



Mandela in/and Poetry

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No! I am no prisoner of this rock, this island,
No ash spew on Milky Ways to conquest old or new,
I am this rock, this island.

Wole Soyinka, "No!" *He Said (For Nelson Mandela)*

On May 24th 1994, in his first speech to the newly elected democratic parliament of South Africa, Nelson Mandela thus recalled the figure of Ingrid Jonker¹ to a rather bewildered audience of mainly male politicians: "She was both a poet and a South African, both an Afrikaner and an African. She was both an artist and a human being. In the midst of despair, she celebrated hope. Confronted by death, she asserted the beauty of life".² He added that the dream of Jonker had come true, because the child in the famous poem he then quoted, *The child who was shot dead by soldiers at Nyanga* (1963), now a man, "treks through all of Africa / the child who became a giant travels through the whole world / Without a pass" (21–23).³ To mention a poet – a white woman – in such a crucial speech was an odd choice for the first black leader

¹ Ingrid Jonker (1933–1965).

² <<http://www.c-span.org/video/?c3844152/nelson-mandela-speech-ingrid-jonker-heritage-project>> (15 June 2014). All the information about Nelson Mandela in this article come from the following biographies and articles: Boehmer 2008; Lodge 2007; Mandela 1994; Nixon 1991; Pirro 2002; Sampson 2000 and Tuttle 1999.

³ As all of Jonker's poetry, this poem was originally written in Afrikaans with the title of *Die Kind (wat doodgeskiet is deur soldate by Nyanga)*.



democratically elected in South Africa. Despite this, the choice was politically fine-tuned and it was also meant to have an emotional impact both on the new-born Rainbow Nation and on Mandela's indisputable stature as a 20th-century-icon.

The aim of this article is an investigation on some poetical constructions on Mandela, which would be incomplete, though, without some preliminary considerations on the use Mandela himself made of poetry and on the role poetry played in enhancing his charisma.

MANDELA AND POETRY

As is clear from Mandela's inaugural speech in Pretoria, the history of Ingrid Jonker, who took her life in 1965 partly as a personal stance against apartheid (her father being a National Party Member of Parliament), makes her, in turn, a symbolic figure. Mandela's reading of her poem offered a fresh and hopeful interpretation of it because of the new political context: the black child once killed by the police is, at last, *really* allowed to grow up and journey around the country and the world without carrying the hideous *Pass*, something s/he could do in Jonker's final lines only because, being dead, s/he was transmuted into a symbol. In opting for this specific poet/poem, Mandela was celebrating both the end of past atrocities and the present democracy; he was also adopting a white, albeit dissident, artist to send a straightforward message to his mainly black nation: that is, reconciliation and *ubuntu* had to be a *must* if the country wanted to eschew the risk of a catastrophe under the eyes of the international community, which had in the meantime been witnessing the whole process of transition. On the other hand, his appropriation of Jonker also knowingly nurtured the long lasting image of his *persona* as a socially responsible, morally righteous, firm and peaceful man; a man without acrimony in spite of his past treatment and sufferings, ready to forgive, negotiate, reconcile and move on. In his first speech, symbols had become tangible truths and, as Rita Barnard has pointed out, "a national literature had become a possibility" (2001: 156). The Rainbow Nation, we might say, began with a poem.

Mandela's relationship with poetry played a role in the shaping of his iconic status and became mythical itself. The South African leader is, for instance, credited as the author of poems which not only he never wrote, but which are not even poems. I am referring in particular to a passage from *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles* (1992) by American 'spiritual' author Marianne Williamson, a piece risen to poetical status with the title of *Our Deepest Fear* (or *greatest* according to some sources) and obsessively associated with Mandela.⁴ Those who properly acknowledge it as Williamson's nonetheless claim it was quoted by the

⁴ For the debate on the subject see: <<http://aetw.org/mandela.htm>> (15 June 2014).



