MANDELA, MESSIANISM, AND THE MEDIA

For some, Mandela may be a figure in a biblical redemption story.

Rob Nixon

From the outset, the South African state seemed to fear that Mandela possessed a talent for immortality. On trial for sabotage in 1964, and clearly aimed toward the gallows, Mandela had, through the force of his own defense, turned accuser into accused and successfully skipped the grave. The state countered by treating him as someone who threatened to become not just larger, but longer than life. The prison identity card pinned, until recently, to his person read: “Nelson Mandela. Crime—sabotage. Sentence—life plus five years,” as if those posthumous five years, like the stone rolled against the gospel tomb, could secure apartheid against the prospect of his resurrection.

Mandela first won his reputation for uncanny powers of survival in 1961, when he vanished from public life and taunted the state by organizing bold underground actions. He traveled inside South Africa disguised as a chauffeur and popped up abroad under the name David Motsamayi on an Ethiopian passport granted him by Emperor Haile Selassie. For his elusiveness, the press dubbed Mandela the Black Pimpernel. After seventeen months underground, however, he was finally captured and put on trial.

At this time, I was a child growing up in Port Elizabeth, a coastal South African city and an ANC stronghold. I recall how within days of Mandela’s arrest, the walls of the public library, government offices, and township shacks were daubed with the words FREE MANDELA, the first signs of what would become, across the globe, the most durable of political graffiti. Nearly three decades later, on 11 February 1990, the world’s newspapers would reverse that slogan in a gesture of momentous simplicity: MANDELA FREE.

Nadine Gordimer once observed of Mandela that “his people have never revered him as a figure of the past, but as the personification of the future.” His relation to time, however, is more ambiguous than that. Between 1964 and 1990 he was absented from the political present, yet remained a preeminent inhabitant of South Africa’s past and
future. He lived on the cusp of time, embodying a people’s hope, yet monumentalized on a scale ordinarily reserved for the dead.

During his 271/2 years of imprisoned fame, Mandela accrued a reputation of near-Messianic dimensions. There are several reasons for this: the redoubtable convictions of the man himself; the scale and inventiveness of the international tributes enacted in his name; the peculiar progress of his relation to the media; and the sweeping power, in South African history, of the idiom and psychology of redemptive politics—deliverance from bondage, covenants, chosen people, divine election, promised lands, eschatologies, chiliiasm, and apocalypse.

If these conditions have indeed generated a redemptive vision of Mandela, it is cardinaly important to keep in view his efforts to repudiate the idolatry that accompanies Messianic politics and can ultimately invite autocracy. From the instant of his release, Mandela has striven to dismantle the cult of personality constructed by the media and to subordinate his prestige to that of the ANC. We should concern ourselves therefore both with the cultural production of the Messianic Mandela and with the limitations of redemptive politics.

By the time he gained his liberty, Mandela had acquired an almost posthumous eminence. In 1973, when nuclear physicists...
University of Leeds, they christened their discovery the Mandela Particle. In Lagos last December, a Sudanese and a Nigerian club tussled in the final of Africa’s premier soccer competition, the Nelson Mandela Cup. When Roxbury and other mainly African-American neighborhoods sought to secede from Boston, the proposed breakaway city was to have been known as Mandela. On the occasion of his seventieth birthday two years ago, 170,000 letters and cards poured in from the Netherlands alone.

Expelled as an undergraduate from South Africa’s Fort Hare College for mounting a student protest, Mandela has since assembled, as if in fabulous compensation, honorary degrees from universities in New York, Lesotho, Havana, Zimbabwe, Brussels, Michigan, and Lancaster, and human rights awards from India, Venezuela, Malaysia, Austria, the GDR, West Germany, Spain, Libya, Sweden, and the NAACP.

While locked up and disenfranchised in his native land, he acquired keys and honorary citizenship in Florence, Sydney, Islwyn, Glasgow, Rome, Olympia, Wijnegem, Aberdeen and myriad other places. Mandela statues have sprung up around the world. By the time he left prison, the man had become a monumental leader in more than the usual dead metaphoric sense.

