Remains of the Social

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Throughout June, July and August 2013, much of South Africa’s news media was preoccupied with the question of Nelson Mandela’s ailing health. Leaving aside for the time being the question of South Africa’s tendency to exhibit a type of media fixation on a single iconic person – the cases of Oscar Pistorius and Julius Malema are clear examples – my objective here will be to offer some speculative comments on the social and psychical significance of this period of uncertainty leading to Mandela’s death in late 2013. Considering the meaning of Mandela in this period – as opposed to the period immediately after his death – represents a very different line of inquiry from any ostensibly objective assessment of Mandela’s political or symbolic legacy. The reason for this is that I broach the topic of Mandela’s role in the what, following Jean-François Lyotard, can be called the libidinal economy of the South African nation, that is, in terms of the various clusters of affect and unconscious ideation that his role represented at the time and beyond.

Societal hagiography
I begin by asking: how might one approach the obsessive media speculation concerning Mandela’s declining health prior to his eventual death? Popular media commentaries on Mandela during the middle of 2013 as a rule wavered between requests that the public honour
appropriate cultural customs – to respect the privacy of Mandela and his family – and an unrelenting thirst for ever more details pertaining to the former South African president and his feuding family. The obvious point to note here is that each such impulse effectively undoes the other, in a to-and-fro, self-perpetuating fashion.

A related tension was also at play. A variety of political personalities and media pundits made the call – presumably preparing us all for the inevitable – that the public needed to ‘let Mandela go’. Verne Harris of the Nelson Mandela Foundation made such a request as early as 2011: ‘He is already gone – as an active voice who offers us a last resort. He is no longer with us. He has been frustrated by our dependence on him. He wants to see us walking without him. We must allow him to go’ (Nuttall & Mbembe 283). Given Mandela’s advanced age in the months before his death, and the various ordeals he had lived through, this call to relinquish our hold on Mandela seemed wholly reasonable. The problem was that, once voiced, such sentiments were almost immediately paired with the contrary demand, to the effect that we – as it was then stated – ‘can’t let him go’ (see Dawes).

The commemoration industry that has been built up around Mandela gives one reason to wonder if the country has become vaguely fearful of its many other struggle heroes. None of these men and women even vaguely approaches the quasi-mythical status attained by the name of Mandela. It is an odd quirk of human psychology and, indeed, of human sociality more generally that societies so often feel it necessary to predicate an entire social or political order on the image or the legacy of a single person (Adorno; Freud, Mass Psychology). In view of the history of fascist, totalitarian and dictatorial regimes of the past century, regimes which unfailingly relied on elevating the figure of a single totemic leader to the place of the sublime Thing of the nation, it is understandable that there are many who feel discomfort at the impulse to thus embody the nation in the figure of a single leader. This gives rise to our first question: Despite Mandela being a hero, a champion not only of the Left but of the struggle against global forms of apartheid, is it not worrying that he has been elevated so far above the many other political actors, past and present, who have posed
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forms of resistance to inequality and injustice? Differently put: What are the shortcomings of seeing Mandela as the encapsulation of all that is good in South Africa's history, as the sublime embodiment of the nation? Are we not in danger of a form of societal hagiography?

What might a psychoanalyst make of a patient who spends time on the couch directing adoring praise towards a single heroic figure? In such a situation, one would be forced to question the function of such praise, and to locate it in reference to a broader array of affects. That is to say, when one views idealisation of this magnitude one can only suspect that it is proportionately related to – and maybe even works to conceal – a considerable quantity of negative emotion, guilt perhaps or a sense of inadequacy. If one adopts such a psychoanalytic view, then the amount of celebration and love directed at Mandela seems less than innocent. We can take the argument further: such levels of idealisation could be seen as an indication of shame, certainly so inasmuch as they possibly function as the necessary counterbalance to a history that cannot – even now, after South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission – be fully admitted.