South African leader in one of his first public speeches.⁵ Words such as “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. / Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure” and the supposed final *couplet* – “As we are liberated from our own fear / Our presence automatically liberated the others” – fitted well with Mandela–the–character. Besides, they mirrored the *ubuntu* philosophy which was to be fundamental in the process of reconciliation after the elections and they responded even better to the widespread tale of Mandela’s life, a “teleological pathway” according to Elleke Boehmer (2008: 20), the creation of which he contributed to through his autobiographical writings, where his story overlaps with the history of South Africa in the sequence of oppression, fight for freedom, captivity, final liberation to ultimately reunite in his image as the legitimate leader of the new democratic country.⁶

Mandela’s relationship with literature was a complex one. He always stressed the pivotal role that both the Xhosa oral tradition and British literature had in his education and life. A Victorian poem, *Invictus* (1888) by W. E. Henley, was chosen as the title and *leitmotiv* of Clint Eastwood’s popular movie (2009) about him. In the screenplay, its lines are reported as supporting Mandela in his years of imprisonment on Robben Island. The closing verses “I am the master of my fate: / I am the captain of my soul”, repeated as a *mantra* throughout the film, are also presented as the incitement providing fictionally romanticised Francois Pienaar, the Afrikaner captain of the Springboks rugby team, with the determination to lead his modest group to win the 1995 World Cup. Mandela made no mention of this poem in his autobiographical writings; his fellow prisoner on Robben Island, Eddie Daniels (1998: 244), though, recalls him reciting it in his cell.

MANDELA IN POETRY. FROM SCOTLAND BACK TO AFRICA

Poets have celebrated Mandela in elegies, songs, ballads, epistles, epics, odes, dub poetry, haiku as early as the mid-Sixties when, banned and sentenced to “life imprisonment plus five years” for sabotage after the Rivonia Trial (1963–64), all photographs, portraits, writings, opinions, references about/of him were forbidden circulation. Soon to become the world’s most famous *faceless* prisoner, Mandela turned into a symbol of endurance, a secular saint. The aura has never ceased to be associated with him; nor was it challenged by the underachievement of his government or the scandals involving his close relatives. On the contrary, his magnetism has continued to work as a source of inspiration for freedom fighters and

⁵ This is the case of Richard Bartlett, the authoritative editor of the anthology *Halala Madiba. Nelson Mandela in Poetry* (2008), who uses Williamson’s opening *lines* as the epigraph for his otherwise accurate “Introduction”.

⁶ On how Mandela used traditional symbols to become a *modern* champion of African nationalism in and outside Africa, see Masemola 2010: 151–167.



artists around the world. The anthology *Halala Madiba* (2008) offers a fair cross-section of the poetical production which flourished around him. Arranged in chronological order, it testifies to how poets brought and kept the light on him in spite of his invisibility.

In 1964, when the outcome of the Rivonia trial became official and Mandela was a relatively unknown political prisoner to the eyes of a yet quite indifferent, if not conservative, Europe, prominent Scottish poet Hamish Henderson⁷ dedicated a song to the trial and detention of the ANC leaders. The ballad, which according to many is one of Henderson's best compositions, is called *Rivonia* and subtitled *Air. Viva la 15 Brigata*, thus recalling a famous Spanish Civil War song. The appropriation/rewriting of folk material – both local and international – is a typical means for radical Henderson to reflect upon Scottish cultural and political issues, a feature which made him, according to Colin Milton, “the dominant presence in Scottish folklore studies” (2005: 461). Even though Henderson interprets the Rivonia sentence as a death penalty, he pinpoints with prophetic insight Mandela's capacity to endure and praises the *illegal Umkhonto we Sizwe/Spear of the Nation*,⁸ in which the *nation* can easily stand for Scotland itself. The refrain, “Free Mandela Free Mandela”, is repeated eight times in forty lines, alternating with the familiar Spanish anti-fascist chorus, “Rumbala rumbala rumba la”, to which “Free Mbeki Goldberg Sisulu” is at times also added. The combination creates a tight rhythm, which makes the song very easy to memorize. *Rivonia's* musicality and its galvanizing *crescendo* account for its wide circulation and quick popularity, as we shall see, in Europe and abroad:

They have sentenced the man of Rivonia
Rumbala rumbala rumba la
The comrades of Nelson Mandela
Rumbala rumbala rumba la
He is buried alive on an island
Free Mandela Free Mandela
He is buried alive on an island
Free Mandela Free Mandela
Verwoerd feared the mind of Mandela
Rumbala rumbala rumba la
He was stifling the voice of Mandela
[...]
The crime of the men of Rivonia
Rumbala rumbala rumba la
Was to organize farmer and miner
Rumbala rumbala rumba la
Against baaskap and sjambok and kierie

⁷ Hamish Henderson (1919–2002).