The protracted Rivonia trial of 1963–64, which saw nine ANC leaders sentenced to life for “sabotage,” enabled black South Africans to stage their grievances under the spotlights of the international press. The pitch of the world outcry took the Verwoerd government by surprise; the New York Times, for instance, hailed Mandela and his fellow accused as the new George Washingtons and Ben Franklins. Mandela’s jailers assumed that if media visibility opened the door to fame, invisibility would shut it. So they decreed that the man’s words, as well as photos and even sketches of him, be whitened out. Having acted against the past, they sought to shut down the future, hiding him (for life plus five years) from all cameras and keeping him mute, confident that he would wither from public memory.

Instead, the South African authorities had guaranteed the kind of scarcity that provokes media fascination by setting up a gigantic photo opportunity in reverse. Mandela became an off-camera phenomenon, and his silence grew more eloquent than words. By January 1990, international agencies were offering $300,000 for the first shots of him. At that very moment, Mandela, chuckling to himself, found he could saunter anonymously past the rows of zealous photographers who scanned the prison gardens for a long-gone man bearing his name. Once his guards took him shopping in the malls of Cape Town, a city pulsating with rumors of his release, yet he proved as invisible as Bruno of Ganz on his angelic tour of Berlin in Wim Wenders’ Wings of Desire.

So the South African state helped station the idea of Nelson Mandela on the threshold between the dead and the living, between commemoration and expectation. They also unwittingly sheltered his image from the erosions of time and di-
versity. The ban on photographing Mandela allowed the same few images to keep circulating in a heraldic fashion perfect for the needs of an international political movement. By the late seventies, the image of Mandela on Robben Island had become such a unifying resource for apartheid’s opponents that the regime sought to disencumber itself of its burdensome captive. The state’s efforts to wash its hands of Mandela took place in the conditional: if he agreed to live abroad, they would

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release him . . . if he renounced violence . . . if he retired to a Bantustan . . . if they could swap him for two Soviet dissidents. Mandela waited. He foresaw that his unconditional moment would arrive. He must have gathered strength from knowing that the patience of captivity—quarrying stone, sewing mailbags, harvesting seaweed, shadowboxing with solitary time—was slowly turning into the patience of power.

A few days before Mandela’s fifty-yard walk to freedom, President de Klerk issued the first recent photograph of the prisoner. He was conspicuously not alone but stood alongside the South African president—a last-ditch effort at image control that only succeeded in making de Klerk appear a provisional custodian beside the country’s de facto leader.

In the myriad American interviews during those first weeks of freedom, Rather, Koppel, Brokaw, Donahue, and all the others could not decide whether Mandela was more intriguing as a maker or a misser of history. His bearing, his diction warped time. He would pluck carefully at the creases of his trousers before taking his seat; “Quite so,” was his standard form of agreement. Asked what films he watched, he spoke movingly of Carmen Miranda and Cesar Romero as if their movies had premiered last Saturday at the Odeon.

Here was an international media colossus who, by 1990 and age 71, had given just one TV interview. Of the same vintage as Reagan, he emerged as a Great Communicator of the opposite sort—a statesman, not a media bite; stirring, in demeanor and rhetoric, memories of the high era of anticolonialism, of the early Nkrumah and Kenyatta, of Nyerere, Nasser, Gandhi, Nehru, and King. His social manner brought together, in disarming union, the militancy of the populist hero with the civility of his mission school training. He proved brilliantly informed about world events, if evidently ignorant of the Reaganite dicta that facts impede communication and that one should meet a media question with a media answer, never with a conviction backed by ideas. Mandela spoke thoughtfully, unashamed of the pauses, the silences, that escort reflection. All this had the effect of reintroducing him to the world as someone who had jumped boldly across history instead of living through it, giving him a disconnected, postmodern, time-machine aura.
There had been an American twist to Mandela’s capture twenty-seven years, six months, and six days before his release: a CIA agent had apparently alerted the South Africans as to the whereabouts of their most wanted fugitive. There was an American involvement of a different sort in the days leading up to 4:16 P.M., Sunday, February 11, for the networks were out in force. If the individual, spectacular image of Mandela walking free threatened to usurp the gains of less telegenic collective processes of social transformation, the American coverage of the occasion sometimes jostled to make itself the primary story.

