



MEMORIES OF DIVISION, MEMORIES OF RECONCILIATION

A reading of a life in Mandela's "Long Walk to Freedom"

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How can memories of division as have characterised modernity in South Africa turn towards memories of reconciliation? The difficulty is captured in Benedict Anderson's apparent paradox: that the nation, if it is to cohere, has to know not only what to remember, but also what to forget. A reading of Mandela's life in his autobiography illustrates the challenge.

Memories, of course, do not float free of contexts. In a society like South Africa with its diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and belief systems, its racial heterogeneity, memories of modernity are inevitably etched with division. There is a clash of worlds, a clash of Africanism and Westernism. Yet if the society is to cohere, memory also has to approach inclusiveness. We are reminded of Benedict Anderson's (1983) necessary paradox about memory and the nation: about the need amid disparate, competing memories to imagine a community. In seeking a unifying South African 'memory' the difficulty – Anderson would say – is to know not only what to remember, but also what to forget. The nation, he argues, must get its history wrong in that community, if it is to cohere, has to learn to see itself as the product of a past that has conducted ineluctably to its present constitution. It must willfully exercise a certain collective amnesia in forgetting the contingencies of the actual while favouring a more compelling teleological tale. But, conversely, are not the dangers of amnesia manifest in a society seeking to emerge from the tyrannies of its past? Or as Marcuse (1962) put it, to forget may be to forgive what should not be forgiven. How difficult: in the South African memory detail should not, dare not, be erased; neither, however, should detail be permitted to overwhelm the possibility of reconstitution, indeed reconciliation. Such is the challenge of my particular illustration here: the reading of a life in Mandela's autobiography.

To read Mandela's autobiography is to read the story of the world's most famous political prisoner, the world's most admired president and statesman. In a style that is clear, unassuming, at times wryly humorous, at other times generous in its humility, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) - as

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is appropriate - refuses separation of the private and public figure and, as a result, assumes proportions of national epic: the struggle in South Africa to defeat the racism and injustice of apartheid and to institute a non-racial, democratic alternative. As a 'bestseller' in South Africa and abroad, the book signals a triumph of humanity over inhumanity and vindicates Mandela's arduous commitment to ideals of hope and freedom: a commitment which does not erase many poignant personal reflections in the course of his story. In the closing pages, which are worth reprinting in their own right, the ennobling words on freedom are so infused with Mandela's personality as to yield with naturalness to the painful observation that his 'long walk to freedom' has forced a life-loving man to live like a monk (617). To suggest, as Harber does (1994), that there is no illumination of the real Mandela, is to fail to appreciate that in Mandela the private is the public, and vice versa, and in consequence to fail to recognise what is a distinctive quality of the autobiography: the quality of its assessing, evaluating mind.

It is a mind in which the vivid illustration gives point to the difficult concept. Without curtailing contemplative qualification, Mandela reveals an oral teller's gift of parable, proverb and maxim. One of the many exemplary tales concerns the callous commanding officer on Robben Island, Badenhorst. On being transferred from the Island as a result of the prisoners' having mounted a successful campaign against his behaviour, Badenhorst says unexpectedly to Mandela: "I just want to wish you people good luck". Instead of dwelling on the single victory at the expense of the larger purpose of trying to educate all people including prison staff, Mandela's response confirms my comment above that individual and social conduct find utter accord in the mind of this book:

"It was a useful reminder that all men, even the seemingly cold-blooded, have a core of decency, and that if their hearts are touched, they are capable of changing. Ultimately Badenhorst was not evil; his inhumanity had been foisted upon him by an inhuman system. He behaved like a brute because he was rewarded for brutish behaviour." (448)

Mandela is clearly no sinner, the life of the sinner being a recurrent model of Western autobiography; neither despite his saintly status is he a saint, the life of the saint being the other recurrent model of Western autobiography. Rather, his assessing mind – as Harding (1995) has noted – is that of the strategist ('it never helps to take a morally superior tone to one's opponent', 172): a strategist, however, who translates the abstraction into a particular human experience. Mandela's book is neither political theory nor sociological treatise (though it is of value to both disciplines): it is a human story and, as literature continues to be identified broadly by its experiential appeal, may assume its place in South African literary study. Yet, in reviews, its literary character has tended to be set aside from praise

of the man and felt to require apology. Seeking aesthetic justification – art as revelatory, complex, strange – Harber observes that although the book is a ‘riveting read’ (the popular phrase is meant, no doubt, to negate considerations of art), the readable, matter-of-fact style offers no major revelations; the story is neither brilliantly written nor imaginatively conceived. Similarly Harding, though he is impressed by the mind of the strategist, is somewhat embarrassed by the exemplary nature of the tale. Given the task of deciding which were the better life story, *Long Walk to Freedom* or Breyten Breytenbach’s *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984), both commentators – I suspect – would endorse the latter. In doing so, they would find support probably from many literary people who in Breytenbach recognise the forms of art: interior monologues, dramatic characterisation, defamiliarisations of mimetic reference, and so on. Mandela’s manner of telling, in contrast, could be regarded as unambitious. Yet without wishing to deny *Confessions* its value in any literary pursuit, I suggest that Mandela’s book raises questions and challenges that are crucial to an understanding and appreciation of South African literature, indeed society.

