its existential significance. Geographical and environmental gerontologists have long been proficient cartographers of the affective landscape of older age (Andrews et al.; Cutchin and Rowles; Rowles and Bernard). Drawing on non-representational theory, they have highlighted the affective meaning of places, whereby affect is understood as a “prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another” (Massumi xvi). This approach foregrounds the sensual fabric of places, consisting of “colors, shapes, textures, sounds, speeds, rhythms, momentums, and clashes of the bodies and objects involved” (Andrews 27). Existential phenomenological approaches, by contrast, have focused on the existential meaning of places. In this view, places are existentially significant in the sense that they provide an outlook on one's life as a whole. In *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir shows how older people may cultivate rigid habits to protect themselves against the menace of an ever-changing world. The possession of an object or place reflects such solidified habits; for instance, “the possession of a garden means being able to take one's walk in it every afternoon” (Beauvoir 469). Yet the protection provided by such habit-places is a mixed blessing, since it can make it harder to accept relocation to a different environment—a consequence I will explore in more detail in the next section. Modelling emplacement in older age on the concept of *Befindlichkeit* echoes and combines insights from geographical/environmental gerontology and existential phenomenology, offering a framework in which place, feeling, and existential meaning are intertwined.

The dynamic unity of place, feeling, and existential meaning is sustained through everyday activities. Being perfectly ordinary and unassuming, these activities may give rise to “daily meaning,” small moments of fulfilment experienced throughout the day (Hupkens et al.). Older people may find daily meaning in hosting guests, enjoying music, or nature walks. As one respondent of Lars Tornstam (59) stated: “I see trees, buds, and I see it blossom, and I see how the leaves are coming—I see myself in the leaves.” What the story of Geertruide shows, however, is that everyday activities can be existentially significant without yielding a sense of fulfilment or being at one with the world. In fact, *De grote zaal* is replete with descriptions of activities that reflect the ambiguity of Geertruide’s *Befindlichkeit*: overcoming a forbidding flight of stairs, lying in bed listening to birdsong, clinging to the nurse who attempts to lift her into the bathtub, and many more. Each of these activities comes with a specific mood or feeling that discloses a particular part of Geertruide’s world and distinct possibilities of being. They manifest her daily struggle with frailty and physical barriers, along with occasional experiences of peaceful connection and the panic of helplessness. These activities are affective, practical engagements with her environment that do not rely on conscious thought—they are meaningful without being reflections on meaning. They belong to larger practices, such as the practices of fearing, sharing, and grieving discussed previously.

The practices of fearing, sharing, and grieving combine both activity and passivity. It is essential to fearing, sharing, and grieving that they happen in place, where in does not denote physical location but involvement and participation (Dreyfus 43). More accurately, these ways of finding oneself may be said to take place, to bring forth a horizon of meaning that is experienced as a particular place with unique textures, rhythms, and atmospheres. Geertruide may be called the agent of this bringing forth in some ways, but not in others. Through fearing, sharing, and grieving, Geertruide not only acts on the world—the world also answers back. Fearing, for instance, may be described as a practice, but that does not imply that Geertruide chooses to be afraid; she rather finds herself in a place of fear, in a world that has become frightful and

menacing. This inherent passivity of affective experience is reflected in the terms used to describe it, such as pathos (from the Ancient Greek *páskhō*, to suffer or undergo), affect (from the Latin *affectus*, to be acted on), and emotion (from the Latin *emotus*, to be moved out or away) (see Fuchs and Koch; Waldenfels 21–34). To find oneself in a place, then, is to be moved by its textures, rhythms, and atmospheres; it implies vulnerability and openness to the “outside” (Casey, *Turning Emotions inside Out*). If there is activity in this passive reception of the world, it consists in the reflexive act of “finding oneself.” Always already finding herself somewhere, Geertruide is in a continuous process of returning to herself, of grasping herself and her values through the imprints that the world—or more concretely, the nursing home—leaves on her. This activity of “finding oneself” neither originates from nor leads to a sovereign self; it is more akin to roaming in a field of relationships, from which the self continuously needs to “gather” itself (Gendlin), without ever mastering its circumstances.

