

Questioning Legacies, Fashioning
the Postcolonial Self: A Reading of
James Gregory's *Goodbye Bafana:
Nelson Mandela, My Prisoner, My Friend*

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But here I am! It's my choice now! And I'll tell you this: if Mandela did something wrong, I *don't* want to hear about it. Something, *something* has got to survive out of all of this.
(Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* 339)

Generally frowned upon by Mandela's biographers, disregarded by academic criticism, and dismissingly received in South Africa as partly fabricated evidence, the memoir *Goodbye Bafana: Nelson Mandela, My Prisoner, My Friend* still needs to be properly assessed.¹ Without sounding apologetic, the analysis should attempt to trace the author's dynamic process of self-representation, the modes through which his ethnic and cultural imaginary worked, and the different attitudes and reactions he endeavoured to portray, from his childhood on a farm in KwaZulu-Natal in the 1940s to the momentous "Sunday the 11th" (Gregory 476), the day Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was released from Victor Verster Prison (11 February 1990).

James Gregory (1941-2003), the author of this book lying midway between autobiographical writing, prison narrative, and a historical account relating to no less an icon than Madiba, was not a professional writer. He was one of the warders who, alongside Jack Swart, Christo Brand, and Major Marais, found themselves cementing a friendship with

the “main man” (Gregory 17), political prisoner ‘Number One’ as well as future Father of the Nation. Such a connection, which Afrikaner Gregory hastened to popularize by means of a book strategically published in 1995, when Mandela’s position as the first black President of a democratic South Africa was firmly established, did not pass unquestioned and predictably received controversial responses concerning the veracity of the account, its breach of trust and its working as a highway to popularity and profit. If Ramoupi and Mkhabela mention in passing that “after its publication, [Gregory’s book] provoked a controversy regarding the genuineness of its story” (3), a more poignant feedback is provided by Coullie, who, while analyzing the “Madiba-marketing” phenomenon, observes that

Mandela is a key person in the autobiographies of both James Gregory (1995), Mandela’s Robben Island jailor, and Rory Steyn (2000), his bodyguard. Their autobiographical accounts of their relationships with Mandela secure a potentially large readership by foregrounding Mandela’s name in the books’ titles. Incidentally, both of these are ‘as-told-to’ autobiographies. This strikes me as significant: can we not infer thereby that more or less anything to do with Mandela is worth publishing, even if the autobiographers cannot tell their stories well enough to make it in print on their own? Collaborators ensure that potentially popular (read lucrative?) narratives are publishable. And publish they, along with many new writers, do. (299)²

Indeed, Gregory’s text unfolds like a conversion story: a tale of biased hostility and hatred magically dissolving via the epiphanic discovery of the moral stature of the ‘criminal’, with the prisoner growing into a friend, confidant, and honourable father figure.

The aim of this article is to better investigate the discursive policy, semantic layers, and identity-construction strategies informing *Goodbye Bafana*.³ I believe that, despite its mystifications and the fact that it was co-written with (ghost-written by?) journalist Bob Graham from *Today*, a London tabloid newspaper which also covered the 1994 elections, this memoir has so far been wrapped in too thick a veil of prejudice. After Mandela’s passing and with South Africa now well on its way towards a transnational, post/postapartheid scenario where porous and ‘glocal’ realities are taking shape, the time is ripe for a historical re-framing of Gregory’s work. *Goodbye Bafana* could in fact be instrumental in considering the relatively brief era of “nonracial South African nationalism – seen as a positive phenomenon, a popular spirit of unity, rather than a legal default position underwritten by the Constitution,” before “the

yielding of the national to the global” in the post-Mandela years of rampant neoliberalism (Cornwell, Klopper, and MacKenzie 6).

While, at the closing of the first decade of freedom (1994-2004), theorists took on the pressing question of whether the economic policies of the African National Congress (ANC) might be interpreted as indicators of a betrayal of the liberation movement’s agenda among the “perils and promises of globalization” (Magubane 660), others observed instead how in the 1980s and 1990s the notion of a South African white identity underwent major shifts within the socio-political fabric. Nuttall, for one, records these shifts as “amplifications of whitenesses” caught in a paradoxical “play between visibility and invisibility” (115), proximity and distance. She includes Gregory’s work among those “invested in changing registers of whiteness” (117) away from ‘settler’ to ‘citizen,’ from a key signifier and even ossified version of racial oppression to a postapartheid development in-the-making.

My purpose in the two following sections is to interweave the moments and phases of Gregory’s political as well as inner journey. I start from the context of an initially ‘staged’ self-portrayal, where Gregory sets about foregrounding his redeeming association with Mandela, as powerfully suggested by his eventual addressing the black leader by his first name. As the chapters develop, however, the somewhat posturing ‘Nelson’s friend’ leaves room for an engaging flow of reminiscences and a more consistent, emotionally genuine intention to craft a postcolonial identity, a well-rounded subjectivity crossing racial boundaries and trying hard to lay the apartheid spectre to rest.