Mandela against Mandela

I would not be the first person to make the argument that a politics of lionisation stands diametrically opposed to Mandela's own emancipatory struggle. Truly progressive political revolutions arguably share this as their aim: not so much to celebrate the icons of the struggle, but to serve the people. Mandela's struggle as outlined in his autobiography Long Walk to Freedom was, to risk a simplification, that of attaining a non-racist and democratic state in which the equality and rights of millions of ordinary men and women were protected. It was not – at least in my view – to set up a moneyed political elite or to enshrine the image of a single faultless revolutionary hero. Nic Dawes has essentially the same point in mind when he notes that Mandela's leadership style was instructive in sending the message that South Africa must be a nation of laws and of institutions, not of single lauded men and women, and certainly not of one man. In his biography of Mandela, Tom Lodge makes much the same point: 'Neither before nor during his presidency, Mandela
neither demanded nor received an entirely unconditional devotion; in power he expected his compatriots to behave as assertive citizens not as genuflecting disciples’ (225).

Lodge goes on in fact to credit this as Mandela’s single overriding achievement: to prioritise the workings of democratic political processes and institutions – essentially, types of participatory democracy – over the authority of any one totemic leader. With this in mind, we may go so far as to say that to idolise Mandela is also, in a very significant sense, to undermine him. If a radical and emancipatory politics is about calling attention to those forms of oppression that have been ignored and unchallenged, then the glare of celebratory Mandela fanfare cannot but be seen as diverting attention from forms of human subjugation that are far less edifying to contemplate. This provides us with a case of Mandela against Mandela, of celebratory image trumping emancipatory values. The role of political hagiography in undermining the political agency of the people is nowhere better made than by the radical historian Howard Zinn, who decries the mountain of history books under which we stand ... so tremulously respectful of states and statesmen ... All those histories ... centred on founding fathers and presidents weigh oppressively on the capacity of ordinary citizens to act. They suggest that in times of crisis we must look to someone to save us ... They teach us that the supreme act of citizenship is to choose between saviours by going into a voting booth ... The idea of saviours has been built into the entire culture ... We learn to look to stars, leaders ... thus surrendering our own strength, demeaning our own ability (143–414).

We can extend this argument by referring to Jacob Dlamini, who, more bluntly yet, enables us to understand how the Mandela imaginary functions in a disempowering way:

Mandela is the hero whose presence allows us not to be heroes in our own lives ... He is the big man in whose shadow we can walk, convinced
that we cannot emulate his example ... [A]ll this evasion does is to ... dehistoricise him and make him larger than life while absolving us of the moral responsibility to become better people.

Perhaps more cuttingly yet, Malaika wa Azania argues that the danger of the deification of Mandela is that it distorts history. When Mandela is posited as the liberator, something atrocious happens: the people of South Africa are reduced to mere decorations in our liberation history ... While Mandela was languishing in prison, ordinary citizens intensified the Struggle ... The reality is that ordinary South Africans liberated Mandela in more ways than Mandela liberated them ... [Mandela] became a symbol of our struggle – by deliberate design. But he is not a liberator of black people. It is both ahistoric and apolitical to appropriate the liberation of millions of people to a single individual, especially one who spent most of his activist years incarcerated as ordinary people were continuing the Struggle and resisting their own oppression.

Overlapping the arguments of Zinn, Dlamini and wa Azania helps us make a broader point about the role of Mandela internationally and about global forms of apartheid. Wherever Mandela is venerated as a political celebratory there is the chance that the discourse of the saviour comes to eclipse an effective belief in the agency and role of single political subjects. One can even imagine, disconcertingly, that as apartheid was being dismantled in South Africa, the historical glamour of this event – piloted by no one other than Mandela – distracted attentions from a global array of various ‘new apartheids’.

