

Karel Schoeman's voices from the past:

Narrating the Anglo-Boer War¹

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Verliesfontein

Verliesfontein (1998) is the first novel in the "Voices trilogy" by Karel Schoeman². These three novels, as well as *Verkenning* ("Reconnaissance") (1996), are concerned with the past and our knowledge of the past. In the opening line of *Verliesfontein* one of the main problems of historiography is raised, i.e. the inaccessibility of the past: "Die verlede is 'n ander land; waar is die pad wat soontoe loop?" ("The past is another country; where is the road that leads there?"). Karel Schoeman has not only published these four novels in the last decade but he has also been responsible for several non-fiction historical publications springing from his research in (especially) the Cape Archives³. It is significant that an accomplished historian, renowned for his meticulous research, writes about historiography, using the fictional form of the novel. *Verliesfontein* has an autobiographical ring to it, in the sense that the narrator is a historian, accompanied by his photographer, who travels through the Karoo on a mission to collect information and to take pictures for a book on the Anglo-Boer War. The planned book seems to deal with the part of the war when Boer forces from the Orange Free State invaded the Cape Colony. The Boers occupied several Karoo towns for short periods. This invasion put the Afrikaner population in the Cape Colony in a difficult position. Some of them were opposed to the Boers while others had sympathy for the cause of the Boers⁴. Joining the Boers, however, was regarded as treason and

¹ Presented at the Poetry and Linguistics Association conference – April 1999, Potchefstroom.

² *Verliesfontein* was the last to be published though, following *Hierdie lewe* (1993) and *Die uur van die engel* (1995).

³ Apart from five novels Schoeman wrote ten books on history, including the studies on Olive Schreiner and Magtelt Smit, as well as numerous articles on history in various journals.

⁴ Cf. Fransjohan Pretorius: *The Anglo Boer War*.

rebels who joined the Boers and were caught, were tried and some were sentenced to death⁵.

The historian/narrator in *Verliesfontein* has done extensive research on the history of the war in the town of Fouriesfontein/Verliesfontein before the journey. Although the town is officially known as Fouriesfontein, named after the influential Fouries who "founded" the town, the town was (according to the narrator's research) often referred to by older people as Verliesfontein (literally "Fountain of loss"), a name given to the place after stock thefts and skirmishes between early white settlers and Bushmen⁶ resulted in substantial losses for the early settlers. This unpopular name for the town is the title of the novel, strengthening the idea of loss, the loss not merely of material means, but also of the traces of the past – the inability to recover the (lost) past.

A well-preserved photograph of a good-looking young rebel from Fouriesfontein, Gideon Fourie, triggers the narrator's initial curiosity about the town. His research has shown that Gideon Fourie was the only casualty during the Battle of Vaalbergpas outside the town. In search of interesting pictures in his book on the War, he wants the photographer to take a picture of the memorial for Fourie erected in the town. They are however unable to find the town and the frustrated historian walks into the veld at the place where the town is supposed to be. Walking into the open space, in the hot afternoon, he suddenly finds himself in the summer of 1901, in Fouriesfontein. In the words of the opening line of the novel, he becomes a traveller in "another country". He gets to know the town (although everybody is unaware of his presence) and hears three of the inhabitants' accounts of the short siege of the town by Free State forces. These three narrators' recounts make up the bulk of the novel. At the end he reminisces on the meaning of these three voices and on his own (and the reader's) experience of the past.

⁵ The impact of this execution of Cape Rebels and the bitterness caused by it among Afrikaners is recorded in the well-known epic poem by C. Louis Leipoldt, "Oom Gert vertel".

⁶ The term "Boesman" is used in the novel and I use it here taking cognisance of the debate that although the term is regarded as derogatory by some, the Bushmen themselves seem to prefer it to "San".