⁸ The armed wing of the ANC, founded by Mandela.



Free Mandela Free Mandela
Against baasskap and sjambok and kierie
Free Mandela Free Mandela
[...]
Power to the heirs of Luthuli
Rumbala rumbala rumba la
The comrades of Nelson Mandela
Rumbala rumbala rumba la
Spear of the Nation unbroken
Rumbala rumbala rumba la
Amandla Umkhonto we Sizwe
Free Mandela Free Mandela. (1–10, 17–24, 33–40)

According to Henderson (Neat 2009: 188) himself, he adopted/adapted the Spanish song because its refrain reminded him of the African drums and because the original text mentioned a *Manuela* which could be easily turned into *Mandela*. Henderson's biographer Timothy Neat (2009: 190) has underlined the accuracy of the historical references in *Rivonia* and the poet's skilful use of foreign *difficult* words – *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, *baasskap*, *sjambok*, *kierie* – as signs of his concern for languages and cultures. Henderson's long lasting interest in South African affairs dated back from the Forties, when, as an officer in the North African Campaigns of World War II, he was assigned to the South African Division. It is important to remember that the desert war generally played a key role in the reflection on identity/otherness for many Scottish poets who were there (Crawford 1993: 69–71). As Carla Sassi, among others, has successfully argued, Scotland has a complex relationship with imperial issues; as part of Britain, it acted as a colonizing agent, but due to its own "history of marginality within Britain" (2005: 90–93) also manifested moments of identification, or else contiguity, with the colonised subjects; not to mention how the exportation of its values and tradition, typical of all colonizing/expansive practices, contributed to the construction of its own, independent, national identity (ibid.: 88).⁹ Henderson's fascination with South African history and with Nelson Mandela was very much related to his own commitment towards Scotland and its aspiration to political recognition, let alone with his criticism of British imperialistic policies. In an article dated 1947 which appeared in *Voice of Scotland*, the poet had reproached the British Monarchy for publicly appraising the *harmony* among peoples in South Africa, words which he interpreted as Great Britain's support of the forthcoming apartheid (Neat 2007: 195–196). In the same years, having been transferred to Italy where he collaborated with

⁹ The relationship between Scotland and South African has a history of its own. From the Eighteenth century onwards South Africa was the final destination of an intense migration from Scotland due to mere interest as well as to political, religious and commercial reasons. It also involved prominent literary figures such as Thomas Pringle (1789–1834), the first and most important author to write poetry on the South African landscape.



the partisans, Henderson became familiar with the figure of Antonio Gramsci and translated his prison letters. Later on, Mandela's arrest and *martyrdom* must have reminded him of the Italian communist thinker and the South African leader was thus added to his personal gallery of transnational heroes. Before its first publication – which occurred in the Italian magazine *Il Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano – Rivonia* was sung by its author in pubs, recorded by the South African group Atté based in London and became known in the London ANC Headquarters which forwarded it to its branches in North Africa, from where it finally reached South Africa to be adopted as the anthem of the anti apartheid struggle; it was also sung in public by Henderson and Mandela himself in Glasgow in 1993 (Neat 2009: 190–191, 352). Scotland was therefore the right ground for the first poem on Mandela to start spreading the news that the man could well be “buried alive on an island” (5) but that did not mean he was alone and forgotten.

Secluded on the inhospitable island, deprived of all contacts with his relatives and friends except a few censored letters and non-contact visits, Mandela led a *secret* life nobody knew very much about and everybody fantasized on. Political initiatives had a strategic role in never lowering the guard; in particular, the international campaign for his release the ANC had promoted not too long after his life imprisonment kept the spotlight constantly on him. Poets added weight to the media hype of the Eighties which reached its peak with the concert in Wembley (11 June 1988) for his seventieth birthday, broadcast worldwide and having an audience of more than two hundred million people (the figure is legendary as well, some sources mentioning up to six hundred million people). Paradoxically *overexposed*, in this decade Mandela was the subject of many lines. Poets sang in jubilation when he was spectacularly freed in February 1990 and then again when he was elected president in 1994. It is very likely that they will keep his legend alive in the years to come in a never-ending process of abstraction and sanctification as a global icon, no matter what happens in South Africa and how his legacy will be judged.