1. A Self-Portrayal as ‘Nelson’s Friend’

As a first step, a crucial point must be addressed when introducing James Gregory, the warrant officer and censor from Robben Island who, in the 1990s, got a promotion to the rank of lieutenant and, in his fifties, was offered an early retirement package. Doubts understandably arise as to whether in *Goodbye Bafana* he might be studiously staging his divorce from the humiliated ‘baddies’ – the Afrikaner white tribe – and negotiating a space for himself as ‘Nelson’s friend,’ an enlightened citizen of the Rainbow Nation.

Needless to say, those were the emotionally heightened times of the South African ‘miracle’ and its exceptionalism, when the country was emerging as a multi-party democracy purged of colour-bar hierarchies, embracing unity and envisaging a new Renaissance. Was then the ex-jailer making an attempt to jump on the winners’ bandwagon and profitably stretching the truth in the mood of national euphoria? Although there can be no definitive answer to this – the more so because textual evidence stems here from life writing, itself a flexible and hybrid genre – well-documented insights into Gregory’s misrepresentations have been supplied by British journalist Anthony Sampson, a close friend of Mandela and the author of a thoroughly researched biography of the black leader (first published in 1999), and by South African Mike Nicol, who, in a long paper written for the Nelson Mandela Foundation, provides a most detailed appraisal of the warder/prisoner intimacy.

Sampson underlines how *Goodbye Bafana* “included intimate accounts of Mandela’s family relationships which he had overheard. President Mandela, as he then was, decided not to apply for an injunction, but the Prison Department officially distanced themselves from the book” (217). He then mentions the fact that “Gregory had ‘hallucinated’ in many of his accounts, Mandela said privately, and Gregory himself admitted that he had used ‘author’s licence’; more seriously, he had abused his role by disclosing confidential personal details” (523).

In his “Nelson Mandela’s Warders,” Nicol devotes one section to each of the three officials who joined the prison services after their training at Kroonstad, had long-term contacts with the incarcerated Rivonians, carried out special duties in relation to Mandela, and gave interviews about their life experience. These warders were: Jack Swart, who was first stationed at Robben Island as a driver and, subsequently, as head of the mess and chef in the prison-house at Victor Verster; James Gregory himself, the only one who published a book on the topic; and Christo Brand, arguably the true ‘Mandela friend.’ *Goodbye Bafana* is said to have appeared at the right time in the public eye and to have woven a story hinging on a basic idea cleverly pushed home to the reader: that of the warder-prisoner “extraordinary relationship,” of “how the warder who initially regarded his prisoner as a terrorist who should be hanged, came to change his mind” (37) in a climate of increasing confidentiality, mutual trust, and, as it were, benign domesticity encouraging talk across the (colour-)bars.

According to Nicol, Gregory revises and overstates both his degree of familiarity with Mandela and his actual assignments. Indeed prison rules, particularly on Robben Island, did anything but foster contact between warders and prisoners, and lower ranking officers did not have much power to decide or act. Nicol points to Gregory's propensity to cast himself as the only man in charge, given *carte blanche*, ranking next to generals, ministers, and politicians and even claiming all the credit when another colleague had been in the foreground instead of him. The most glaring among the allegedly fictionalized episodes concerns the leaking of a conspiracy plot to assassinate Mandela on the very day of his 1990 release. While this scoop is not backed up by any other clear evidence, Gregory significantly capitalizes on it so as to provide his last chapter with engrossing dramatic effects. There he stands, in the thick of things, galvanized into action and ensuring safety while the system's 'yes-men' are getting nowhere, for all their trying hard to understand:

At 3.35 [on February 11th, 1990] the phone rang again. I was standing outside in the garden. I knew it would be General Willemse again. It was. [...]. "They've received information which indicates that one of the armed guards on the route to the gate has been contracted to assassinate Mr Mandela." What the hell was happening? I froze with the phone in my hand, unable to speak [...]. So that was it. Tell Mr Mandela and handle it myself [...]. The release of Nelson Mandela at any time now and an assassin on my hands. And with the world's press standing on the door-step with their eyes, cameras and microphones firmly fixed on Victor Verster Prison and me [...]. I gave an order to the main control. "This is Warrant Officer Gregory. I want every person along the road to the gate, including all guards, totally disarmed. I also want every officer, up to and including generals and their bodyguards, disarmed [...]. I want everyone disarmed. Do I make myself clear? Now do it. I have the authority of the minister, so move, man." (485-87)

The sense of pressing urgency and edginess, the syntactic fragmentation and climactic rising of the chain of clauses, all contribute here to cast the protagonist as the officer who succeeds in saving the day. This is probably Gregory at his most 'self-aggrandizing' and, as far as this side of him is concerned, Nicol's study is an important source of information. Its list of references includes not only Mandela's autobiographical works and personal papers, alongside Sampson's *Mandela: The Authorised Biography*, but also newspaper articles; interviews with Brand, Gregory's wife, and Swart (2009-10); and email correspondence with Ahmed

Kathrada (a renowned ANC activist, political prisoner, and future member of Parliament) and with journalist Benjamin Pogrand, who interviewed Gregory for *The Independent* and *Granada TV* in 1994.⁴

Yet, when reading *Goodbye Bafana*, we also realize that a willingness to question old socio-political legacies, denounce the degeneration of Afrikanerdom, and sever ties with a burdensome Calvinistic inheritance,⁵ does underpin Gregory's reminiscences. At the same time, the narrating I's discursive mode shrinks away from the lacerating struggle with guilt, the troubled-conscience motif, and the overwhelming search for expiation which permeate such Afrikaner works as, famously, Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (1998), Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* (1995), or Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* (1990). In *Goodbye Bafana* the tone is rarely heartrending; self-exposure and confrontation with culpability or connivance do not lead to brooding estrangement, developing instead along the lines of a propositional and sensible evaluation. Interestingly, this seems to gesture towards a dialogic ethics linked to the fluid, relational identity which Kalua situates in the context of postcolonial Africa and also describes in terms of Homi Bhabha's "third space" of enunciation, that is to say, the ambivalent cultural locus where multiple traces of meaning create 'fertile' slippages and interact in non-hierarchical, unexpected ways.