The historical "facts" presented in the novel and the three voices that narrate three different versions of the events during the war are fictional. Verliesfontein, Fouriesfontein doesn't exist. The Battle of Vaalberg Pass never took place, no rebel by the name of Gideon Fourie was killed in action and the Free State forces did not execute a Coloured community leader by the name of Adam Balie⁷. That is why the writer and his photographer cannot find the town. Only the historian experiences the town by means of his imagination. The photographer, who is only interested in the latest cricket score, is unable to share in this experience. The narrator's experience, however, is not "merely fictional". It offers a possible history of a town, similar to so many other towns that the narrator has done research on:

A handful of obscure notes, newspaper clippings, photos and facts I can remember, and then I have to improvise, with the certainty that the events during the war did not differ significantly from one small town to the next, Roggeveld, Hantam, Namakwaland or Boesmanland, Vanrijnsdorp or Victoria West, Fouriesfontein, Fraserburg or Sutherland. (...) and finally its probably also not important, a few yellowed newspaper clippings and two or three old photographs of an empty street, trees, a village square; Victoria West, Williston or Fouriesfontein. What does it matter in the end, and who, a century later, still remembers or even cares? It has all become interchangeable (69-70⁸).

The past: another country

Historiography since White, Mink and LaCapra has emphasised the importance of narrative in history⁹. White (1978) argues that when "real events" are encoded in narratives, the reader becomes aware of the way in which these real events are encoded. The historian who wishes to say something about a specific event, can choose from a number of different narrative structures. The preference for a specific narrative structure has an influence on the events, adds meaning to the events. The

⁷ These incidents coincide with historical events in several other towns, and the character of Adam Balie and the events described in the novel is probably based on Abraham Esau, a blacksmith from Calvinia who openly resisted the Boer campaign (Weideman, 1998).

⁸ Page numbers in brackets, without author or date, refer to: Schoeman, Karel. 1998. *Verliesfontein*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau. (My own translation of the original Afrikaans – WDB.)

⁹ The problematic relationship between history and fiction is discussed by, among others, Hayden White (1973, 1978), LaCapra (1985) and Foucault (1970, 1972).

awareness of the influence of the way history is narrated has also left a mark on other human sciences and is called by Kreiswirth, "the narrativist turn in the Human Sciences" (1992). Ricoeur (1984, 1988) points out the importance of narrative as a mode of understanding while Gergen (1999) even argues that a sort of "narrativist constructionism" is currently replacing empiricist fundamentalism as way of understanding the world and of gaining and generating that which the human sciences regard as knowledge of the world.

In *Verliesfontein*, Karel Schoeman uses the narrative form to address especially two problem areas regarding historiography and these problem areas will be the main focus of this article. On the one hand the inaccessibility of the past is examined and on the other hand the problem of history as narrative.

In *Verliesfontein* the past is described with several metaphors. These metaphors refer to the past as a physical space that is inaccessible, as a place where the senses of sight and hearing are impaired. The narrator experiences the past as "another country" from which he is cut off by an abyss, or a glass wall (14), or which is hidden behind a door that cannot be opened (47). The journey to this removed geographical space is like swimming against a strong current and to be beached eventually in a foreign country after almost drowning (25). The past is also a place of darkness, a land of shadows (8, 53-4). The narrator often refers to images seen only for a fleeting moment in the flickering light of a candle (83&85). The idea that the historian is feeling his way in total darkness or deep shadows or that smoke or dust impairs his vision is often repeated (8,10). The past is also a place of silence (10) or where the sounds heard are like a foreign language of which merely some words are intelligible (39). It is only later, once the narrator has learned how to listen properly (that is, not to search for the things that he *wanted* to hear but simply accept what he is granted), that he hears the "voices" narrating what they remember about the past. The flickering images that he sees and the whispering voices that he hears do not coincide. He hears the thundering hoofs of the horses, and even finds their hoof prints in the street, but he never sees the soldiers. He hears the cry of agony and pain from the prison, but never sees Adam

Balie. He doesn't see the narrators when they tell their stories many years later – he only sees them as the much younger persons they were during the war.

The narrator initially wanted to visit Fouriesfontein to find more information about Gideon Fourie, but learns only about Adam Balie. To write history is more complicated than expected. He doesn't find the "evidence" that he came looking for, the traces of Gideon Fourie. He is confronted with a totally different history.

The use of metaphors and narratives as a road to knowledge of the past is examined by the narrator, and by means of the novel, by Karel Schoeman. Just like the past the narrator and his photographer came looking for, the history of Fourie, is absent (they cannot even find the town and when the narrator reaches the town by means of his "time travelling" he still does not really find Fourie's story); the story of the war and Fourie's rebellion is virtually absent from the novel. It is only by means of the alluding voices that the narrator experiences the absent past and that the reader can construct the "absent" story of the novel. The past escapes the historian, just like the story of Gideon Fourie is absent while the subjugated history of Adam Balie is revealed.