Transformed into metaphors, blended with virtues, identified with private and collective historical events, associated with specific spaces, Mandela is also identified with geographical places, the chief among which is Robben Island, where he served the first eighteen years of his sentence. Due to the substantial lack of information about his stay on Robben Island – the physical isolation of the place being the main reason why it was chosen for him – the place itself became legendary.¹⁰ A flat rocky island less than 6 square kilometres, ten miles West of Cape Town, forbidden for decades to civilians and housing three hospitals (for leprosy, chronic diseases and mental illness) before being converted into a penitentiary for black convicts, Robben Island, now a National Monument and a Museum, remained associated with its eminent detainee even after his release, his cell becoming one of the most visited sites

¹⁰ Information about Robben Island, both from a political and a geographical point of view, come from Buntman (2003) and Deacon (2000).



of South Africa to date. Commonly called *the Island*, it acquired a reputation of its own in South African prison writing and became internationally known after it started hosting the Black Pimpernel. In poetry, the osmotic intercourse between Mandela and Robben Island is a *topos*; there is hardly any poem on Mandela without reference to the gaol, which recurs also in poems written after Mandela was moved to other penitential institutions. Throughout the years, Robben Island became a synecdoche of South Africa itself: a segregated, brutal and unjust place but also a laboratory of resistance and hope. For this reason, poems about Mandela and/or on Robben Island will be the principal focus of what follows.

FROM EMPTINESS TO MEANING: ROBBEN ISLAND IN DENNIS BRUTUS'S POEMS

One of the first artists who dedicated some of the most intense lines to Robben Island was Dennis Brutus.¹¹ In 1963, Brutus started serving a sentence of sixteenth months on Robben Island, and shortly after his imprisonment he came across the newly arrived convicts from the Rivonia Trial. Nelson Mandela occupied the cell next to him. Three of Brutus's poems seem to me a case in point. The first, *On The Island* (1963), is a desolate evocation of the place and of the despondency it inspires. Mandela does not feature in it but the poem is worth mentioning because, in a certain way, it sets the standard for the lyrical recreation of the place in the years to come. In the second poem, *Robben Island* (1980), the gloomy atmosphere of *On the Island* is recalled and Mandela, who is mentioned with his comrades, plays an emotionally subverting role which sheds a new light on the place and suggests different, even positive, interpretations of it. In the last poem, *For Nelson Mandela* (1990), which Brutus wrote as a tribute to Mandela's release, the figure of the leader is central; nonetheless the island features as a past scenario lingering over the joyful but also uneasy present.

In *On the Island*, a composition of six stanzas, the misery of the site is suggested by the anaphora "cement-grey" used to describe the place and soon contaminating non-material realities:

Cement-grey floors and walls
cement-grey days
cement-grey time
and a grey susurration
as of seas breaking
winds blowing
and rains drizzling.

¹¹ Dennis Brutus (1924 –2009). For a narrative recollection of his years on Robben Island see Brutus 2011: 92-109.



A barred existence
so that one did not need to look
at doors or windows
to know that they were sundered by bars
and one locked in a grey gelid stream
of unmoving time. (1–13)

The anaphora is followed by a disquieting synaesthesia (“grey susurrations”), which gives way, via simile, to three rhyming verses about elements of nature and natural phenomena (seas, winds, rains, all untypically declined in the plural) portrayed while moving – the use of the present participle stressing the idea of the duration as *movement in time* – as opposed to the immobility of prison life; a contrast which will be manifest in the following stanzas. This underlined opposition between confinement/immobility and movement/freedom is topical in Brutus’s prison poems as well as in his later compositions during/on his long exile from South Africa (Wilkinson 2001: 256–258). *On the Island’s* first stanza has a perfectly balanced structure: a three-line anaphora, an interruption where “a grey susurrations” links what came before (through the colour grey) with what follows (a series of noises), three more rhyming lines. In the second stanza the colour theme is retrieved via the grey key–element of prisons *par excellence*: bars. Existence itself is defined “barred”; all thresholds (doors and windows) are “sundered by bars”. The adjective “grey” surfaces again in line twelve – “grey gelid stream” – to introduce the final oxymoron: “unmoving time”, a synthesis of life in prison. The human subject is reduced to the indefinite pronoun “one”; an anonymity the poet will come back to with new awareness in *Robben Island*. There is no autobiographical *I* in this first poem, whereas *one* often occurs: “and sometimes *one* mistook / the weary tramp of feet”; “It was not quite envy / nor impatience / nor irritation / but a mixture of feelings / *one* felt” (26–30; Italics mine). In the final stanza the indefinite pronoun melts in the image of “we”, a group of prisoners waiting anxiously for visiting time until the monotonous cycle starts again: “and we knew another week would have to pass” (41). Although the poem is highly lyrical and intimate, the final use of the plural pronoun marks the collective plight represented by prison and, implicitly, by the oppressive regime (Killam 1995: 90).