In Gregory's book, the enveloping (white) rhetoric of contrition is in fact replaced by a lighter and worldly-wise, occasionally ironical approach that emerges as early as in the Prologue, set in May 1994, the *annus mirabilis* of the ANC's political ascent in a finally unitary state provided with a bill of rights and a liberal-democratic Constitution. In the pageantry of celebrations on the President's inauguration day in Pretoria, Mandela is depicted as the charismatic weaver of reconciliation in the face of old rivalries, allegiances, and baffling reversals of roles on the pathways to power. As if in a masque crowded with parading actors and figureheads, a towering Man of the People and a snickering narrator/spectator – an amused Swiftian or Johnsonian observer of human weaknesses and turns of the tide, getting "the opportunity to see a birth and a burial in the same ceremony" (3) – seem to move on a higher sphere of their own. See in particular how the contrast between the unmatched 'tallness' of Mandela and the 'ordinary meanness' of political castes or social groups is framed in this reminiscence:

As I sat watching the impressive line-up, a sense of the ridiculous overwhelmed me: just a few years ago many of these people were considered terrorists and criminals, a threat to our lives. They now mingled with dignitaries from 167 countries, filled with pride yet at this moment all content just to be sharing the same shaded sunlight. Could this really be happening? Memories kept returning of a time when we had been told in no uncertain terms that many of these people were subhuman, animals to be broken until they begged for mercy [...]. When I closed my eyes I could see Robben Island, that Devil's Island prison where we had kept him. I could see the times when he had wanted to be free. I could see the man standing there so tall, so ram-rod straight that he towered above everyone else [...] I felt a chest-splitting pride in him today. We'd both come a long way together. Not only had we healed the differences between us both as men, one black, one white, but the process had started throughout our land. (1, 3-4)

A similar atmosphere pervades the recollection of the official opening of Parliament, again on the cusp of an extraordinary change, when South Africans were undergoing a delicate process of psychological and interrelational adjustment. For his part, Gregory continues to sketch his profile as a farsighted dissenter from what was once the apartheid derangement; as a floating 'intermediary' capable of rejecting the ethnocentric bias of nationalist discourse and inducing Mandela to discover the white man's humaneness, as seemingly testified to by Kobie Coetsee, a National Party member who served as Minister of Justice (1980-93) and Minister of Defence (1993-94):

A week or so later there was a second phone call. The President requests my presence once more. This time for the opening of parliament [...]. At the main gate there was the same look of incredulity from the security guards when I presented my invitation. A second, closer examination to make certain it was not a forgery, and this time a seat in the President's personal box [...]. As we left with a feeling of exhilaration, we were stopped by two men, one of whom I recognised: Kobie Coetsee, the Minister of Justice. He wanted his companion, one of the country's most notable judges, to meet me. "This is James Gregory," he said, introducing me. "You will have heard a lot about him." The judge nodded his head in perfect rhythm with pumping my hand. "This is the man who took the hatred for the white man out of Nelson Mandela." (5-6)

Self-complacency and sarcastic smack aside, these passages set the tone for the next thirty-three chapters of the memoir, where even the most sorrowful circumstances⁶ are commented on with a sense of composure,

responsiveness, and sound determination that can be conveyed through a statement like the following, taken from Chapter 9, “The Road to Robben Island”: “My choice was limited, but I was determined to make my own way. I was not going to be a farmer like my father [...] I was going to do it my way” (99). This kind of critical approach and presence of mind is confirmed by Gregory’s cool-headed reflections on Afrikaner indoctrination and anglophobia,⁷ on *laager* ideology and Manichean dichotomies, as well as by his accurate contextualization of the white prejudices and inner fears which often resulted in a demonization of the land-stealing and slaughtering blacks, arguably allied to the Muscovites. Among such blacks were the Rivonia “terrorists,” the leading antiapartheid activists who, at the Rivonia Trial (1963-64), were charged with conspiring against the state and committing acts of sabotage to overthrow the government. The following passage convincingly spells out, in a nutshell, an ideological standpoint once shared by both ‘decent’ and blatantly conservative white South Africans:

[A]fter Rivonia, we all knew this man [Mandela] was the man who was the power behind the terrorists [...]. These people were my enemies, trying to take away what I had earned and what my forefathers had earned with their blood and toil. I was angered by what I read, that these people would try to win power at all costs. My views, I believed, were shared by the majority of ordinary, white South Africans. We all believed that this black threat had to be stopped, and when these people were brought to trial it was a great victory for law and order. (108)

However, particularly from Chapter 13 (“The Beginning of Knowledge”) onwards, the same confident voice proceeds to pinpoint the moments and trials that made a pivotal change of mind and attitude possible. While progressively disclaiming his earlier acquiescence and crude self-righteousness,⁸ the narrator moves now closer to Mandela, discovering the Xhosa leader’s spiritual qualities and witnessing his striving to alleviate the harshness of prison life. A step forward is definitively made when Gregory claims that he “began to call Mandela by his first name, Nelson” (167).