During the countdown to the release, ABC promoted Ted Koppel’s series from Johannesburg as “Nightline Makes History”—a description not without its possibilities, but, coming from ABC’s mouth, little more than an ambush on “We need a Messiah to lead us out of the wilderness,” an unnamed Afrikaner told Ted Koppel. “Maybe Mandela is that man” historical agency. The Koppel series culminated in a “Town Hall Meeting” which brought together a spectrum of leading South Africans ranging from the far right Conservative party’s Koos van der Merwe and the Nationalists’ Stoffel van der Merwe to Helen Suzman (doynne of white parliamentary liberalism), a representative of Inkatha’s young wing, the UDF’s Allan Boesak, and, beamed in by satellite from Lusaka, the ANC’s Thabo Mbeki. Koppel allowed the first hour to become wholly dominated by banter and polite needling between himself and the two van der Merwes. It was only during the second half, broadcast between 12:30 and 1:30 A.M. Eastern time (by which hour many viewers would have switched off), that probing questions from the audience finally put the Nationalist regime’s representative on the spot. That initial showdown between the Far Right and the right-wing government might have been choreographed by President de Klerk himself, so perfectly did it accord with his efforts to abandon the growling, finger-wagging, menacing public demeanors of his two predecessors, P. W. (Crocodile) Botha and John Vorster, in favor of a policy of conscientious charm. Alongside the uncompromising Koos (who, after a protracted bout of circusry, left for breakfast to protest the ANC presence on the program), the Nationalist van der Merwe was able to project himself as a beacon of reasonableness and moderation. This new readiness of the Nationalist leaders to jettison the body language of “total onslaught,” as they strove instead to mimic the media manners of American politicians, exerted extra pressure on the emergent Mandela. For Koppel’s Town Hall Meeting and allied coverage enabled the regime to showcase itself as fairly bursting with liberalish goodwill, asking for little more than the ANC’s renunciation of violence and a bill of minority rights, recognizable American-style issues, which,
of course, figure quite differently in the two societies.

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. For confirmation, one has only to scan the

It is a psychopolitical climate that nurtures Messianism. The Exodus narrative and its New Testament analogues have a hold on the imaginings of Afrikaans and African nationalism alike. We are talking about a society in which a former ANC president, Albert Luthuli, could call his autobiography Let My People Go and an influential Afrikaans novel bears the title Gelofte Land—Promised Land.

A few years back, in the pages of Grand Street, Edward Said offered a Canaanite reading of Michael Walzer’s Exodus and Revolution. Where Walzer gleaned from Exodus an uplifting narrative of radical hope, Said found a more tormented story entangled in conquest, exclusion, national self-righteousness, and what he called “moral triumphalism.” Relations between apartheid and Exodus bear out Said’s skepticism. Afrikaners became decisively invested in Exodus politics with the Great Trek inland that began in the 1830s: they fled the British (aka Egyptian) tyrants, roamed the wilderness, and signed a divine covenant that brought them victory over the Zulu Canaanites. To press the contradictions, one need only recall that this trek to freedom was spurred by Afrikaans outrage at the British abolition, in 1833, of slavery.

The principal exegetical tension between South African readings of the biblical redemption myths lies in the sense, widespread among Afrikaners, that their deliverance occurred in the past, while blacks have invested the same story lines with a future force. If, for most South Africans, the sight of Mandela gaining his liberty flung open the gates of the future, the same event prompted far-right-wingers to gather in Pretoria’s Church Square and lament a betrayal of history. In their midst, they placed a small white coffin (for the Afrikaans children killed in the civil war). They draped the coffin in a neo-Nazi flag, then scattered, on top, thirty pieces of silver.