Fundamentally, Mandela marries content and form in ways that connect him to a strong tradition of South African literature.¹ Like Pringle, Philip, Schreiner, Plaatje, Paton, Mphahlele and others, his style embodies the priority of the moral idea. Like Schreiner, Blackburn, Paton, Mphahlele, Gordimer, Coetzee, Serote and others, or before them the San/Bushman story or traditional African tale, he finds forms of allegory – youthful innocence/adult experience; rural simplicity/urban testing – to be the apt plot structures for issues of contemporaneous import. In reiterating the central trope of South African narrative² – the trope continues to be an experiential reality – *Long Walk to Freedom*, which was awarded the 1995 Alan Paton Literary Prize, follows the Jim (Nelson) who comes to Joburg and, like the hero of folktale (or, like Paton’s Revd Stephen Kumalo), is guided by the wise man (Msimangu or, in Mandela’s case, Walter Sisulu) into the trials of modern, industrial South Africa.

Despite the fact that men, and women, remain afraid of a great deal in the beloved country, Paton would have wished surely to hear Archbishop Desmond Tutu praise the miracle of the rainbow nation. As I have suggested, however, Mandela’s story is not about miracles (neither was Paton’s): it is about human conduct, tactics, national goals, moral ideals. It answers Paton’s closing words – ‘But when that dawn will come of our emancipation ... why, that is a secret’ (236) – not on a triumphalist note, but with the reminder that the process of transformation is ongoing: ‘... with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended’ (617). We may recall, in this context, the important point of several third-world theorists – Césaire, Fanon, C.L.R. James, Mphahlele – that once independence is gained, new and imaginative reconceptions of society will be required in order to avoid the old

orthodoxies and injustices recurring under the new dispensation.³ Developing this argument within nationalism, Said (1993: 264) observes with reference to Algeria, Palestine and South Africa that 'this larger search for liberation is most evident where the nationalist accomplishment had been either checked or greatly delayed'. Mandela's book incorporates such an argument as it looks back to the struggle in order to look forward to an integrative view of human community, in which South Africa will have to find its local identity – hybrid, complicated – while interacting with a global society. At the same time as *Long Walk to Freedom* indicts apartheid, it poses the challenge of civilian time.

The challenge is to several categories of sense-making, and Mandela's reconciliatory intent belies his strenuous reformulations. I have mentioned his story of rural innocence and urban experience, in which the elements of folktale – oral, communal – serve modern understandings. Whereas Jim either returns to the tribal land or is destroyed by the city, however, Mandela undergoes the hardship of imprisonment in order to lead his country out of an oligarchical timewarp into the community of nations. As a prison memoir *Long Walk to Freedom* confounds several characteristics of the genre. Whereas black writers – as Ndebele (2006) would say – have often chosen 'spectacular' representations of the extreme condition, Mandela chooses 'ordinary' depictions. Or, rather, he does not so much choose the ordinary as record his role in ensuring that on Robben Island the ordinary prevailed: as a result of numerous resolute challenges to the prison regime by a disciplined prisoner presence, the brutal police culture of Mandela's early years on the Island changed to the monotonous, but reasonably dignified, routine of prison life. Instead of evoking the images of protest theatre – warders pissing in prisoners' faces (a particular warder, we learn, urinated near prisoners' food) – Mandela permits the assessing mind to determine tenor and tone: 'To survive prison, one must develop ways to take satisfaction in one's daily life. One can feel fulfilled by washing one's clothes' (475). And on his transfer in 1982 to Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town: 'A man can get used to anything, and I had grown used to Robben Island' (497). Such observations have affinities with those of Solzhenitsyn. As autobiography, the story does not comply, as I have said, with the models favoured by Western autobiography. But if Mandela has affinities with black autobiography, in which individualism is checked by the social demand, a voice of its own ultimately distinguishes the content and form.

What is this voice? The voice is not that of Richard Stengel, who assisted in editing and revising the first parts of the manuscript written on the Island and who ghost-wrote the post-Robben Island sequences. The intimate political knowledge combined with the common touch remains consistent with Mandela throughout the book in thought pattern, intonation, and turn of phrase. Just as debts are owed to scribes and translators from Homer to Honwana, so literature is indebted to Stengel.

