

## Editor's Column

# Nelson Mandela: The Absent Cause

**T**HROUGHOUT THE LAST HALF OF 2013, IT IS CLEAR TO EVERYONE that his end is near and that the deathwatch has begun. Nelson Mandela's long and glorious life is coming to a close. Although Mandela has been part of my political family for a long time, I don't feel sad because I believe that he has done his work and, as we say in Africa, the time for him to dance to join his ancestors is a time for rejoicing rather than mourning. But I find these long months of waiting to be full of anxiety. Waiting for death is a hard chore. I have been teaching a course on death and literature regularly, so I know where to turn for consolation. John Donne's "Death be not proud" is always a good starting point:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,  
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,  
Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,  
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,  
Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.

Donne's poem provides consolation by depriving death of its singular power, by making it a slave to other forces in the universe:

Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poyson, warre, and sicknesse dwell,  
And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,  
And better then thy stroake; why swell'st thou then;  
One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

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And yet, as I await Mandela's death, I experience an anxiety that the poetics of sorrow cannot mitigate. My condition comes from what in the end appears to be intellectual vanity: what will I say when the press starts calling to ask me about Mandela's role in the making of African literary culture? I imagine myself receiving questions from the African correspondents of major American and European publications, who call on their expensive satellite phones from the battle zones of Central Africa or wherever else the grief of the continent is acted out. I am thrilled by the attention but also tongue-tied. All I can offer the calling scribes is the truth of silence in the form of W. B. Yeats's poem "On Being Asked for a War Poem":

I think it better that in times like these  
A poet keep his mouth shut, for in truth  
We have no gift to set a statesman right;  
He has had enough of meddling who can  
    please  
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,  
Or an old man upon a winter's night.

These conversations take place in the world of dreams, that faraway place where possibilities are endless. Still, I know that given Mandela's towering presence in the twentieth century, it is just a matter of time before someone, somewhere, wonders what he meant to the literary world.

A few days after Mandela's death, the questions start coming: what do you think was Nelson Mandela's contribution to the field of African literature? Not knowing what to say, I redirect the calls to people who might have better answers to such inquiries, people whose professional compulsion does not allow for silence. Let the lawyers, historians, and political scientists deal with Mandela's reputation; the world of letters was perhaps marginal to his larger struggles. Keeping the mouth shut quarantines one from the embarrassment of half-truths. However, when a colleague asks me to speak at a local forum commemorating

Mandela's life, I can't escape into silence, nor can I just turn up and declare, in the words of Williams Carlos Williams:

Of death  
the barber  
the barber  
talked to me  
  
cutting my  
life with  
sleep to trim  
my hair—  
  
It's just  
a moment  
he said, we die  
every night—

So I will stay up all night trying to think about the role of the imagination in the life of Nelson Mandela, the icon of freedom in our times, and about his influence on the forms of art in South Africa.

[ I ]

Speaking about Mandela in relation to two forms of art—photography and music—turns out to be easy. A short excursion into the archive brings him to life as an image, for early in his life Mandela seems to have entered into contracts with famous photographers, such as Alf Kumalo, to have the key moments of his life photographed.<sup>1</sup> There are photographs of him in everyday activities: Mandela at his wedding to Winnie (fig. 1), Mandela in the boxing ring (fig. 2), Mandela the guerrilla visiting sites of revolution in Algeria. Looking at these pictures now, I'm struck by Mandela's ability to transcend his social or political circumstances and enter the public space as an image. As a prisoner on Robben Island, he defies his prison garb with his pose of authority. Whether he is photographed consulting with his political associates, sewing sackcloth, or breaking up rocks as part of his punishment, Mandela always seems beyond the quotidian.