The black nationalist rendition of the Exodus story is more accommodating of democratic aspirations. Revived in recent years by Desmond Tutu among others, it stresses how Moses will triumph over pharaoh and free blacks from the yoke of slavery, foregrounding liberation while avoiding the bigotry of divine election. Nor is this version populated with Canaanites waiting to be vanquished. However, even this more benign application of the redemption myth builds on a disturbing prototype for nationalist leadership: that of the autocratic, solitary, prophetic figure who commands from on high, in short, precisely the kind of one-
nation, one-leader model that Mandela has cited as a hindrance to democracy.

The allure of redemption myths in situations of advanced tyranny has been heightened in South Africa by the ruling Nationalists’ relentless Antichristing of the Mandela name and the ANC. He was, they broadcasted, a “known” terrorist and a minion of the godless Muscovites. At one point, the Special Branch burst into the house of his wife, Winnie, to arrest a bedspread quilted in the ANC’s black, green, and gold. As recently as 1985, foreign minister Pik Botha (who is now featured on American TV as the telegenic face of the Nationalist regime) explained that his government continued to detain Mandela for the very reason that the Allied powers held Rudolf Hess. The Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka, for one, drew inspiration from Botha’s remark. A poem in his volume Mandela’s Earth opens this way:

Got you! Trust the Israelis
I bet they flushed him out, raced him down
From Auschwitz to Durban, and Robben Island.
Mandela?
It’s he! Nazi superman in sneaky blackface!

The major document of ANC principles, the 1955 Freedom Charter, declares that “our struggle is a struggle of memory against forgetting.” All these years, Mandela had been the trump card for the forces of remembrance. For the ANC, his reemergence was to be an exhilarating yet testing moment. The unbanning of the organization on February 2 and the release of Sisulu et al. had produced a convergence of three branches of leadership with quite dissimilar experience and credentials: the

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exiled members (headed by Oliver Tambo), the ex-prisoners, and the leaders of sympathetic organizations prominent in the internal struggle, especially the United Democratic Front, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, and the Mass Democratic Movement. Matters might be further complicated by the ANC’s ideological inclusiveness: it is a coalition embracing African nationalists, socialists, communists, and social democrats. Clearly, in releasing Mandela, the govern-ment sought, among other things, to try the ANC’s community of purpose.

At that point, Mandela’s legendary re-pute remained the ANC’s best resource. Yet if, after February 11, the cult of personality grew unchecked, it might equally turn into a liability. Ironically, Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth offers the best gloss on the dangers of Mandelamania. (The book first appeared in 1961, just
months before Mandela would embark on his clandestine tour of newly and imminently independent African nations, where he was hosted by Ben Bella, Senghor, Kaunda, Nyerere, Selassie, and Nkrumah, among others.) Fanon saw with great prescience the pitfalls of emblematic leadership in Africa’s postcolonial era. He observed how under white domination the people had internalized an impoverished sense of their own potential. By investing hope and power in a single exceptional figure, a postcolonial order risked not only erecting an autocratic future, but extending, among the general populace, the stagnant attitude that they were bereft of political influence. The fledgling state ought rather, Fanon averred, to convince its citizens “that there is no such thing as a demiurge, that there is no famous man who will take the responsibility for everything, but that the demiurge is the people themselves and the magic hands are finally only the hands of the people.”

During Mandela’s first public speech, before a Cape Town crowd of perhaps 100,000, it became evident that he, better than anyone, intuited the strategic necessity of deconsecrating himself. To do so would help reaffirm his democratic commitments and check the surging expectations coming from an impatient, overextended people. However, in forswearing demiurgic powers, Mandela had nonetheless to preserve enough prominence to keep South Africa in the media’s eye and to maintain pressure on de Klerk, who clearly hoped the prisoner’s mystique would tarnish in the open air. Mandela’s first speech, therefore, would be a delicate affair to manage.