In the years stretching from December 1966, when he was posted to Robben Island, to February 1990,⁹ the Afrikaner jailer would undergo a substantial transformation beyond the boundaries of his Aryan identity. And the black luminary, with his Gandhian poise and awe-inspiring dignity, proved a powerful catalyst for this redeeming metamorphosis. To borrow Shaun Irlam’s words, it might be contended that Gregory charts

his route alongside the “story of the emergent nation’s first leader, Nelson Mandela, catapulted from prison to presidency,” a parable which “became a vivid allegory for the national story, the passage from bondage to ballot box” (696).

Mandela’s inner strength and stoic aura, therefore, figure prominently in Gregory’s work, where the words “terrorist(s),” “criminal(s)” and “communist(s)” are dramatically highlighted to be soon smoothed over, only partially explained in real connection with the historical dynamics of law-breaking and infringement. The book offers no detailed analysis regarding African-nationalism tenets or the programme of retaliation violence and armed struggle which Mandela himself had advocated, at least in the more radical phase of his career (1940s-early 1960s), from the turbulent years in Johannesburg and with the ANC Youth League to the starting of Umkhonto we Sizwe and underground mobilization.

Such one-sided emphasis on a disciplined and ‘sanctified’ Mandela would also mark the 2007 film version of *Goodbye Bafana*, starring Dennis Haysbert and Joseph Fiennes, directed by Bille August and released in the United States with the title *The Color of Freedom*. In this movie, August infused his evocation of Madiba with the almost superhuman magnetism emanating from Gregory’s first depiction of him, a potent strand which the Danish director soon picked up together with the qualities of empathy, nobility of soul, readiness to understand and forgive. This excerpt from Chapter 1 (“My First Meeting with Nelson Mandela”) captures such a magic moment and adds an allegorical layer to it by having Gregory instinctively respond to Mandela’s word of welcome with a Zulu greeting. The metaphorical transformation of ‘Mandela the prisoner’ into a mature personification of ‘Bafana the friend’ is thus foreshadowed from the very beginning (even by the book’s title, through its chiasmic sequence *Bafana/Mandela/Prisoner/Friend*):

[Mandela] turned round, his eyes fixing me firmly with an aloofness, a detached remoteness I found immediately disconcerting [...]. His voice was as firm and direct as his eyes: “Good morning,” he said. “Welcome to Robben Island.” My reply was unusual. “Good morning,” I replied. “I see you.” It was a phrase I’d learned a generation ago as a child, growing up with Zulus, a greeting of friendship. Immediately I caught myself, wondering what the hell I was doing using it for the first time since Ongemak. (18)

At the same time, the departure from the ‘Boer script’ and its principles of faith – a sense of God-given patriarchal superiority and predestination – also emerges in the memoir as an individual achievement. This is a difficult feat that Gregory endorses by debunking received opinions, reading about apartheid legislation and realizing how much cheating and lying went into the policies of separate development.¹⁰ Instilling in him the need to distance himself from the cult of white supremacy seems to be not so much a process of brainwashing and counter-indoctrination by the Rivonians, as his own mind and sensibility awakened by the High Organ, the black elite’s learned members. The earliest signs of this can be detected in the 1960s’ sections, when the young jailer, waiting for the night-shift to show up, had the chance to hear the prisoners talk. This is a moment when “writing against the official text of [political] imprisonment” (Gready 489) towards a recovery of humanity and solidarity is powerfully recorded:

Now [...] the talk started in the cells, from one prisoner to another. It was an invaluable insight into the thinking of these men. Not for them pointless complaining about their situation; they were intent on conversing about higher matters – religion, social issues, concepts in physics and chemistry, literature and art. That evening just listening to them was a beginning to my understanding of how different these men in B section were. It was a group of men unlike any the people who trained us at Kroonstad had ever mentioned. I’d expected something very different. (129)

Gregory would thence keep on treading his truth-seeking path towards a moral and epistemological destination, that is to say, a firm critique of apartheid deviancy and glaring inconsistencies: “These blacks were terrorists and they wanted to kill me. But here they were in my control now, and they were just ordinary people. When I had been introduced they responded politely. My mind was spinning” (130). His response is compellingly heightened by the leader group’s erudition and devotion to the cause of freedom, as well as by Mandela’s wisdom and ingrained sense of justice. But awareness also dawns on him at the cost of banishment and ridicule by his offended ‘peers,’ some of whom did not confine themselves to looking askance. They curtly dismissed and attacked Gregory as a white traitor, a trueborn Afrikaner officer lowering himself to the disgraceful status of a *kaffir boetie*, a nigger lover.¹¹