Traces

Historical research is, in the first instance, a search for "traces" of the past, as the visitor to the past is well aware:

Sooner or later the search is rewarded and some thing or another is discovered, 'n small monument, a tombstone or plaque, or maybe if you are lucky an old man with a wheezing voice somewhere in a room darkened against the glow of the day" (15).

It is often argued that there are certain proofs for the so-called facts from history. Jenkins (1991) argues that certain events had occurred in the past, but these are no longer present. Only traces of the past still exist in the present (regardless whether the historian finds these traces or even look for them or not). A trace is thus a vestige that a human, animal or natural event has left behind. Historical proofs originate when such a trace is used to prove some argument. Consequently it could be argued that any so-

called 'proof' is the product of the historian's discourse (Jenkins, 1991:49). The implication of such an argument is that the discourse, the method or theory, determines the facts.

The historian character in the novel has little information on Fouriesfontein. He only knows that a undecided battle took place in February 1901 (The battle of Vaalberg Pass – 16), that a certain Gideon Fourie was killed during this battle and that he was buried in the town's cemetery and that a memorial was erected in front of the church (16). A few further 'traces' from war-time Verliesfontein include: photographs and post cards of the town (9), some documents from the town archives and minutes of the church council (9-10) and photographs of some of the people (10), most of which are unidentified. These photographs and other documents are described as mere fragments from which a kind of puzzle of the past can be constructed, but where some pieces are missing you have to make deductions from the surrounding pieces (10). To reconstruct the past, to write history is like building a puzzle of which some pieces are lost and will never be found after so many years, but it is possible to recognise a pattern (11). **It is the role of the imagination to complete the puzzle.**

Of the township, outside the town, even fewer traces are to be found. The township was not photographed. It is therefore even more difficult to reconstruct this past, to know the past of the Coloured community. Here "is no mention or even a shadow of a puzzle left: at best could be hoped for a few fragments, pieces of pottery, porcelain or coloured glass" (13). So little has been preserved of the past of this community, that even the burial of Adam Balie has to be reconstructed without any proper, existing "documentation": "the whole human life of which there is only a name, a ribbon and a of bone, a wood splinter left (13)¹⁰.

¹⁰ The narrator gets an opportunity to witness the burial of Adam Balie, but, interestingly enough, he has to view the ceremony, that takes place outside the walls of the cemetery for whites, from inside the white cemetery (60-61).

Ricoeur (1988:116) remarks that documents are kept in archives with a specific purpose and by a certain group of people¹¹. As a direct result of the reverend Broodryk's hard work (and political motives) a monument and a tombstone are erected to commemorate Giel Fourie's death. It is a direct result of Broodryk's committed work that Giel Fourie became a legend (77). Nothing is left of the township. Adam Balie's grave is not to be found and no monument was erected to commemorate his martyr's death. Balie's history has to be constructed from incidental remarks in other's stories.

In *Verliesfontein*, the visitor to the past is not allowed to search for the traces that he would like to find. He is aware that he is only "meant to see or hear" certain things and that he has to "be content with that" (49). His initial impatience to find the traces that he came looking for, passes and once he has lost that hurried impatience and simply waits on what he is granted to experience, he starts to discover the past (41). Patience becomes important to the visitor to the past. "All information becomes available if one is patient and prepared to wait and accept the information in bits and pieces and as confused as it is granted to you" (55).

This is not simply a general remark about historiography, but also holds a message to the reader of the novel. The reader has to be patient. The war events in Fouriesfontein are not simply narrated chronologically by three different witnesses. The reader has to be patient, has to "listen carefully" to the three voices, has to search for traces in their recounts, often simply has to "experience" a specific setting described at length by one of the voices. From these observations, the reader can hope to experience something of the "other country".

Traces are not merely difficult to be found and often unreliable because they are sought after to prove a specific theory, but traces can also be tampered with. Even the photos are not reliable traces as they can be altered by the photographer's modern technique

¹¹ This also reminds of Foucault's idea that those in power determine knowledge.