In Brutus’s 1980 poem, *Robben Island*, we initially face the same claustrophobic atmosphere created in *On the Island*. This dissipates, though, when Mandela and the other freedom fighters appear:

In a long shot down the rectangular enclosure
stone-walled, with barred windows I find myself
anonymous
among the other faceless prisoners



I see myself again bent on my stone block
crouched over my rockpile
and marvel

I see the men beside me
Peake and Alexander
Mandela and Sisulu
and marvel

All the grim years.
And all the marvellous men
who endure beyond the grim years.
The will to freedom steadily grows
The force, the power, the strength
steadily grows. (1–17)

Enclosed spaces and bars are still crucial presences in this lyric. The composition opens by stressing the anonymity of the autobiographical “I” (3), which is echoed in the facelessness of the other convicts. Identity is erased also by the repetitive lifestyle in the colony, well epitomized by the adverb “again” (5) accompanying the useless gestures of the hard labour. The positive note is introduced by the impression provoked by the sight of the famous political prisoners, who bear names and posit themselves as a challenge to the absence of identities claimed at the beginning: George Edward Peake, Neville Alexander, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu. The grey tone characterizing *On the Island* comes back, but it is now “grim” (12, 14), a more inclusive and emotional term than *grey*, twice associated to the years spent in the colony (the “unmoving time” of the first poem). The verb “marvel” (7, 11) is used twice too, and reiterated as an adjective alliterating with the noun it qualifies: “the marvellous men” (13). As a *marvel* indeed, the hard labour described in the couplet 5–6, whose unproductiveness was suggested by the gestures of harvesting applied to inanimate objects, produces a spectacular growth in the last lines of the poem. What grows on the barren/barred island? “The will to freedom”, “the force, the power, the strength” (15, 16). They grow “steadily” (17), reminding us once again, by opposition, of the despairing ending of the 1963 poem, here revised thanks to the endurance of men such as Mandela, Peake, Alexander and Sisulu. A place of segregation and oppression, Robben Island is also a site of resistance and of possibilities. This idea of something positive springing up from a fearful context corresponds to Brutus’s belief that prison as well can constitute “a greening experience” (Abrahams 1995: 59).

In *For Nelson Mandela*, Brutus shows how it is not possible to separate the aged Mandela, just freed and projected towards his difficult task in the new South Africa, from his past, fatally connected to the island: “behind, the island’s seasand, / harsh, white and treacherous / ahead, jagged rocks / bladed crevices of racism and deceit” (7–10). In this tribute, Robben Island is still associated with the hard labour and with the



unmoving time of *On the Island*, let alone with Mandela's endurance during his conviction: "in the salt island air / you swung your hammer grimly stoic / facing the dim path of interminable years" (11–13). This time, though, the closing lines describe a happy ending: "now, vision blurred with tears / we see you step out to our salutes / bearing our burden of hopes and fears / and impress your radiance / on the grey morning air" (14–18). However, the grey morning air on which the poem closes casts a dark shadow on the portrayal of the old man stepping free to carry not only the weight of his personal past – "a blanket cobwebbed of pain and grime" (6) – but also that of everybody's expectations about the country's future. Commenting on this poem during an interview, Brutus stated: "[I]nstead of saying here is the man who is going to lead us to freedom, I said, I hope you can do it because I can see the pitfalls in your way" (in Steptoe 1995: 193).