Heidegger speaks of the existential significance of this passive activity by which we find ourselves somewhere. As he writes in *Being and Time*: “Existent beings glimpse ‘themselves’ only when they have become transparent to themselves equiprimordially in their being with the world, in being together with others as the constitutive factors of their existence” (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 137, translation by Stambaugh). In his view, human beings come to an understanding of themselves through their involvement with the world and with others. *Befindlichkeit* mediates this process of existential reckoning, though not all of its modes are created equal. Heidegger argues that only the *Befindlichkeit* of anxiety (*Angst*) confronts human beings with their potential non-being, death, thus offering a unique standpoint from which to grasp one’s life as a meaningful and purposeful whole. In my analysis, I have also considered other “existential feelings” (Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*), such as sharing and grieving. As I have shown, the limitedness of Geertruide’s situation manifests itself in a number of ways. Finding herself at the nursing home, she is not only confronted with the prospect of death, but also with limits to her health, bodily prowess, and social bonds. These limits are inherent in Geertruide’s

emplacement and are sometimes reflected in the physical structure of the nursing home itself. Geertruide encounters them as she moves about the home, gradually inhabiting her older age.

Viewing emplacement through the lens of *Befindlichkeit* clarifies how places can hold affective-existential meanings and how these meanings may be specific to later life. While Heidegger views *Befindlichkeit* as a basic feature of human existence in general, there appears to be something specific about the way older people find themselves in the world. The nursing home in *De grote zaal* is but a setting, as Jacoba van Velde remarked; in my reading, it is the symbolic situation of countless older people in Western societies. One prominent feature of this situation is what some scholars have referred to as “disenfranchised grief” (Moss and Moss). If growing older typically involves the accumulation of losses—losses of bodily possibilities, of social status, of loved ones—these losses frequently remain unacknowledged. For instance, an older person who loses their lifelong friend is often not seen in their grief—after all, the loss was to be expected, inevitable, “normal.” This disregard for the affective dignity of older people betrays ageist prejudices and forms part of what Simone de Beauvoir (2) has termed the “conspiracy of silence” around older age. The nursing home of *De grote zaal* can be seen as the materialization of this cultural silence, a place whose primary function is not dwelling but rather the management of residents, whose bodily, social, and affective situations has rendered them unbecoming and disposable. Grief does not find an outlet there but bounces off the walls that progressively close in on Geertruide. By virtue of existing, by finding herself in the world, she never succumbs to pure passivity. Yet, there is an unmistakable rift between Geertruide’s life before relocating to the nursing home and her life thereafter. It marks the shift from a place of freedom that includes the possibility of going elsewhere to a place of confinement and hopeless endurance where leaving is but an impossible wish, however fervently held.

## EXISTENTIAL HOMELESSNESS

It is common in the phenomenological literature to interpret ageing as a process of alienation (Améry; Beauvoir). To lose one's footing in the present world and its culture may give rise to a sense of homelessness, as Fredrik Svenaeus has argued recently. In this literature, the link between homelessness and older age appears to be largely metaphorical and not necessarily grounded in older people's *Befindlichkeit*. By contrast, a close reading of *De grote zaal* shows how older people's alienation from the world at large may be intimately connected with the loss of their homes, understood as a dwelling place of unique affective-existential significance.

In institutional care settings, older people often find themselves far away from home. It is unsurprising, therefore, that experiences of home and homelikeness occupy a central position in geographical and environmental gerontology (Adams and Chivers; Oswald and Wahl; Wiles and Coleman). Upon relocation to a nursing home, many older people find their sense of home diminished and may even slide into existential homelessness. While not technically homeless, they may still feel profoundly out of place at their new residence. Cut off from familiar activities, environments, and people, they may fall into existential despair, "left adrift in a strange and frightening world without meaning" (qtd. in Barsnes). Existential homelessness involves not only the loss of one's physical home, but also the inability to make oneself at home, that is, to reach a level of integration between oneself and the environment (Molony).

Geertruide's experience at the nursing home reflects many elements of existential homelessness, such as non-personhood, powerlessness, insecurity, and meaningless space (Carboni). In fact, her movements of fearing, sharing, and grieving can be considered responses to the diverse aspects of existential homelessness. Fearing is Geertruide's way of finding herself in a place devoid of shelter, understood in the existential sense. While the nursing home provides physical protection, the looming presence of the big ward undermines Geertruide's overall sense of security. It dissolves the dynamic tension between adventure ("autonomy") and security that is at the heart of the home

(Steenwinkel et al.), establishing a constant atmosphere of foreboding. A similar defect consists in Geertruide's all but total lack of privacy. Having no personal belongings with her, no control over her private space, and no freedom from the intrusion of others, Geertruide finds her sense of identity under constant siege (see Young). The bleak reality of this oversharing is only occasionally counterbalanced by moments of solitude, when Geertruide appears to regain her sense of home.