Fig. 1

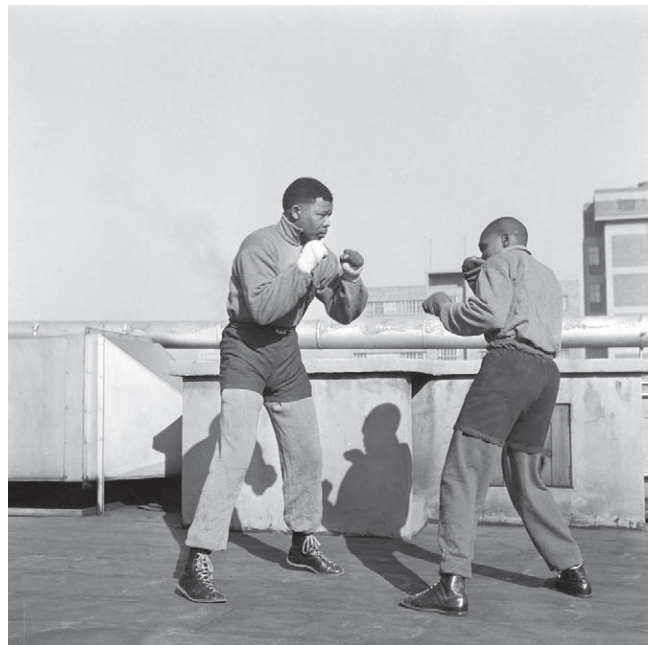
The wedding of Nelson Mandela and Winnie Madikizela in June 1958. © API / Gamma Rapho.

More important, what makes Mandela the quintessential figure of the twentieth century is his ability to use photography to control his self-representation. Consider this example: For most of 1961 Mandela will be in hiding, living underground as what he later describes as “a creature of the night” (*Illustrated Long Walk* 87). His enemies and friends have dubbed him “the black pimperl”—a mysterious underground figure—and the most wanted fugitive in South Africa. During this trying time, however, Mandela will still find time to pose for a now famous photograph of himself as a Thembu prince (fig. 3). Read against the other underground pictures of the time—Mandela as a guerrilla in training, for example—the photograph enables an alternative image of the self in public. And so it could be said that when it comes to the world of images, and thus the presentation of the self in, and as, the world picture, Mandela provides the ideal object of study.<sup>2</sup> Take away this image and the African archive is impoverished.

The same can be said of Mandela and music. In my mind, his name is associated with an inerascable sonic experience. In fact, I first heard his name in the sorrow songs of South African exiles in East Africa and over the shortwave frequencies of the African National Congress, broadcasting from Lusaka, Zambia. The year is 1964, Mandela has been arrested, and the Rivonia trial is sending jitters and jolts across the world; the government that brought him to trial has an appetite for hanging its enemies; the sorrow songs from around the world seem intended to prepare us for the worst outcome. I surf shortwave radio, and everywhere I go there is that name, now under the shadow of its dissolution. I hear the name uttered in different intonations: with Hindi inflections on All India Radio, in New Delhi; German ones on Radio Deutsche Welle, broadcasting from Cologne; and even Spanish notations on Radio Cuba, coming from Havana. The voices on the air may say his name differently, but they seem heavy with the responsibility of what Rivonia stands for—death and life. I’m too young to understand the implications of this choice, but going by

Fig. 2

Mandela sparring with Jerry Moloi, a professional featherweight, in 1957. © Drum Social Histories / Bailey’s African History Archive / Africa Media Online. Photo: Bob Gosani.



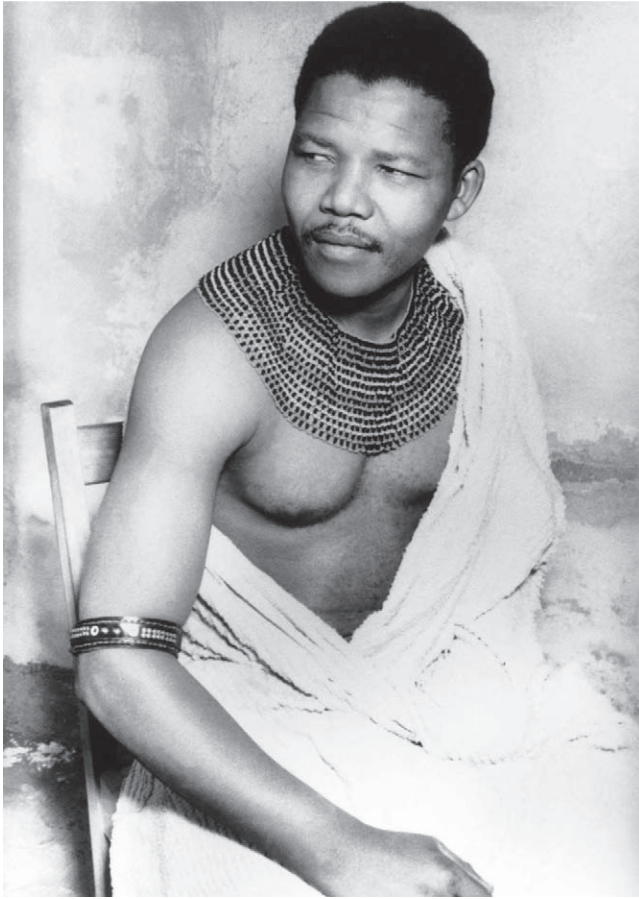


FIG. 3

Mandela wearing traditional Thembu garb. © L'Humanité / Keystone-France / Gamma Rapho.

the sound and the mood of the time, I sense what is at stake.

Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, I will hear sonic booms as the world demands that he be set free so that others can be free. This is the simple message of the Special AKA's 1984 protest song "Free Nelson Mandela":

Free Nelson Mandela  
 21 years in captivity  
 Shoes too small to fit his feet  
 His body abused, but his mind is still free  
 You're so blind that you cannot see

At its height, the international antiapartheid movement will move to the beat of Hugh Masekela's 1987 song "Bring Him Back Home":

Bring him back Nelson Mandela  
 Bring him back home to Soweto

I want to see him walking hand in  
 hand with Winnie Mandela

And on his triumphant return home to Soweto, the African National Congress Choir will remind the crowds gathered to listen to their song "Usilethela Uxolo" that what was always at stake in Mandela's long imprisonment was the idea of perpetual peace:

Oh Mandela, usilethela uxolo  
 Nelson Mandela; he brings us peace

The long campaign to free Mandela could be written as a purely sonic affair, and the 1988 Wembley antiapartheid concert will stand out as an unprecedented gathering of world music, a sonic revival enabled by the absent figure of Nelson Mandela. As the jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim will later note, Mandela and music have a symbiotic relationship: his words inspire the composition of masterpieces such as Ibrahim's Mannenberg blues; listening to these songs in prison, Mandela finds words for imagining and describing freedom in its absence.<sup>3</sup>

[ II ]

But what about literature? What was Mandela's relationship to the written word? This is the first question I get after a conversation with college teachers in Mysore, India, in December 2013, a few weeks after Mandela's death. Actually, the question is put to me more specifically: did Nelson Mandela have the same influence on African literature as Gandhi did on Indian literature? Instead of answering the question directly, I try to rehearse a familiar story—the influence of Gandhi on the making of Indian literature. I lay out the nature of this influence in classic Indian texts such as Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, and R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*. I tell my audience what it already knows about these works: Gandhi is an inescapable presence in

them, a figure of nationalist longing and desire, the one who enables the romance of Indian beginnings. What about Mandela? Does he play the same role in African writing?

When we turn to literature, we are confronted with the complications of the man, the myth, and the memory. Mandela makes occasional appearances in African literature, but he is more notable for his absence. He is absent from the great autobiographies produced in the late colonial period by Es'kia Mphahlele (*Down Second Avenue*), Bloke Modisane (*Blame Me on History*), Don Mattera (*Sophiatown*), and Ellen Kuzwayo (*Call Me Woman*); he barely makes an entrance in the fictions that bring international prominence to South African letters, leading to the award of the Nobel Prize to Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee. Mandela may shadow the great antiapartheid novels by Alex La Guma (*In the Fog of the Seasons' End*), Richard Rive (*Emergency*), and André Brink (*A Dry White Season*), but he is not a subject in such works. Nor does he appear in Athol Fugard's political plays of the 1970s (*Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island*). Mandela may affect the mood of the poetry that is written in the dark period beginning with the 1960 massacre at Sharpeville and ending with the 1976 student uprising in Soweto. This is a poetry populated by the desires that Mandela embodies, but the heroic figure himself is absent. In Dennis Brutus's poetic account of the Robben Island prison, aptly entitled "On the Island," the sites that readers should readily identify with Mandela are defamiliarized:

Cement-grey floors and walls  
 cement-grey days  
 cement-grey time  
 and a grey susurration  
 as of seas breaking  
 winds blowing  
 and rains drizzling  
  
 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. (38)

How do we explain Mandela's absence from the literature of the moment that he was supposed to embody? The simplest answer to the question is sociological: the sabotage and censorship acts of the 1960s and 1970s effectively silence Mandela. By the end of the apartheid period, over twenty laws will be enacted to control the distribution of materials considered subversive, and over eighteen thousand books will be banned. People are banned, too. Under the Suppression of Communism Act (1950), the government will silence its citizens by limiting their rights of movement, association, and expression. A banned person cannot be quoted or cited in a publication.<sup>4</sup> Censorship seeks to control addresser, message, and addressee, effectively killing what Roman Jakobson would consider the structure of poetic expression: the transmission of a message from an addresser to an addressee (66). How does one enunciate that which is forbidden?