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

In a poem dated 1970 called *Questions and Answers* by Arthur Nortje¹², Robben Island is similar to the one portrayed by Brutus. Nortje, who was a student of Brutus's in his school years, refers to Mandela as "the lawyer / who because of the golden words that sprang from his black mouth / languishes in a stone cage" (16–18); an image assembling the morphological nature of the site, which was to become topical in poetry, with the confining function of prison. For the first time, though, Nortje underlines also Mandela's eloquence and cogency, virtues that will strike both, albeit with different outcomes, Wole Soyinka and Jacques Derrida.¹³

Far from the intimate and dramatic dimension of Brutus's poems, Robben Island is an *inferno* in Keorapetse Kgositsile¹⁴'s composition called *Manifesto* (1970) where, in the fashion of African traditional oral performances, a personified *Truth* revolts and waits to be restored. The poem, which advocates for a collective rebellion against injustice, is structured as a passionate invocation rhetorically addressed to Mandela through anaphors and repetitions:

Yes, Mandela, we shall be moved
We are Men enough to have a conscience
We are Men enough to immortalize your song
We are men enough to look Truth straight in the face
[...]

¹² Arthur Nortje (1942–1970).

¹³ Wole Soyinka wrote a collection of five poems on the leader, *Mandela's Earth* (1988), which I will briefly discuss later; Jacques Derrida edited a selection of tributes to the man among which features his own essay on Mandela's rationality and coherence as the sources of his extra-ordinary mind (Derrida 1987).

¹⁴ Keorapetse Kgotitsile (1938).



We emerge to prove Truth cannot be enslaved
In chains or imprisoned in an island inferno
We emerge to stand Truth on her two feet We emerge
To carry the banner of humanism across the face of the Earth
Our voice in unison with our poet's proudly says
'Change is gonna come!' (15–18, 22–27)

Seen from the boats and yachts passing by on their carefree routes to pleasure in *from the Cape to Rio* (1976) by Breyten Breytenbach,¹⁵ Robben Island is the place where "ashpale old men bend down / and count and arrange the grains of salt" (42), with the stress – via polysindeton – once again on the posture, uselessness and monotony of hard labour. The image of black prisoners made white by the ash, while the "brownburnt youngsters set the sails" (38), creates a contrast which parodies the racial rigidities of apartheid. In this colour reversal, acting as a chiasmus, we find Breytenbach's customary dark irony as the blacks, who are also portrayed old, are made white by the unjust penal servitude, whereas the whites – who are young – are dark as the result of their frivolous and rich lifestyle.

The lack of news about what life was like on the little piece of flat land made many poets wonder how Mandela passed his time. Time is a central issue in *Mandela* (1988), by Nigerian poet, playwright and activist J. P. Clark¹⁶:

How does the old man spend his day
In the cage they kept him,
[...]
Does he, outside the routine drill of the day,
Tell the passing of the day upon
The beat of his slowing heart?
Sitting or asleep on his bed of stone,
What does he see, what does he dream
In the dark of day so slow to break? (1–2, 8–13)

Clark's careful selection of words, many of which start with or contain dental consonants (t/d) gives the poem a harsh sound which potentiates the already heavy visual effect of customary images such as the cage, the bed of stone, the darkness of the days. On Mandela's Robben Island time does not pass and meteorological elements feature as a constant reminder of the *natural* isolation of the place from the *cultural* and above all *political* life of the country. However, in the following lines, the poet successfully opposes the stronger and energetic sound of uprisings underway in the mainland to the noise of sea and rain. He formally stresses, once again, the phonic

¹⁵ Breyten Breytenbach (1939). The poem, originally written in Afrikaans, has been translated into English by Denis Hirson.