For the international media, February 11 developed into a day of waiting. Mandela’s emergence from Victor Verster Prison had been delayed an hour-and-a-quarter, and he arrived several hours late for the speech on Cape Town’s Grand Parade. These expanses of waiting tried the readiness of TV commentators—both South African and American in their distinctive ways—to transcend their unease about the ANC. South Africa’s state-controlled network, accustomed to the certainties of stiff censorship, betrayed some initial difficulty feeling out the limits to its suddenly expanded license. The quandary of SATV’s commentator was unenviable: he had to ensure that the event of Mandela’s release redounded to the government’s credit, while avoiding direct reflection on the person of Mandela, his qualities, or the injustice of his suffering. At one point, not fully able to keep the superlatives at bay, he resorted to praising Victor Verster as “the most beautiful prison in the world”—a serious case of displaced eulogy. Nonetheless, SATV coverage inadvertently paid homage to Mandela’s stubborn foresight when it had a
young anchorman, one Hendrik Verwoerd, break the news of his release. Twenty-six years earlier another Hendrik Verwoerd, the anchor’s grandfather and the mastermind of apartheid, had vilified Mandela as a bloodthirsty communist and secured his imprisonment.

During the same drawn-out wait on the Parade, one American channel’s commentary team flew the colors of a distinctively national paranoia. To fill in the hours, they had been discussing activities on the City Hall balcony, which was to be Mandela’s podium and from whence the anti-apartheid clerics, Rev. Frank Chicane and Rev. Allan Boesak, had been urging patience on a sweltering, raucous crowd. At one point, the consolingly familiar figure of Boesak descended into the gathering to persist in his efforts; in his absence, a group unrecognizable to the Americans ascended to the balcony and proceeded to bedeck it in a South African Communist Party flag. Panic broke out in the commentary box. To judge from the blur of eruptions—like “This is getting out of control, the balcony has been taken over by the radicals”—the quite predictable prominence of the SACP had startled the commentators, who sounded persuaded that a godless Red coup had intervened between the disappearance of Boesak and Mandela’s arrival. Only when it became apparent that this was merely one among an array of symbolic gestures did the commentators repair their damaged equanimity and continue the job of rendering events accessible to their American viewers.

When Mandela finally arrived, the occasion turned into an oddly unmediated, un-American political event. Rather than using the crowd as a decoy for an address, via satellite, to the world, Mandela appeared indifferent to the cameras while speaking directly to those bodily present, as if spellbound, just hours out of solitude, by such physical evidence of his reunion with the mass of humanity. His oratorical style and the crowd’s spirit brought to mind a rally from a pretech era. Mandela’s public manner had been shaped by the live politics of the fifties, two decades before South Africa got television, and in an era when his prodemocracy speeches were too radical for the state-run radio. If their leader seemed above the pressures of media packaging, a sizable proportion of his audience, even in 1990, would not have possessed TVs. And the minority who did would have mistrusted its fierce censorship of the news.

Mandela launched his first live speech in almost three decades by taking direct issue with the redemptive conception of him. “I stand before you,” he declared, “not as a prophet, but as a humble servant of you, the people.” In casting off the lonely mantle of the prophet, he democratized responsibility for the future and subordinated his powers to popular au-
thority. For much of that benchmark speech he was at pains to remind his audience that he was not an elected leader of the ANC and that, in any case, only “disciplined mass action,” not individual genius, could assume the task of unifying the country. It is typical of the man that his appeal for collective responsibility harmonized the idiom of parliamentary democracy with the more radical register of Comrade Mandela, “loyal and disciplined member of the African National Congress,” as he repeatedly portrayed himself.

But the surest index of his deference to grass-roots power was edited out of the press transcripts the next day. Early in his speech, Mandela launched into a roll of honor, commending by name the many organizations—women’s groups, trade unions, community groups, guerrilla wings, popular fronts, the alternative press, anticonscription organizations and so forth—that had brought the struggle to his pass. Few of them were known out—

“Dignified” became, on the American networks, the most overtaxed adjective—as if they’d been expecting Idi Amin side South Africa. It was a very African moment—full of the measured salutations and respect that reanimate community belonging. If the litany of thanks made for opaque international TV, it was a moment of constructive parochialism, a vital move toward promoting an alternative to the one-nation, one-leader brand of Messianic politics. In those ten minutes of greetings, Mandela walked away from the media trope of him as a one-man shadow government running the show from his fax machine in Victor Verster.