2. Carving Out a Postcolonial Identity

What seems difficult to brand as fake, in various sections of the book and in its thrilling last chapter on the watershed release day, is the respectful consideration that Gregory shows towards Mandela, along with his treasuring the moments they shared in the more relaxed, somewhat bucolic atmosphere of the last Pollsmoor years and at Victor Verster. In those more ‘humane’ institutions, the black elder, blessed with a natural paternal instinct, turned into a sort of spiritual confidant on family matters and children’s education, never underestimating the importance of motivation, study, and care. Furthermore, if the warrant officer’s closeness to the Mandelas had been fostered by his going through (and censoring) their mail and overseeing visits in the detention centres, affection and admiration also came about via the personal contact he had with some of them besides Nelson, especially Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, on whose striking beauty, pride, and unquenchable spirit he frequently dwells. See also, for that matter, the participation and emotional intensity permeating the description of the first contact visit Mandela was allowed after twenty-one years of incarceration:

Nelson and Winnie were so taken with being able to touch one another that they had forgotten I was there. Inside the room there was no sound, yet the emotion was overwhelming. Both of them knew I knew everything about their lives; by now I had read every letter they had written to one another over the past two decades. I had sat in on most of the meetings in the visiting rooms; these people were my family. I knew them and they knew me. At some stage they began talking, their voices soft and thick with emotion. I could tell Nelson was all choked up; he was barely able to speak. I knew he would be in tears. I certainly was. I felt a joy and pleasure in this moment, that they were able to hold one another again. (300)

This trajectory climaxes with the touching descriptions of the ‘walking-to-freedom’ day, which should have been before Sunday 11th and in Johannesburg, but was eventually planned from Victor Verster (at Madiba’s request). Such a day started hectically with Winnie’s late arrival in Paarl and the tensions of falling behind schedule, to say nothing of the “sense of bewilderment and confusion,” the “mixture of elation and sadness” (467, 468) stemming from the thought of suddenly breaking an association which had lasted for twenty-four years. Just before walking out and meeting the euphoric crowd, Mandela gave Gregory a symbolic token

of recognition and attachment: the handwritten card included among the reproduced illustrations in the volume, saying: “The wonderful hours we spent together during the last two decades end today. But you will always be in my thoughts. Meanwhile I send you and your family fond regards and best wishes” (487). The final shaking of hands between prisoner and jailer, now respectively a free man and an officer in a liberated South Africa, synecdochically seals the ending of a historical phase marred by racism and injustice. A new era is dawning, inspired by the ideals of interracial harmony, reconciliation, and *ubuntu*.

Their saying “Goodbye” sounds like the prelude to future and happier encounters, since “I knew in my heart this man was going to lead my country and I bowed my head slightly and said, ‘Thank you, sir’” (488). Hence the exchange of the ANC clenched-fist salute, which for Gregory is also a symbolic gesture projecting him *backwards* into his boyhood, with “the layers of prejudice and hatred” being stunningly “peeled back” (340). This gesture contributes to heal old wounds of separation and allows him to imaginatively return full circle to the idyllic world of Ongemak, the ancestral family farm, the “home where the troubles of the outside world never penetrated” (19), in “a part of Natal that the concept of apartheid never seemed to reach” (24).

It was there that he had met the eponymous Bafana, a Zulu boy from one of the kraals who would be his bosom friend and playmate for a few years, helping him to become familiar with native customs and beliefs and reach fluency in the African idiom. Bafana saved his life from a snake-bite (50-52) and led him to dispel any creepy feeling about skin colour: “I was considered one of them, a white Zulu. Whenever we went to a kraal we were greeted and in return I would greet the inhabitants of the kraal with respect” (35).

While the second and bigger farm they would move to, near the Swaziland border, was bought by Gregory’s father, Ongemak had been in their family for many generations. Not ‘stolen’ from anybody, it was probably donated to one of Gregory’s ancestors by King Mpande – a half-brother of Shaka, the nineteenth-century notorious Zulu monarch – as a reward for his help during the fights against despotic Dingaan (Dingane), another half-brother of Shaka and Zulu king of Natal, deposed by Mpande himself in 1840.¹² The latter’s renown as a peaceful ruler and ally of the Voortrekkers adds a further layer to the motif of inter-ethnic cooperation and to Gregory’s instinctual acceptance of “blacks as equals” (340): as an

enlarged family with whom he, as a boy, even felt more at home than with his biological parents, here portrayed as cold or untrustworthy.

Ongemak might thus be seen as the emblem of a regrettably silenced Covenant, a non-aggression pact involving both black and white tribes, as opposed to the celebrated nineteenth-century Covenant, namely the Voortrekkers' vow of enduring loyalty and thanksgiving to a 'white' God who would protect them from black savagery.¹³ This farm had provided a virtually pre-colonial scenario for the intercultural dialogue of the "white Zulu" with a wild natural environment and 'primitive' traditions, such as using *knobkerries* and *assegais*, or following a *sangoma's* prescription for medications (Chapters 2-4). Some additional references to Gregory's maternal grandparents from another Natal farm, where Shaka's family had a kraal (22), further undermine any puristic assumption regarding phylogenetic apartness. Yet, if the past communion with the Zulu families living on Ongemak bore the marks of a utopian, prelapsarian condition, Gregory's early adolescence carried with it a painful passage from innocence to experience. It represented the first real stage of enclosure within the white enclave, a period of bewildered loneliness which was only temporarily relieved by his friendship with Dali, a black boy working in their new farmhouse.