¹⁶ John Pepper Clark Bekederemo (1935).



aspect of the scene through an internal rhyme (clamour/clangour) and an alliteration (clamour/clangour/children), all of which occur in the same line (14). The vigour of children in revolt, even if the reference is to Soweto 1976, where many of them were killed, is thus depicted in opposition to the immobility of *natural* sites such as Robben Island itself and the Drakensberg mountains:

Does the old man hear
Above the waves battering Robben Island,
Above the thunder rolling over Drakensberg,
The clamour and clangour of children in revolt,
All ready to die outside their classrooms
Rather than receive the pen
And pit reserved for their parents? (14–20)

Similarly, Andries Oliphant¹⁷, in his *To Mandela* (1988), opposes the leader's segregation on the island – "In a cell girdled by a sea leaping and crushing against stone walls" (1–2) – to the vital struggle inspired by him on the mainland. The landscape participates in the fight, as the waves act as messengers and the star metaphorically connects the lonely man to the struggle. The distance between the poet and the hero is erased through the use of the direct form of address, a device we can find in many compositions on Mandela from the mid–Eighties onwards:

You are on the minds of everyone.
In the waves you decipher
The messages
From the struggle you inspired
[...]
Between the harbour and the prison
Through the grilled windows
Of a truck, a besieged city calling on you
To liberate it.
From your cell the morning star
A pristine eye:
Freedom for all here and now. (42–45, 60–66)

The island is still central in *Mandela's Earth* (1988) a collection of poems by Wole Soyinka,¹⁸ which according to Niyi Osundare (1994: 95) marks the passage from the Nigerian poet's modernist obscurity of the Seventies to a more accessible kind of versification on social and political issues. An eulogy of the South African leader in the form of the praise poem typical of African oral tradition and refined by Soyinka in his

¹⁷ Andries Walter Oliphant (1955).

¹⁸ Wole Soyinka (1934).



previous collections on Yoruba gods and African warriors, *Mandela's Earth* attacks and ridicules the apartheid establishment through hyperboles, rhetorical questions and parodies (Bodunde 1991: 4–6; Ogundele 1994: 162–163, Ojaide 1994: 109–110 and lately Jeyifo 2004: 261–262). The poems celebrate the leader as the contemporary literary *locus* where myth, history and legend fuse together; a living man epitomizing the power of the god Ogun and the courage of the Zulu king and warrior Shaka as Soyinka depicted them in *Idanre* and *Ogun Abibiman* (Aiyejia 1994: 173–174). Among the many critics who have read *Mandela's Earth* in the wider context of the Nobel prizewinner's poetry, Tanure Ojaide (1994: 109) convincingly interprets Soyinka's Mandela as a Christ-like figure, a martyr. Mandela also reminds him of St. Peter when he reclaims the unity between himself and the island – “I am this rock” (see epigraph to this article) – in “No!” *He Said* (ibid.: 113).

Inspired by Mandela's decision to reject P.W. Botha's offer to release him from prison in 1985, Soyinka composed *Your Logic Frightens Me, Mandela*, a monologue where he engages with the leader's ethical/ontological position (Attwell 2003: 37). Mandela rejected the offer because he felt he could not accept freedom if his people were still oppressed nor could he negotiate anything from the position of a prisoner. As Susan Sontag had more clearly marked, Mandela would not separate his freedom from his people's, therefore he *could* not acknowledge Botha's offer, which meant nothing to him; for this reason he “has been *made* a symbol” (1987: 49, *Italics mine*). At the time, Mandela was in Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison and the event had an international resonance, nonetheless Pollsmoor does not feature in Soyinka's composition. A political prisoner himself in Nigeria, the poet was obviously well prepared to make a prison topical in his work but Robben Island with its physical isolation and Shakesperian echoes was more appealing for the points he wanted to make. Time is also a central issue here. Soyinka rhetorically – and ironically – asks his imaginary interlocutor how he spent his time on the island, whether entertaining himself with the local fauna – despised animals – or with pastime games, which would be forbidden by the authorities anyway, because reminiscent of either class or ethnic divide:

Do you grow food?
Do you make friends
Of mice and lizards? Measure the growth of grass
For time's unhurried pace?
Are you now the crossword puzzle expert?
Chess? Ah, no! Subversion lurks among
Chess pieces. Structured clash of black and white,
Equal ranged and paced? An equal board? No!
Not on Robben Island. Checkers? Bad to worse.
[...] Do you tame geckos?
Do grasshopper break your silences?