Imprisoned at Robben Island and under a banning order, Brutus decides to write his poems under the guise of letters to his sister, Martha, and it is in the collection containing them that many of us will get our first glimpse into what is taking place in the apartheid gulag. First, there is the desolate landscape:

In the greyness of isolated time  
 Which shafts down into the echoing mind,  
 Wraiths appear, and whispers of horror  
 That people the labyrinth self. ("Letters" 6)

Then there is the prison house of the mind:

Quite early one reaches a stage  
 Where one resolves to embrace  
 The status of prisoner  
 With all it entails,  
 Savouring to the full its bitterness  
 And seeking to escape nothing. . . . (17)

Sometimes poets seeking ways around the rules of censorship and striving for a poetics that might find a banned addressee produce memorable lines. This is what happens when Mongane Wally Serote tries to communicate with his friend Don Mattera, banned in 1973:

it is a dry white season  
 dark leaves don't last, their brief lives dry out  
 and with a broken heart they dive down  
     gently headed for the earth,  
 not even bleeding.

Here we have the complexities of writing that takes place under siege: the poet is not banned, the poem is not banned, the subject is not banned, but the addressee has been banished from the public sphere and can only be addressed indirectly as "Don M.—banned." Of course, most of the initial readers of the poem know to whom it is addressed. The figure of Don M., like that of Mandela, is an absence/presence. Ironically, because Don Mattera cannot be mentioned, cited, or quoted under the rules of censorship, he enables a poetics of indirection, entering the public sphere through a language that says one thing and means another. It is the same with Mandela—he is there because he is not there.

In Mtutuzeli Matshoba's short story "A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana," a young man sets out on journey to the prison at Robben Island, ironically named "the holy of holies," to visit his brother:

Over the next few days everyone who happened to get wind of my destination wanted to talk of nothing else. What I found interesting was how the talk always embraced all the people at "the shrine."

"Will you see *him* too?"

"What do you actually want to know, *ndoda*?"  
 In any prison you only see the person you've invited to visit. Or would you expect everyone to be paraded before you?"

"Naw—I mean you might see him by chance."

"Well, I don't know." (93)

The story assumes that we know who the "him" is. The unnamed one bears the desires of others. Because Mandela's name is repressed, he is everywhere.

It could, of course, be said that Mandela does not make a good subject for lyric poetry. It may also be that his powerful personality and the mythology surrounding it resist the pathos that makes elegy possible. Perhaps Mandela would be a better subject for *izibongi*, praise poems, the quintessential genre of his Xhosa people; but this might go against his wish that his persona be sublimated into a larger cause. So, to function as a poetic figure, Mandela must be presented under erasure, creating the difficult topoi that Wole Soyinka notes at the beginning of "Mandela's Earth":

Your logic frightens me, Mandela  
 Your logic frightens me. Those years  
 Of dreams, of time accelerated in  
 Visionary hopes, of savoring the task anew,  
 The call, the tempo primed  
 To burst in supernovae round a "brave new  
     world"!  
 Then stillness. Silence. The world closes round  
 Your sole reality; the rest is . . . dreams?  
 (3; ellipsis in orig.)

### [ III ]

What about Mandela's own relationship to the institution of literature? Like most Africans of his generation, Mandela—a product of Lovedale Mission and Fort Hare University—has had a solid colonial education, one in which literature occupies a privileged position. At Robben Island, a copy of Shakespeare's collected works will be circulated among the prisoners, who are asked to mark and annotate their favorite verses. Mandela's choice is *Julius Caesar*, act 2, scene 2:

Cowards die many times before their deaths;  
 The valiant never taste of death but once.  
 Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,

It seems to me most strange that men should  
 fear  
 Seeing that death, a necessary end,  
 Will come when it will come. (32–37)

Although I know that *Julius Caesar* has fascinated African readers (and leaders) for over a century, it has never been clear to me whether this is because of the vehicle or the tenor of the play. It could be that living and writing in violent colonial and postcolonial situations, these readers saw in *Julius Caesar* a play of power that mirrored their own condition. But it could also be that since many of Shakespeare's African readers entered the English language through the King James Bible, what seduced them was the iambic pentameter. Translated into other tongues, Shakespeare acquires even more resonance. For the African translators of *Julius Caesar*, then, what survives the topic—the play of power—is the language, the mood, the tone. This is what we hear in Julius Nyerere's *Juliasi Kaizari*, a now famous Swahili rendering of *Julius Caesar*:

