

In the name of the father

Book review

Verwoerd, W (1997) **My winds of change**. Randburg: Ravan Press.
ISBN 0-86975-513-7. 176 pages.

(Verwoerd, W (1996) **Viva Verwoerd?** Cape Town: Human & Rousseau – *Afrikaans edition*).

*Carli Coetzee
18 Chalfont Road
Oxford OX2 6RB
England*

In the autobiography by Wilhelm Verwoerd, grandson of the architect of apartheid, issues of names and lineages are, not surprisingly, dominant. The Afrikaans edition has the title **Viva Verwoerd?**, the question mark calling into question the meanings of the name, and the legacy handed down from his father and grandfather.

The book is written in response to the author's father cutting off all ties after his son joined the ANC (p3). In his book, Verwoerd documents his own move from being a son of Verwoerd to being a "son of Mandela". Each of the chapters bears a title that follows the same pattern – "from ... to". The English edition includes a foreword by Nelson Mandela, whose signature at the end of the text is reproduced here – as a seal of the author's association with him. The book also includes a photograph showing the author meeting the President. Near the end of the book Verwoerd reports a fight between his infant children and some friends: each one wants to be Mandela in the game they are playing. It is as if the next generation have made their entry into the new world, where the name of the father is Mandela not Verwoerd.

Yet Verwoerd's decision to vote for the ANC, and his wife's election as MP, is never dissociated from the name Verwoerd. Melanie Verwoerd belongs to a generation of women who need not take on the name of the husband, or the husband's father; yet for both of these young Afrikaners their choices take on added power, acting as they do against the backdrop of the Afrikaner genealogy. Metaphors of new beginnings and birth abound in Wilhelm Verwoerd's text, which reads in many ways like a conventional religious conversion narrative. In these texts, the author needs to establish a distance between the old, sinful, self and the new self. Autobiography tends to construct a narrative line retrospectively, and often the moment of writing is seen as the culmination of events. Instead the narrative of religious conversion asserts a break with the past, and relies instead on the disrupted and broken life line for effect.

The old life is left behind, the development of the new life is charted, and there is a dramatic break between the old and the new. In the conversion narrative, the past is not revisited fondly; for the children of Verwoerd the past also remains a country to which there is no return. Like much recent writing by white Afrikaans-speakers this text, too, concerns itself with new births and new beginnings in an attempt to deal with what seems like a lack of a usable past for the sons and daughters of Verwoerd. The author writes, for example, of the birth of his child, a clear allegory for his own (re)birth and that of his country. The narrative of religious conversion offers the opportunity of creating a narrative that is untainted by the past, where the past is invoked only as a foil for the glorious present. Wilhelm Verwoerd's little text is perhaps not one of the greatest autobiographies to come out of South Africa. But the ways in which its narrative wittingly or unwittingly parallels (white) South African history make it a significant and revealing book.