Bats' radar pips pinpoint your statuesque
Gaze transcending distances at will?
Do moths break wing
Against a light bulb's fitful glow
That brings no searing illumination? (25–32, 45–51)

Mandela's extra-ordinariness subverts the order of things and makes Soyinka wonder who is the prisoner on the island; whether the leader or his guard, here reduced to a metonymy with, once again, Christological inferences:¹⁹

What brings you back to earth? The night's guard
Inhuman tramp? A sodden eye transgressing through
The Judas hole? Tell me, Mandela,
That guard, is he *your* prisoner? (65–68)

Soyinka's poem is very clear, unlike its subject which is presented a *human* enigma. As a Prospero who "disdain[s] legerdemains" (10), Mandela also serves to reveal the pettiness of his enemies and the inadequacies of African politicians in general, both targets of Soyinka's political satire (Bodunde 1991: 2–6). *Your Logic Frightens Me, Mandela* is a tribute full of suggestive images; in the final lines the poet casts a disquieting light recurring, once again, to animals – unambiguous "fat leeches" – and closes the poem wondering (prophetically) on the man's unfair exploitation on behalf of everybody:

Your bounty threatens me, Mandela, that taut
Drumskin of your heart on which our millions
Dance. I fear we latch, fat leeches
On your veins. Our daily imprecisions
Dull keen edges of your will.
Compromises deplete your act's repletion –
Feeding will-voided stomachs of a continent,
What will be left of you, Mandela? (69-76)

UNLOCKING THE PRISON: MEMORY, HISTORY AND ROBBER ISLAND MUSEUM

In the sixth section of his long epic poem *History is the Home Address* (2004), Mongane Wally Serote²⁰ reiterates Soyinka's final question. While the Nigerian poet was worried

¹⁹ As early as 1977, prominent Mozambican poet José Craveirinha (1922–2003) operated a similar reversal in his *Ever Since my Friend Nelson Mandela Went to Live on Robben Island*, where he ironically pictures four millions of whites *detained* in South Africa while Mandela and his mates live on "a tranquil island" (4).



about the future (Mandela was at the time in prison), the South African poet, ten years after the first democratic elections, significantly puts the accent on the importance of the past. His poem highlights history as the privileged site from which to debate South African identity. Thus, this part of the composition is set during a visit to Robben Island Museum; its past and ghosts are remembered with the tone of a solemn recollection to raise the issue of the lesson to be learned from history. The deep-rooted image of the prison as a place of repression but also of hope and potential freedom is prominent:

on Robben Island the earth is rocky
and rugged
here dust clings to the leaves and stones
it clings to the walls which
I wish could speak
for I wonder what they would say
and what we would hear
here where a degenerate mind ruled
but where also
hope primed the essence of human race
and since then a wish and will for freedom
flew
took off into the blue sky ricocheting on the sea
[...]
Robben Island: what have we learnt
what do we know now
when the cells and jails are empty
and echoes ghosts only? (17–29, 56–59)

From the rocky outside, the perspective quickly shifts inside the walls which saw the mystery of the lives of the prisoners and the morbid perversity of a regime in power for so long. Serote is adamant about the meaning of the place and builds an emotional *crescendo* through alliterations and repetitions conveying the image of a powerful nature permeated by history:

our address is
Robben Island
ask us we will tell you
Zizi
Madiba and his comrades left the cells
and you and we know our addresses
and the roaring seas sing of them
as the breeze whistle and whistle and whistle

²⁰ Mongane Wally Serote (1944).



and the earth spins in its miracle pin
if you go away
remember your home address. (60-70)

Also in *Mandela's Cell* (2005) by Chris Mann²¹, we find a poet visiting Robben Island Museum in the democratic South Africa. Mandela's cell still provides the occasion for venturing into the past: "I stood among a crowd / of tourists from abroad / and stared into the past" (1-3). The seclusion normally associated with the prison and its aspect of "a stone-cold strip of floor as make an ancient tomb" (9), produce, though, new sounds. Not the "clang / shook from a gate of steel / that bigotry kept locket" (10-12) but, rather:

the cheering of the world
when he the era's Lazarus

walked out into the sun.
Around that unlocked gate,
that legacy's stark shrine

the cameras flashed applause. (17-22)

Mann ends his poem unlocking Robben Island's gate, although Mandela was actually released from Victor Vester Prison (near Paarl), and portrays the man in a Christological scenario, that is as a modern Lazarus.

Historical accuracy, once again, gives way to the myth.

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²¹ Chris Mann (1948).



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