KAIZARI. W'oga hufa mara nyingi kabla ya vifo vyao;  
 Mashujaa hawaonji kifo ila mara moja.  
 Kati ya vioja vyote nilivyokwisha sikia,  
 Kishangazacho zaidi ni woga wa binadamu.  
 Kwani kifo, kwa sababu ni hatima ya lamiza,  
 Bila shaka kitakuja siku itakapotimu. (32)

What do these sounds mean to Mandela? What does the literary mean to one cut off from literature through censorship and prison regulations?

When Mandela is finally out of prison and able to speak about that world hidden from the world, we learn why literature was important to him. Language, he notes in his autobiography, was the key to human freedom: "Without language, one cannot talk to people and understand them; one cannot share their hopes and aspirations, grasp their history, appreciate their poetry, or savor their songs" (*Long Walk* 84). Later, in a memorable tribute to Chinua Achebe, Mandela will praise

the father of African letters as the writer whose works brought the prison walls down.<sup>5</sup>

What about Mandela as a writer? I have to confess that I don't find *Long Walk to Freedom*, his magnum opus, that impressive; of the existing editions of the book, I find myself drawn to the illustrated edition because the pictures bring a certain poetic dimension to Mandela's life. Compared with other South African political autobiographies, *Long Walk to Freedom* seems a corporate work, focused on the singular task of the world-historical individual at the expense of the private self. Drafted in prison and polished in freedom, *Long Walk* disappoints because it seems to work a bit too hard to subordinate the unique story of a self to a collective political mission. The two goals are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Indeed, it could be said of Mandela that from his early life he sought to tie his fortunes to those of his community. As Oliver Tambo, Mandela's compatriot and former law partner, notes in a 1964 tribute, Mandela is "an outstanding individual" who nevertheless "derives his strength from the great masses of people who make up the freedom struggle in our country" (xv). The challenge for Mandela as a writer has been how to balance these two tasks. The results are mixed. Written from the vantage point of arrival, *Long Walk to Freedom* sets out to confirm the prophetic idea that from the hills of Qunu a leader will emerge to bring his people out of bondage; tied to this allegory of the world-historical individual, the autobiography fails to account for the vulnerability of the subject or to acknowledge the challenges of incomplete histories.

In contrast, Mandela's speeches, collected in *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, are written under the shadows of uncertainty, danger, and threats to the self, on the run, in court, and in prison. In these conditions of distress, when circumstances call the capacity of language itself into doubt, speech acts become the condition of becoming and being:

You can see that “there is no easy walk to freedom anywhere and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountain tops of our desires.” Dangers and difficulties have not deterred us in the past; they will not frighten us now. But we must be prepared for them like men who mean business and who do not waste energy in vain talk and idle action. The way of preparation for action lies in our rooting out all impurity and indiscipline from our organization and making it the bright and shining instrument that will cleave its way to Africa’s freedom. (31)

Here, at the end of a remarkable speech, read by a friend because he was banned, Mandela quotes Jawaharlal Nehru (a Hindu), who in turn quotes a Hebrew text (Psalms 23.4), to energize his listeners as they begin their long march to Africa’s freedom.<sup>6</sup> When it comes to speech acts, Mandela works best when he is an absent cause.

*Simon Gikandi*

## NOTES

1. An account of Kumalo’s work as the photographer of the Mandela family can be found in *8115: A Prisoner’s Home* (Kumalo and Warner).

2. The questions and terms here are borrowed from Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture”: “Does every period of history have its world picture, and indeed in such a way as to concern itself from time to time about that world picture? Or is this, after all, only a modern kind of representing, this asking concerning a world picture?” (128–29).

3. “When he first heard the song, he said it was a sign that liberation was near,” Ibrahim recalls.

4. A comprehensive account of censorship in South Africa can be found in Green and Karolides 526–33.

5. This statement has been circulated widely, and it is difficult to trace its origin. But its most recent appearance was in Mandela’s condolences on the death of Achebe issued by the Nelson Mandela Foundation.

6. The quotation is from Nehru’s article “From Lucknow to Tripuri.”

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