Any prisoner fashioned into marble and granite must face, on release, the excessive strain of reconciling the epic self with the person who reenters public life. Yet this could not, in Mandela’s case, involve a pristine transition from public myth to private man. In the glare of the media, control over his identity would remain contested ground. “Dignified” became, on the American networks, the most overtaxed and abused adjective of the week. Some of it can be put down to sigh-of-relief syndrome (no revolutionary fangs were showing). The rest arises, in a twisted kind of way, from racial bigotry. Would reporters have fussed with such boundless amazement over the dignity of a European or American politician—Mitterrand, say, or Bush—as if they had been expecting, all along, Idi Amin to come crashing in?

Mandela’s American interviewers clung to the spectacle of his heroism as a martyr for the cause. Dan Rather: “What was the worst thing that happened to you in prison?”; “Did they beat you?”; “Real bad?”; “What was the best thing that happened to you in prison?” Koppel, less clunkily, but to similar effect, asked: “How does it feel to know you are one of the most admired men in the world?”

Mandela answered civilly, though sometimes with discomfort at the call to strut with talk-show egotism. More than humility was at stake. He comes from a society whose rulers have detained, over
the past five years, some 50,000 activists. Organization after organization has had its leadership skimmed. Under such conditions, to concentrate power, talent, and hope in a prestigious few was simply to invite beheading. Over the past five years, unions have grown faster in South Africa than anywhere on earth, and the recent successes of the Mass Democratic Movement and trade unions have depended on lateral styles of organization that allow resistance to regenerate itself, phoenixlike, ad infinitum. This tactic is not without South African precedent: in 1953 a beleaguered ANC adopted a proposal to regroup into a complex lattice of street-based cells. The strategy was code-named the M (for Mandela) Plan. It is thus consistent with the genesis of his democratic vision that Mandela would use his media prominence to augment the struggle, but recoil, on principle, from glamor politics, an ill-starred approach, if ever there was one, to the pursuit of democracy under apartheid.

Pretoriaestroika—the thawing of apartheid—has begun its by-now-irreversible course, but the process remains beset by traumatic uncertainties. Already, however, it is clear that many of the rhetorical verities of the struggle have come to feel the pressure of the expectation of power. While scarcely straightforward, the endlessly oppositional task of rendering the country ungovernable was less taxing than the current need to produce the kind of practical policy minutiae necessary for the ANC to govern. Its routine position on the nationalization of key mines and industries, for instance, has been subject to unprecedentedly animated debate over the need to redress inequality while reviving economic growth. As I write, the question of how to integrate the diverse command structures of the struggle—the exiled leaders, the Robben Islanders, key UDF and COSATU figures, and, most recently, Bantustan leaders who have converted to the ANC—remains remote from resolution. The team compiled by the ANC to enter the May “talks about talks” with the government was unevenly weighted: nine of its eleven delegates were over sixty years old. Its composition held little reassurance for the youth and trade unionists, constituencies widely yet guardedly supportive of the ANC and reluctant to see their militant legacies bartered cheaply away. The organization faces the unenviable task of weaving its way through the impacted language of resistance, negotiation, participation, compromise, collaboration, co-option, and plain selling out.

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Each term in this spectrum possesses its own bloody history. A resilient UDF slogan, after all, has been “Long Live the Spirit of No Compromise,” which the NC has sought of late to revise (without quite reversing) through its massive campaign of T-shirts and bumper stickers declaring “Negotiations Are Struggle.”
The risk remains that a gulf may widen between a spectacular sphere of media politics, where Mandela and de Klerk loom large, and an obscured Lilliputian realm of mass politics. As the euphoria of release dissipates and the loosening of oppression allows long-buried differences within anti-apartheid opposition to surface in debate and violent feuding, Mandela will be hard pressed to sustain his ascendancy as a national politician on a par with his global prestige as elder statesman. It is beyond dispute that, of the two, his internal authority will come under greater pressure as South Africa enters the tunnel at the end of the light.