(19). What is more, even the original untampered photographs could not really capture the past:

The heat, the dust, the glow of wood or metal against a hand, the perspiration in the eyes and the dust in the throat, the whining of bullets, bullets that snap against the rocks, the sudden death, this can not be captured on any film or photograph. The blood in the eyes, the blood that gurgles in the throat. Nobody will ever know (19).

The traces from the past are therefor not enough. The **imagination** is needed to bring this kind of information in such a way that people will know and understand. The process of causal linkage of these traces, by means of imagination, is part of "emplotment", of making a narrative about the past.

Narrative

The importance of narratives as the way we make sense of the world has become more apparent during the last twenty years. Gergen (1999:1) even regards a kind of narrative constructionism "as the principle successor to empiricist foundationalism as the chief means of understanding the acquisition and generation of what we as human scientists take to be knowledge of the world". We narrate our experiences in order to make them intelligible. The narrative is the result of "emplotment" (Ricoeur). "Emplotment" involves the selection of certain events and the organising of these events into a specific form. By providing causal links between these events, emplotment makes events, lives, significant. All these selected events are determined by the valued endpoint. Although history and fiction share these narrative traits of emplotment, it doesn't simply follow for Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988) that they are equal. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur points out that history is like fiction in the sense that imagination is needed to construct plots. Fiction, however, is also like history in as far as both history and fiction refer to the real world of human action.

Historiographers like Mink (1969) and White (1973) explain that we inherit a tradition of historical accounting in which history agrees with the "well formed narrative"

(Gergen, 1999). History approximates the western story telling tradition. The implications are that history is characterised by (amongst others) the following:

- A valued end-point
- Selection of events on account of their relationship with the end-point
- An impression of a unified culture is created (Greek culture, Roman culture, etc.)
- causal linkages are elaborated (Because of drought, people moved north)
- Beginnings and endings are well marked (1899-1903)

The "truth capacity" of history is for this reason, culturally determined. Gergen (1999:12) argues that a number of rhetorical and literary devices are used to make reality intelligible. We inherit a myriad of traditions which each give preference to some of these devices. Thus the physicist's truth will differ from the theologian's truth" and the man in the street's truth. Within each of these traditions, it is possible to "speak the truth", as Foucault would put it, you have to stand in the truth to speak the truth. Each community has its own "code for truth". If a community is fragmented, it becomes difficult to keep this "code for truth" intact. History is especially vulnerable in such circumstances. In South Africa the truth of history has been accepted for a long time within one community (the white, Afrikaner community). Now it is not acceptable any longer.

History and community is intertwined, as Gergen puts it:

It is when two or more persons join together in creating an intelligible story of "what happened", that we locate important seeds of community. And, when communities of intelligibility are formed, so do they more effectively generate the kinds of stories that confirm their intelligibility and their relations with each other. As histories become sedimented – part of the taken for granted past – so do they serve as implicit guarantees of community solidarity. (12).

In *Verliesfontein*, there is no intelligible story of what happened. The three voices give their separate accounts of the past but do not really agree to form what Gergen would call a "community of intelligibility". They do not create stories that confirm intelligibility of the past. In this way no history becomes sedimented, taken for granted,

and community solidarity is undermined. This is exactly what Miss Godby refers to when she remarks that the war only opened up the divisions between people. As the different voices cannot agree, does not even seek intelligibility, and the most important voices are absent (save for a scream from the prison), no single "community of intelligibility", no community solidarity is possible.

Voices

In this novel, besides the historian who is the narrator in the introduction and reflection at the end, three "voices" narrate their experiences of the war, trying to make sense of their experiences. All three of them confess repeatedly that their stories are not flawless, as they have to rely on (unreliable) memories. In fact they are all aware that even during the war, they did not really know or understand what was going on. No one of them were directly involved in the siege or the battle at Vaalberg Pass and had to rely on gossip as a source of information ("vroumenspraatjies, lokasiepraatjies" – "women's talk, township gossip" – in other words the "least reliable sources" of the time – women and Coloureds). Their narratives are characterised by the repeated use of the words "forget" and "remember". In all three cases no coherent version of the war is given but repetitive, dwindling, uncertain descriptions of certain events or merely some images are made – without any certainty about the chronological position of these images or events.