A few decades later, Gregory's adult tie with Mandela, a 'present-day Bafana,'¹⁴ would both be firmly rooted in the postlapsarian wasteland of apartheid and powerfully announce a new age of communal rebirth. In this sense, the last passage of the memoir strikes a deeply responsive chord, as the vicious circle of separateness is replaced by the virtuous one of mutual recognition and brotherhood:

As the car passed, my mind returned to my boyhood and to the farm where I had played with Bafana all those years ago. I never had a chance to say goodbye to him. Now as my friend was leaving, my heart and mind were filled with a vision of Bafana.

No one heard me, and even if they had, they wouldn't have understood. As Nelson stepped from his car, his hand holding Winnie's, the crowd roared, the man of the people was freed. I said two words: "Goodbye Bafana." (489)¹⁵

Regarded in this light, the postcolonial self of the Afrikaner warder, getting closer and closer to Madiba's horizon – so much so that he learnt to decipher the different expressions on the prisoner's face, from the reassuring smile to the distraught frown and tight lines around the mouth –

does not contradict what Mandela himself said in *Long Walk to Freedom*. There the officer had been depicted as “a welcome contrast to the typical warder. He was polished and soft-spoken, and treated Winnie with courtesy and deference” (614). Mandela added that “our bond was an unspoken one and I would miss his soothing presence” (672). In various sections of the 1995 book that refined, polite, and more sensitive side of Gregory comes into view.

If sometimes elaborating history into a moving story, this memoir also should be cited among the contributions which have enhanced the mythography of a moral hero and global icon, providing “living proof of Mandela’s ideas about our essential goodness and the human capacity for self-transformation” (Bille August qtd. in Stephenson 1). One might also bear in mind Nixon’s observation on Mandela’s Messianic aura and the role of the Exodus narrative and redemption myths in the African and Afrikaner social imaginary:

The week before Mandela’s release, an unnamed Afrikaner told Ted Koppel on “Nightline”: “We need a Messiah to lead us out of the wilderness. Maybe Nelson Mandela is that man.” In the object of his admiration, this may be startling iconoclasm for an Afrikaner, but we should recognize the deep traditionalism in the cast of thought. During the countdown to February 11, “Waiting for Mandela” became a routine headline, reinforcing a very South African preoccupation with imminent time. In their distinctive ways, the nation’s black and white cultures seek obsessively to command the future through metaphors of dawn, birth, revolutionary redemption, or apocalypse and historical closure. (47)

Out of a phase of systematic “Antichristing” (Nixon 49) and accusations of Russophilism by the white minority rulers, Mandela would be hailed as the prime agent of liberation and a harbinger of reconciliation. For his part, the leader from the Thembu royal house always played down self-glorification and the cult of personality in favour of a ‘servant-of-the-people’ ideal, of mass action and a commitment to the claims for justice and equality. All in all, Gregory’s fashioning a postapartheid identity and bridging a dreadful chasm in the epoch-making context of decolonization operate in tandem with this discourse, bent on nurturing the 1990s’ national allegory and shedding lustre on South Africa’s native liberator. By coming to terms with the European Fathers’ ‘original sin,’ washing away rancorous feelings and releasing the mental straitjackets of racial discrimination in his memoir, Gregory (with Graham’s help) did promote solidarity and a

sense of community belonging. In doing so, he laid the groundwork for his own little miracle of healing and rebirth, even before the TRC's cathartic apparatus was set in motion.

When tempted to see this gesture as an index of opportunistic self-reinvention, a political U-turn in the new dispensation, we ought to remember that the very dispensation we speak of was also the outcome of a "negotiated compromise" (Guy 68).¹⁶ In a cautionary formulation by Attwell and Harlow, "ambiguity seems to be the distinguishing feature of a transitional South Africa. The country's moment is one in which endings and inaugurations compete simultaneously for recognitions, and these agendas cannot always be kept separate" (3). With hindsight, it could be argued that two kinds of ambiguity emerge when weighing up 'transition' in South Africa. The picture shades into a negative one when transition is seen as a long-term compromise which eventually goes beyond the Rainbow Nation ethos – working together to reach the goal of unity (justice, democratic parity) within ethnic difference – and acquires elitist, asymmetrical traits, conforming to the agenda of the groups who hold political and economic power. In the last few years, a growing number of critical histories of South Africa (e.g., Bond; Jacklin and Vale; Welsh) have offered lucid examinations of the demise of apartheid and its troubled aftermath to date. Attention has been extensively drawn to how the multiparty negotiation process and, later, the newborn body politic were not exempt from contradictions, stalemate, and internal opposition (e.g., by the Inkatha Freedom Party, the Azanian People's Organization and conservative white fringes, but also between F.W. de Klerk's National Party and the ANC, the two main coalitions which made reconciliation and a government of national unity possible). Surmounting the obstacles of mass violence, cleavages, and economic stagnation was perceived as such a tall order that, just one year before the democratization process officially started in 1994, people felt it "difficult to predict" if the "country's transition away from apartheid will produce a stable democracy" (Friedman 56).