Despite these threats, however, I would hesitate to join those purists who reduce the media concentration on Mandela to an unambiguous betrayal of grassroots social processes. Mandela’s planetary visibility continues to engage people who would otherwise struggle to identify with and involve themselves in a far-off, faceless cause, however estimable. For instance, the crucial call to the European parliament to preserve sanctions gathered unique credibility from having Mandela issue it in prison.

While Mandela’s tremendous media presence has cemented ANC support internationally, the congress’s considerable domestic authority may prove more difficult to stabilize, not least because any organization banned for three decades needs time to establish itself, root and branch, at the local level. Even here, Mandela’s prestige improves the chances of easing grim divisions, for the PAC and Inkatha, bitter rivals of the ANC, have both shown greater respect for the man than for the organization he represents. Apartheid’s success, however incomplete, in fostering a reactionary stripe of Zulu ethnonationalism has left a divisive force at least as fearful as the Afrikanar nationalism which helped nurture it in the first place. Indeed, the timing, tone, and outcome of Mandela’s rapprochement with Inkatha’s Buthelezi should prove his most nerve-wracking challenge, given the pitch of popular loathing that Buthelezi elicits, especially from the radical youth and unions, who have suffered most at his hands. In these matters, so much depends on how the ANC deploys the time which Mandela’s lingering allure has bought them. In the months immediately following the unbannings and his release, the organization too often seemed caught off guard, retreating into reactive or rhetorical stances, poor substitutes for new initiatives.

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The prospect remains that Mandela may be saddled with inhuman expectations which, being mortal in a deeply riven country, he cannot be asked to fulfill. There were shades of this in his effort, soon after his emergence, to stay the bloodshed in Natal—ranked this year as the most violent spot in the world. Man-
dela urged all parties to hurl their pangas into the sea. Nothing happened—a response that exposed the limitations of individual appeals, no matter how charismatic, unsupported by resourceful policies.

Winnie Mandela once recalled how living with Nelson she had to shelter her “extinct ego” from his towering authority: “You just fizzled into being his appendage, with no name and no individuality except Mandela’s; Mandela’s wife, Mandela’s child, Mandela’s niece.” As with Winnie so, too, in a sense, with the ANC, for whom appendage politics has sometimes proved a debilitating side effect of the net asset of Mandela’s gifted presence. Any organization wedded to one of the century’s most commanding figures risks vanishing behind the long shadow of his apostrophe.

The most remarkable development in South Africa during the past decade has been the deepening of the country’s traditions of radical democratic process through the organizing efforts of bodies supportive of the ANC: the UDF, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, and the Mass Democratic Movement. It is therefore quite wrongheaded to cast, as Conor Cruise O’Brien did recently, Mandela as a one-man Burkean buffer standing between the awfulness of the massing black Jacobins and the destruction of all prospects for democracy. O’Brien would have us believe that Mandela is hated and feared by the grass-roots Left, which is peopled by “instinctively totalitarian minds.” One need neither trivialize the difficulties of ushering in democracy nor deny the tinderbox atmosphere in South Africa to recognize O’Brien’s extravagant opposition between Mandela and the rank and file as profoundly false. More to the point is whether the returning ANC exiles build on or bypass—and thereby risk both squandering and frustrating—the structures of local democratic experience erected during the recent years of embattled resistance. Against conceptions of the postapartheid order as a prefabricated edifice to be imposed from above or crated in from abroad, such indigenous traditions remain the country’s principal, if vulnerable, resource of hope. With them, too, lies the hope that the antiapartheid resistance will gain fortitude and publicity from Mandela’s fame while warding off the alternative disposition, prevalent in the society and heightened by the media, toward visions of the man as South Africa’s anointed redeemer.