

spanningsroman beantwoord nie, dring 'n simboliese interpretasie hom op. Piet van Rooyen maak van 'n magdom intertekste gebruik. So het die belangrikste dolfyne almal name van Russiese skrywers gekry. Verder maak ook Victor Hugo, Simon Raven en Tintin hul verskyning. Ook die mite van Jason en die goue vag en veral die legende van die Vlieënde Hollander word vermeld. Al hierdie en ander verwysings lei egter nie tot betekenisverdigting nie omdat ook nou weer elke vorm van noodwendigheid lyk te ontbreek. Die stukkie van die legkaart pas net nie in mekaar nie omdat 'n eenduidige simboliese interpretasie nie moontlik blyk te wees nie. Wat is die bedoeling van die soektog na die verdwene dolfyne aan die hand van die literêre verwysings? Wat is die betekenis van die vermelding van Vanderdecken, die kaptein van die Vlieënde Hollander of van Jason en sy vliessoekers? Ensovoorts. Is dit bloot 'n slim speletjie wat die outeur met die leser speel? Die digte verwysingsraamwerk skep eerder verwarring as opheldering. Die leser kan deur die bome die bos nie meer sien nie en bly daardeur in 'n kringetjie rondraai.

Akwarius laat die leser onvergenoegd. Sy leesavontuur het hom nie by 'n eindpunt gebring nie. Nóg as spanningsverhaal, nóg as simboliese werk is *Akwarius* oortuigend uitgewerk.

Luc Renders

Universiteit Hasselt, Hasselt, België

This Life.

Karel Schoeman. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau. 2005. 227 pp. ISBN 0-7981-4552-8.

First published in 1993 in Afrikaans as *Hierdie lewe*, Karel Schoeman's *This Life*, recently powerfully translated into English by Elsa Silke, is

a novel of its time: a compulsion to understand the past in order to achieve reconciliation in the present. The reminiscences of an elderly woman on her death bed, the novel, set in the Roggeveld in the nineteenth century, is thus deeply entrenched in the post-apartheid South African discourse of memory as a potentially crucial construct in the national project of reconciliation, given its believed power to exorcize the past by its revelation of truth. However, Sussie, the narrator's groping through unstable landscapes of memory, words, silences, gesticulations, writing, and inscriptions towards an understanding of the past raises sober questions about the retrievability of the past as such. Self-conscious, self-questioning, foregrounding its gaps and silences, hinting at alternative versions, *This Life* in its layering of past experience inscribes history, like fiction, as a myth aimed at enabling us make some sense of reality.

Sussie's need for the past is clearly stated: "to understand, and even to forgive" (9). And part of what she needs to forgive is the essentially unloved childhood life that marginalizes her, driving her to the life of a witness, even to virtual voyeurism and dread of human communion. Told in the background of the many stories of several domineering women who overshadow their more compassionate and humane husbands, *This Life* is not a simple story of female exclusion. But to understand her mother's estranging acquisitiveness and inhospitality, probably deriving from a childhood of deprivations and insecurity, just as in resolving the mysterious death of her elder brother, Jakob, and the younger brother, Pieter's later elopement with Jakob's widow, Sofie, the narrator can only speculate based on indistinct whispers, hints, innuendoes. There are no ascertainable facts, no certainties.

Typically, in a novel that interrogates our habitual ways of reconstructing history, Schoe-

man's narrator is led early in the novel to reappraise her very concept of memory as her self-delusions about her acquaintance with her environment and presumptuous attitude towards history are relentlessly undermined by self-doubts. Schoeman's demonstration that memory is a myth is constantly highlighted in the narration by the narrator's recurrent hesitations, constant interrogation of the validity of a recollected fact, her consternation about remembering things she never thought she knew and the general marvels of memory, her subtle suggestions that memory is "reviewed," altogether a "composition", outright imagination, or coalesces with the delirium of fever or her frank acknowledgment of her discovery of lying as a necessary survival strategy.

If memory is unreliable, occasionally even dubious, Schoeman's demonstration of the implication of writing in bad faith is even more telling. Embittered by Sofie's flight with her second son, the mother-in-law, (the narrator's mother), has the date of that flight or probably the date of the husband's return from a futile search of the eloped lovers recorded in the family Bible as the date of Sofie's death. Led, moreover, to believe that the grave beside Jakob's is Sofie's, her enfant son, Maans, grows up to raise a tombstone over it for the mother inscribing the "fictitious" date on it. Commenting that "the written word perpetuates the lie, the chiselled inscription is rendered untrue" (10), the narrative voice nonetheless recognises this gesture as one of *meaning-making* and acquiesces in it: "if this was how they wished to give meaning to this nameless grave and this arbitrary date, then this was what it would henceforth signify; only my memory contested this new interpretation, and it was up to me to keep silent and to see that this unsettling knowledge remained unspoken until the final threat disappeared with me. What had happened was in the past, after all, and how the next genera-

tion wished to apply or interpret the relics of the past was their concern: the words, dates and facts they wished to remember were chiselled into stone, in lead-filled letters, to be read and accepted, or one day to crumble and be lost together with the weathered stone, its fragments never to be found among the rank bushes and shrubs" (192-193).

Although told in the first person, *This Life* adopts a narrative strategy that incorporates a multiplicity of viewpoints. This has to do with Sussie's interpretation of her role as mere witness, and her happy evasion of responsibility by opening her mouth to let others' voices come through. The typical seductions of the first person narrative to elicit the reader's empathy are in this novel held in constant check by the narrator's frequent self-exonerations and sarcastic self-deprecations, offered as moral guides. Thus if Sussie is often mortified to learn other characters' opinion of her, the reader does not always share her life. Sussie's stories of her marginalization invariably highlight her implication in the history of injustices she attempts to understand. Only rarely living in her own family in love, incapable of even recognising the humanity of the racial Others present there, Sussie's humanity finds transcendent expression at the close of the novel only when she reaches out a hand of love to the dying stranger on their farm. And it is this unobtrusive demonstration of the sterility of this life when not shared with others, its extension of the artistic frontiers of the first person narrative, its compelling poetry and evocative language, and its humanising the concept of memory and history that make Schoeman's *This Life* not only a memorable but also an important novel.

Isidore Diala

Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria
Wolfson College, University of
Cambridge, England.