On the other hand, this painfully 'reluctant' transition coexisted with a shorter-term one which, climaxing in 1994, proved to be a positive middle ground for totally rethinking 'race' and avoiding civil war. Here is where a seminal kind of ambiguity is to be found: a breaking down of borders and a syncretic combination of ideas, projects, and purposes kept together by the energy of social transformation. Gregory's book belongs exactly to this momentous phase of committed cooperation, when nonracialism and

multiculturalism – Mandela being a Xhosa, Bafana a Zulu, and Gregory himself an Afrikaner of mixed European descent – seemed to be a dream finally come true. Turning now full circle, and borrowing Krog’s words quoted in the epigraph, we can persuasively contend that Gregory’s representation of Mandela is worth surviving.



- 1 When searching for critically tenable approaches, I came across Pirro, who, though never discussing the merits of Gregory's account, draws on it as a reliable source and introduces him as the "jailer who, for many years, personally oversaw the conditions of Mandela's incarceration" (86). Dick took the warrant officer's statements on trust, too, in connection with censorship regulations in South African penal institutions: "Some officials took a different approach, and Robben Island censor officer James Gregory, for example, became convinced that censorship laws were harsh and wrong. He argued with other censor officers, and the system of censorship of letters and newspapers on Robben Island was gradually relaxed" ("Blood" 8). More recently, however, he added a proviso: "Personal accounts of the apartheid-era by prison and censor officials should be treated circumspectly, though, as the recent controversy surrounding the veracity of Gregory's book cautions" ("Remembering" 195). In her book on the survival and resistance strategies of Robben Island prisoners, Buntman also wonders whether Gregory "is being sensationalist in his claim that warders were instructed to single out Mandela for bad treatment. Most prisoner accounts point out that the prisoners in the general sections were treated far worse than those in the leadership sections" (197).
- 2 For further commentary, see also Ramakuela.
- 3 A shorter version of this paper was presented at a conference organized by the Centre for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies, University of Kent, UK ("Subverting the State: The Postcolonial Predicament," 22 May 2015).
- 4 On the other hand, this 'treasure house' of information might be read as a (cautionary) political counter-response to the popular appeal of *Goodbye Bafana*. In a 2011 article which focused on the issue of Madiba's legacy and on the measures adopted by his family and advisors to protect his name against fraudulent use, Butcher argued that there are grounds for supporting this interpretation: "[W]hen one of those guards, James Gregory, wrote a book about his experience, [...] he was accused of fabricating a close relationship with Mr Mandela for personal gain [...] recently the Nelson Mandela Foundation commissioned a South African author, Mike Nicol, to put 'the record straight.' The resulting document, 'Nelson Mandela's

Warders,' now sits on the foundation's website, more prominently displayed than the 'Fraudulent Activity' page but speaking, none the less, to the same desire to protect what might be called the Mandela brand."

- 5 The following passage from Gallagher's study aptly throws light on this component: "For many years, South Africa had one of the strongest civil religions of any twentieth-century nation. Under National Party rule, it was a self-proclaimed 'Christian' country in which religion and politics were inextricably intertwined. The most powerful and influential denomination in South Africa, with some 1.5 million white members, was the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk (the Dutch Reformed Church, or DRC), sardonically known as 'the National Party at Prayer.' The DRC played a crucial role in the development of the Siamese twins of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid. The Afrikaners who founded the National Party saw themselves as the Chosen People, a 'new Israel,' expressly selected to advance the cause of Christian civilization [...]. Identity was at the heart of this system, as Afrikaners created clear binary categories of 'us' and 'them,' the elect and the reprobate, the Chosen and the Other" (37-38).
- 6 See Gregory's sad memories of his school days, the disappointments and difficulties linked to the prison service, his son's premature death in a car crash, and the telephonic death threats in the last years of Mandela's imprisonment.
- 7 On the theme of indoctrination, see in particular Chapter 8, "The School that Taught me to Hate," 81-97, where Gregory expands on "the daily pumping of propaganda" (86) and adds that "[w]ithout knowing it, my life had been moulded, unmoulded and remoulded. It was a chipping, chipping, chipping process which eventually led me to being as bad as the rest of them, turning into a teenager who had the same racist beliefs as my fellow whites" (88). As in other reminiscences by white South Africans, school experience is perceived as a first demarcation line between ethnic interconnection and racial separateness. In those times, it was at school, too, that white pupils used to further split up into National Party supporters and United Party sympathizers and were often involved in bullying. From the first boarding-school in Vryheid to Ermelo High School in Transvaal, Gregory evokes his education and training in terms of constraint and moral subjugation, against which he reacted through sullen resistance and fighting. Hence his bad reputation as a "trouble-maker," an expression that beckons to "Rolihlahla," Mandela's first name, conveying the same meaning in Xhosa. What is also worth noting is a prophetic statement by Bafana, the Zulu boy from the Ongemak farm: "You are being kept prisoner just like the bull and one day you will break out" (62). Even Gregory's English-sounding (actually Scottish) surname had aroused anti-British suspicions among his most hot-tempered schoolfellows.