Gergen (1999) refers to the "well formed narrative" as a narrative that is not a random recollection of images and events, but as a story in which there are clearly established end-points, endowed with value (desirable or undesirable to reach). All the events are causally linked and all events are selected for their significance regarding the end-point. He argues that memory is a social construct that has to meet the requirements of the "well formed narrative". "To 'remember properly' is to generate a story replete with all earmarks of the well formed narrative" (1999:9).

The memories of the voices in *Verliesfontein* do not meet these requirements. Their narratives are not "well formed" as they do not have clear-cut, valued end-points, the

events recounted are not causally linked and often doesn't seem to have any relevance to the war. They seem to have lost a sense of chronology and their recounts have no clear beginnings, middles and ends (as Aristotle described the *muthos*).

Alice (the magistrate's daughter) has no idea of what really happened. She can only remember hearing voices in other rooms. Nobody ever talked to her about the war. Her aunt would not allow her to leave the house while the Boers were in town (111). The result is that she remembers the war as voices that she heard in the street or in other rooms in their house where her aunt listened to the gossip about the war (112.117, 118). After the war Alice went back to Scotland and has deliberately tried to forget the war (and South Africa) by systematically destroying all the photographs, starting with those of "traitors" and "rebels" (121). She still does not know what "traitor" or "rebel" really means (120) but feels betrayed by Fourie who never pitched up at her house when she waited for him at night on the veranda (121).

Although the second narrator, **Kallie**, had considerable access to information about the town and the district, he chose to commit himself to what he regarded as "his duty as magistrate's clerk". This duty becomes something he hides behind when he refuses to become involved with Adam Balie's plight. It is conspicuous that he repeatedly says that Adam Balie has nothing to do with the war, that he would only talk about the war, yet time and again his narrative returns to Adam Balie. He also, almost compulsively, claims that he is innocent because he did not know what was going on and that he had to do his duty. All the news about the events surrounding Balie's arrest, he simply regarded as "women's gossip and township gossip", even when Adam Balie's wife pleaded with him for help. At night, he continued his work on his *Epitome*, a summary of the works of philosophers, ignoring the reality of the war and Adam Balie's predicament. Even though Adam Balie and he were friends, grew up together and in spite of the fact that Adam actually saved his life once, he wouldn't do anything to help Balie.

Miss Godby, the 'third voice', is the only one of the three who became involved. She tried to talk to the Boer magistrate, but many years later, when she reflects on that

incident, she knows that it had no effect, that it had been only an "ineffective gesture of benevolence" (193).

The attitudes of these three 'voices' could also be seen as typical in our era, one hundred years later. Looking back on the past twenty years (especially at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work) the same kind of reactions are often heard: Some say that they did not know, that they had only heard voices in the streets and in other rooms (like Alice). Others went about their daily lives, and now want absolution on account of simply doing their duty (like Kallie), while still others tried to show goodwill that was inadequate to attain anything.

Narrative understanding

The reader gets to know the town Fouriesfontein in a process that is described as follows by Miss Godby:

Knowledge, wisdom, insight, understanding and forgiveness, the one follows on the other if everything is right, if all goes well, and it is important that these things go together (179).

The first of these things she mentions, is knowledge. In order to gain knowledge of the past, traces of the past are needed. As indicated earlier, there are several problems with gathering of these traces. Knowledge often depends on arbitrary witnesses, on hearsay, on deductions. Some 'traces' are deliberately destroyed: Alice destroys all the pictures, no stone is erected for Adam Balie, Kallie refuses to talk about Balie while Giel Fourie gains mythical status thanks to the Reverend Broodryk's passionate work.

Knowledge, according to Miss Godby, leads to wisdom and insight. The narrators' endeavour to put their experience of the past into words, is the way in which they are trying to gain insight and understanding of the past. All of them experience trouble with words. Alice wants to know what words like traitor and betrayal mean. Kallie tries his utmost not to talk about Adam Balie, to talk only about his duty. Miss Godby searches for the right words to describe the Boer magistrate and feels uncomfortable to use the word "evil".