Mandela's wisdoms, nonetheless, are his own, or at least the product of his education on the Island. What does the distinctive voice owe to discourses that in South Africa and the world opposed apartheid: liberalism, Marxism, Africanism? It is obviously indebted to all of them, as well as to the Gandhian principle of non-violence as political tactic.⁴ After a struggle with his own early African nationalism, Mandela acknowledges that Marx helped him see things other than through the prism of race. His liberalism returns to the age of Reason in its commitment to modern constitutionalism. But where Western liberal thought moves from the individual to the society, Mandela in a key Africanist revision moves from the society to the individual. To make further distinctions, the concept of the society is not the socialist one of a collection of individuals, but the communal one of unity at the centre of people's beings. With the family as the model of community, Mandela states unabashedly about solitary confinement that 'nothing is more dehumanising than the absence of human companionship' (321) and that his son's death while he was in prison 'left a hole in [his] heart that can never be filled' (431).

The Africanism is not nativist, ethnic or millenarian, but entirely rational as it takes from Senghor's Négritude (1964) not the rhetoric of intuition and rhythm, but an analytical modification of Western capitalist-labour theory: a recognition that the crucial economic problem of the South is not to eliminate classes by class struggle within the nation, but to bridge the gap between developed and underdeveloped countries. The Africanism is social, not socialist, in that the character of the person changes in relations with others (Robben Island was a community of prisoners), and it is generational in that as we grow older in relational understanding we become more of a person, more ourselves. The greater the sharing of humanity the greater our *isithunzi*, or *seriti*: our aura or prestige. Thus the dichotomy of the individual and the society is rendered invalid in the formulation that involvement in community with others permits one's self-realisation as a distinctive person. With ubuntu⁵ recognised as a principle of conduct, we are forced to reconsider the concepts of Africa and the West. When the British government and the IRA seek to resolve their impasse by referring to a 'South African solution', Africa despite its material disadvantages has been granted a kind of moral advantage. Whether it can utilise Africanism as modern leverage remains to be seen, but with Mandela as exemplum Africa and the West require to be set, not in contrast, but in comparison. Antithesis is sufficiently bold to anticipate synthesis.

The synthesis will have to engage in a fresh – post-apartheid, post-Cold War – dialectic of the local and the universal, and the conclusion of *Long Walk to Freedom* is that universals arise from the functions of specific contexts. It is Mandela's local African knowledge, not obeisance to the narratives of modernity, that has earned him his universally respected

voice. Is it a South African – rather than an African or a Western – voice? We should check immediately any propensity for hubris, and realise that the question need not, perhaps cannot, be answered. *Long Walk to Freedom* in its southern locality, nonetheless, has something original to say to the North. Its voice is not anti-colonial, but postcolonial: postcolonial, however, in the sense that the terms self and other, or centre and periphery, seem suddenly to be the West's latest rhetorical importation to Africa. In searching for the civilian time after (post) colonialism, the book implicitly requires categories of thought to be connected firmly to the actual situation at hand. To pursue such a course is to confirm Mandela's style as meaning. We may ask, accordingly, whether in the light of the following comment his response to injustice has been ordinary or extraordinary:

"Men like Swart, Gregory and Warrant Officer Brand reinforced my belief in the essential humanity even of those who had kept me behind bars for the previous twenty-seven and a half years." (552)

To turn memories of division to the service of reconciliation – we are led to understand – requires both an extraordinary leap of imagination and an ordinary acknowledgement of our diverse or seemingly intractable, but ultimately our common, humanity. To misapply Walter Benjamin, for every memory of barbarism there needs be a memory of civilisation.⁶ Such is Mandela's challenge to both Africanism and Westernism. It is his challenge to many of us, in the increasingly multicultural world of the twenty-first century, to infuse with new contexts of complexity our ongoing interpretations and reinterpretations of memories of modernity.

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1 For commentary on the South African writers mentioned in this essay, including reference to traditional oral expression, see Chapman (2006).

2 I refer to the narrative pattern of numerous novels, novellas and stories, the 'Jim comes to

Joburg' trope, in which the innocent African from the rural homestead journeys to the experience of the huge city of gold.

3 See, in particular, Fanon (1968).

4 As a young lawyer, Gandhi spent almost twenty years in South Africa where he laid the foundations of non-violent political action. (See Brown and Prozesky 1996)

5 Ubuntu, or traditional African principle of community sharing, summarised in the proverb (found in Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho cultures): a person is a person because of other persons.

6 Benjamin's dictum, 'there is no document of civilisation which is not also a document of barbarism' ('On the Concept of History') was much quoted, and misquoted, in liberal versus Marxist 'struggle criticism' in South Africa of the late 1970s and the 1980s. (See Benjamin 1977)

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