- 8 See for instance, in Chapter 1, “My First Meeting with Nelson Mandela,” 7-18, Gregory’s typical lashing out at the liberals and proud defiance of the international economic sanctions imposed on South Africa: “This [Mandela] was the bastard who was responsible for the turmoil dividing my country, for stoking up all its anger and bitterness, and for causing us to become the pariahs of the entire civilised world. He was the one who had turned the world against us. The lies he and his kind told to try to get sympathy from the soft bleeding-heart liberals, always looking for a cause to latch on to, making out that we were the ones to blame. They had imposed sanctions against us, trying to starve us into submission. But what had they deprived us of? Big Macs and rust-bucket Peugeots and little else because we found ways around their stupid rules. What did foreigners know anyway? They’d never understood us in the first place” (9).
- 9 After taking up a post as a clerk at the Department of Justice in Cape Town and passing a few university exams, Gregory worked as a traffic policeman in Claremont and Worcester and became a prison guard in 1966. He served for many years on Robben Island and, in 1976, was transferred to the mainland, although he would continue to handle the Island mail and supervise visits there. The other two destinations connecting him with Mandela and ANC leaders were: Pollsmoor Prison (1982-88), on the outskirts of Cape Town, where conditions improved and some restrictions were lifted (inmates were allowed to read, watch films, play tennis, tend a garden, and there was a relaxation on censorship rules, too); Victor Verster (1988-90), near Paarl, in the Western Cape (now Drakenstein Correctional Centre), where Mandela was given a cottage with a garden and a swimming-pool, surrounded by walls and a wire fence.
- 10 Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that his first-hand knowledge of the Freedom Charter – a banned document in the 1960s – is probably one of the concocted details scattered in the text. The Freedom Charter was a statement of democratic principles approved by the South African Congress Alliance and inspired by the ideals of equal rights, wealth-sharing, and land reform in a non-racial South Africa. It was officially adopted in June 1955 at a Congress of the People in Kliptown, Soweto, and henceforth endorsed by the ANC.
- 11 See in particular the episode in Chapter 30, “Death Threats,” 423-24, in which a drunken Major van der Westhuizen is said to have verbally assaulted Gregory in the warders’ club at Victor Verster. On the whole, Afrikaner warders and officers are represented in negative terms, as either slaves of prejudice and dull executors of orders, or mean, irascible men, often affected by alcoholism. They were the “adult equivalent” of the bullies at school (199).
- 12 Dingane’s name is associated with a crucial episode in the Great Trek history. In retaliation for his murder of Boer pioneer Piet Retief and hundreds

of Voortrekkers, the African ruler was attacked and defeated by a punitive commando led by Andries Pretorius, another Founding Father of the white nation. One of Gregory's ancestors, this time from his mother's Dutch side of the family, was apparently among the survivors of the Voortrekkers' massacre. Pretorius's feat became known as the Battle of Blood River (16 December 1838), during which about five hundred Boers managed to ward off thousands of Zulus near the Ncome River in Natal. Before the battle, the Voortrekkers had made a covenant with God: in case they should win, they would build a church of thanksgiving and celebrate that day of triumph as a national holy day in the years to follow, and so it happened (see the Afrikaner commemoration of the "Day of the Covenant," now "Day of Reconciliation"). In Gregory's words: "Not one Boer life was lost that day and the conviction was born among these settlers that they had entered into a covenant with God, just as He had with Moses and the Israelites. It was a belief that everything they were to do, every course they were to follow, every choice they made, was to be with His blessing. It was the birth of a theocracy that was to have terrible ramifications in the generations to follow" (22). In 1840 the allied forces of Mpande and Pretorius dethroned Dingane, and Mpande was proclaimed the new Zulu king, the harbinger of a more peaceful reign.

13 See previous note.

14 The idea of Bafana as an allegorical prefiguration of Mandela is reinforced by the following passage relating to the 1980s at Pollsmoor: "Nelson was intrigued by my friendship with Bafana and listened intently to my tales of adventure with my childhood friend. He spoke softly. 'I knew in my heart you must have had that type of background; there is no bitterness within you to the black man or any other colour. I have watched you carefully and you treat everyone as equal.' I nodded and said, 'In many ways you have become as close to me as Bafana, that's how I view you. Over these past years I have grown to feel as much for you as I did for him'" (274). See also this excerpt: "Nelson spoke with great detail and affection of his younger days [...]. I listened, fascinated by his past, comparing it constantly with my own; how he was so like Bafana" (359).

15 The greeting paradigm brings the Bafana-Mandela dyad into focus in more than one sense, because the utterance "Goodbye Bafana" also harks back to "I see you," the Zulu friendly salute which Gregory had instinctively resorted to when first meeting the ANC leader on Robben Island.

16 As a resistance movement leader and ANC symbol par excellence, Mandela himself had been one of the main actors throughout the 1980s' 'secret talks' with the government and the complex negotiation process in the 1990s. Gregory gives a fair amount of space to this common ground for talks

being prepared in view of the country's democratic transition. He mentions Mandela's contacts or meetings with the ANC High Organ and such crucial figures as P.W. Botha, F.W. de Klerk, Helen Suzman, Kobie Coetsee, and Cyril Ramaphosa. See Chapters 22-33.



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