This strife to understand and to gain insight by narrating can eventually lead to forgiveness. Miss Godby has reservations about forgiveness, however. She says:

Forgiveness could possibly be granted, but it is impossible to forget, and even if the wounds heal, the scars would be impossible to remove. What happened remains unyielding and irrevocable, like barbed wire running through your memories. (234)

Forgiveness is not the end - the scars remain. Even if nobody ever mentions Adam Balie's name again, even if no memorial is erected for him, even if it is "as though he was forgotten", it is impossible to forget, it cannot be made undone (235). In spite of Kallie's efforts not to talk about Adam Balie, and even though there is no voice, no trace from the township, even if forgiveness is possible, his death cannot be forgotten. The division between people in this country remains. Nobody learns from a war like that, the divisions are only enhanced (235):

We didn't learn anything and continue as if nothing had happened, condemned forever, I think to myself, to repeat the same phrases and gestures, caught up in a treadmill from which we can no longer escape.

The novel is about more than the war. It is about the dividing lines between people (and between the past and the present). Events like the war merely enhances the dividing lines, the scars remain and the barbed wire fences between people are stronger than ever. The war left scars, barbed wire fences between British and Boer and between Brown and White.

Use of (fictional) history?

If this is the case, if nobody learns from these experiences, why do we bother to write history? The narrator/historian asks himself the same question, referring to Santayana's remark that we are doomed to relive the horrors of history. If forgiveness can't take away the scars, why try to remember, to gain knowledge about the past at all? Wouldn't it be better to act like Eddy, the photographer, who is not bothered about the past at all, who is only interested in the latest cricket score?

At the end, when the voices that narrated the past had died away, the historian-narrator feels that it is his turn to speak (236/7). He tries to explain the meaning of these voices. He feels "caught up in the past without any escape" (236). He asks himself:

What should one do with this collection of pieces and fragments, incoherent like the random collection of gifts and donations in the showcase of a town museum (237)?

This question has only value for academics, the narrator argues. He only wants to keep his own "immediate experience" of the night in Fouriesfontein, 100 years ago (237). The imagination differs from the scientific collection. By means of his imagination he (and through his imagination, the reader) experienced the town and the events that took place there.

According to the historian/narrator, one can make use of "Official reports, newspaper articles, obituaries, community histories and books on the war, eye witness reports and recreations of later researchers, incoherent memories and unreliable traditions, convinced voices of which the authenticity cannot be determined, the unflinching risky venture of fiction: where does fact stop and fantasy start?" (242). Immediately after asking this question, the narrator provides an answer. It is not important to know. In the context of this novel, this fictional text, everything is true for the reader. The reader does not need to doubt anything. The reader is addressed directly and is taken on a guided tour through the town. When the narrator walks away, he leaves the doors and the gates open, he has completed his task; he has experienced the past and has remembered. Now he leaves the past open for the reader to experience. The reader has also "heard" the voices, experienced the town and should now remember. The world of the reader is a changed world.

This reminds one of Ricoeur's notion that the fictional configuration of human actions is not merely a discourse about these actions but that it has an effect on the reader. That is why we can say that we are 'moved' by a story. The function of fiction is to discover by invention. By inventing a 'story' a discovery is made. Each fictional

narrative invites the reader to look at the world from the perspective of the story. The reader's focus on reality is changed and in this way fiction 'remakes' reality. According to Ricoeur fiction has two functions, to reveal and to transform:

Revealing, in the sense that it brings features to light that were concealed and yet already sketched out at the heart of our experience, our praxis. Transforming. In the sense that a life examined in this way is a changed life, another life (1988:158).

This is what happens in the Schoeman text. On the one hand the novel reveals – it reveals the traces that were overlooked, the whispering voices, not the story of the rebel hero, but the forgotten story of Adam Balie. The novel is also transforming, in the sense that the reader is changed.

Fiction refigures the world in order to make it possible for us to see the world and ourselves in new ways. The difference between fiction and history is also found at this point. History moves from life (traces, experience of the past) to literature – the past events are remembered by being written down, the writing takes the place of the past. Fiction moves from literature (imagination) to life – by means of narratives that influence the reader's life. The patient reader experiences the past with the time travelling narrator (who leaves the doors and gates to the past open for the reader).

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