Grieving offers a more ambiguous response to existential homelessness, combining suffering with the affirmation of meaning. On the one hand, grieving appears as Geertruide's spontaneous reaction to displacement, understood not only as the loss of her physical home but also as the permanent contraction of her world. To be at home somewhere involves the double possibility of leaving that place and coming back to it again—a cyclical rhythm of departures and returns that sustains at-homeness (Bollnow 178-79). No longer being able to engage in that rhythm, Geertruide descends into existential homelessness. Grieving expresses this predicament but also partly transforms it. Through grieving, Geertruide finds herself outside of the nursing home: at the beach promenade or at her old studio, in the caring presence of her daughter Helena. The pain of their (anticipated) separation is accompanied by memories of their shared lives, reflections on their differences, and concerns for Helena's happiness and wellbeing. In this way, grieving connects Geertruide with her identity outside and beyond the nursing home. It affirms the central meanings in her life at the very moments they threaten to slip away.

This analysis of Geertruide's *Befindlichkeit* complicates the idea of existential homelessness as the mere absence or negation of home. To become existentially homeless transforms a person's entire being in the world—a shift that cannot be reversed simply by working on an older person's psychological resilience, strengthening their relationships with care providers, or improving the design of the nursing home (cf. Rijnaard et al.). While certainly important, these interventions do not necessarily address the affective-spatial-existential crisis underlying an older person's sense of homelessness. Geertruide's experience highlights the role of what one might call negative *Befindlichkeit* in dealing with

the loss of security, the lack of privacy, and the contraction of her world. Grieving, in particular, involves a generative movement toward (partial) at-homeness, potentially integrating present emptiness with the fullness of past and future meanings. As a mode of *Befindlichkeit*, grieving does not happen inside a person's mind—it takes place in Geertruide's practical being in the world.

As phenomenologists have pointed out, being at home is an accomplishment rather than something that one passively receives (Steinbock 233). Even in inhospitable environments, people may attain “a sense of ease, comfort, or even belonging” by engaging in so-called “hometactics” (Ortega 172). This focus on practices of homemaking rather than states of being at home resonates with the experience of Geertruide. Her existential homelessness is not an objective property of the nursing home but the effect of the practices it encourages (or inhibits). Like fearing, sharing, and grieving, being at home denotes a way of inhabiting a place; it is a practice of participation that gathers people and objects in a sphere of intimacy, ease, and belonging. Through practices like grieving, Geertruide does not overcome the contraction of her world and the existential homelessness it fosters. Yet, her experience is not one of pure despair; it also involves an element of generativity, the possibility of meaning beyond meaninglessness.

## CONCLUSION

The contraction of Geertruide's world comes to a head in the final scenes of *De grote zaal*. In a moment of disorientation that recalls the book's opening line, Geertruide wonders: “Where am I? How did I get here?” (Velde 89). Disorientation gives way to horror when she realizes that she has been transferred to the big ward. The pain that has been invading her abdomen for a few days has grown into a lethal condition. At the brink of death, Geertruide finds herself in an endless black tunnel, trying desperately to escape. This collapse of her lived space comes with a sense of mortal fear and the certainty of her imminent end. In this way, the image of the black tunnel offers the

ultimate illustration of the unity between place, feeling, and existential meaning—the key theme of this paper.

Reading *De grote zaal* through the lens of *Befindlichkeit*, I have not only offered an interpretation of the protagonist's emotional landscape but also challenged ingrained assumptions about the emplacement of older age. Despite the book's thematic focus on tragedy and decline, its detailed description of Geertruide's spatial-affective-existential life opens up generative interpretations of her lived experience. In my model of emplacement as *Befindlichkeit*, older age is never a purely chronological, biological, or social condition, but a specific way of existing, that is, of being in the world. To be in the world is to always already be emplaced, to find oneself at a particular place. Place in this sense is not a container that holds objects; it is a field of relationships, a landscape of meaning. The meaning of place does not involve intellectual propositions but reflects a person's embodied engagement with the world. This engagement is inherently affective, involving various feelings that communicate qualities and values. My analysis of fearing, sharing, and grieving incorporates these insights, combining Heideggerian sensibilities with a detailed description of Geertruide's lived experience. As such, it offers a critical standpoint from which to rethink the emplacement of older age.

I have gestured toward some of the (practical) consequences of such rethinking, particularly in the section on existential homelessness. If meaning in later life is a co-production of person and place, this raises questions about the design of care spaces. While homelike decoration and effective care are crucial, giving space to the dark movements of *Befindlichkeit*—such as fearing, sharing, and grieving—may be equally important. Do residents have the freedom to find their own shelter, seek solitude, or grieve their losses? How is it possible to be at home in homelessness? Addressing these questions may lead to a more responsible care home architecture—an architecture that makes the creation of existential possibilities in later life its essential task.

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