**Neurotic vacillation**

Let us return, though, to the contrary impulses displayed in public discussions of Mandela’s ailing health in mid-2013. How are we to understand this double-step oscillation whereby an instance of action or assertion is immediately paired with its negation (letting Mandela
go/refusing to do so, respecting and then undermining his privacy)? Psychoanalytically, one cannot deny the obsessional quality to this self-cancelling set of actions, which clearly represents an impacted ambivalence, a clear ‘stuckness’, an unwillingness to proceed. This is not, for the most part, an encouraging sign, because it so strongly resembles, as in the case of the classical psychoanalytic model of obsessional neurosis (Freud, ‘From the History of an Infantile Neurosis’), a form of paralysis.\footnote{1} When it is extrapolated to the social sphere, we have a mode of societal stasis in which ambivalence becomes entrenched, where opposing movements perennially counterbalance one another. We have something akin to the dynamic of a perpetual motion machine, continually moving, but never progressing beyond the site to which it is affixed. It is in this way that the obsessional subject avoids the new, forestalls the possibility of making significant choices, and thus, in effect, annuls life. Hence the Lacanian idea of the obsessional as constantly marking time, effecting a kind of deadness-in-life (Fink, \textit{The Lacanian Subject}; Melman).

Such a deadening of life is typically characterised by ritualisation, by structured patterns of living or compulsive behavioural tics (radicalised in the case of obsessive compulsive acts) that ensure that nothing new can ever emerge. It is perhaps unnecessary to add that, classically, such a psychic structure or disposition to life often takes the form of the son or daughter chronically overshadowed by a larger-than-life father figure. Such a symbolic figure – not necessarily, of course, one’s actual father, a man or even biologically a father at all – is one whose influence cannot be metabolised and who thus remains a model of ambivalent affective responses, typically disguised by processes of idealisation. Here another motif of Lacanian psychoanalysis comes to the fore: that of the obsessional patient who, despite protestations to the contrary, is essentially waiting for the father to die so that he or she can start to live. What this obsessional (and typically unconscious) aspiration overlooks is the fact that the influence of such a father will only grow and attain an ever greater status after his demise – when, by virtue of ascending to a wholly symbolic existence, he becomes in effect immortal.
Many questions arise here, not the least of which is whether a society or the ‘affective economy’ of a nation’s investment in a given figure could exemplify a type of obsessional neurosis. Speculation of the sort I have offered can of course be accused of a type of overextension, of generalising the observations of the clinic to the political sphere (Fink, *Against Understanding*; Hook). One should also point out that there is nothing extraordinary about a temporary period of suspension directly preceding or following the death of a national leader. Indecision and prevarication regarding the future would be unremarkable under such circumstances. Nonetheless, this much can confidently be said: the broader pattern of obsessional neurosis, if we are to accept for the moment such an extrapolation from psyche to society, would be ill suited to a nation for which ongoing transformation remains such an urgent injunction. For a country still battling to attain the social equilibrium of a genuinely post-apartheid era, the prevarications, hidden resentments and repressed ambivalences of the obsessional would prove an immobilising force. The stultifying mode of life lived-as-death is not one that the postapartheid nation can afford. Indeed, if Mandela’s symbolic and psychical legacy becomes to the nation akin to that of the overbearing father to the obsessional neurotic, then it would be difficult to see how the nation might move ‘beyond Mandela’ rather than obsessively repeating gestures of his commemoration.

**Mandela, metonymy and enchantment**

Importantly, it would be wrong to dismiss the quasi-hysterical nature of the South African public’s concerns over Mandela’s failing health in 2013 as an excessive or over-the-top response. To the contrary, this wave of anxiety was deeply significant, although perhaps not in the way it may have appeared. It was a token of a more far-reaching and less easily communicable form of social unease than could have been explained simply by reference to the advancing death of a former president. This behaviour can, in other words, be read symptomatically, as a crisis of concern that condenses within itself a series of fundamental anxieties.
underlying the postapartheid condition as such. Before elaborating upon this idea any further, we need to consider the unique status that Mandela’s name and legacy have come to acquire in the psyche of South African and global culture alike. Deborah Posel’s astute sociological analysis of ‘Madiba magic’ proves an invaluable resource in this respect. Mandela’s stepping out of prison after 27 years to negotiate with his oppressors, says Posel,

became a metonym of the wider national ‘miracle’ of a peaceful transition to democracy … He rapidly came to personify the ‘new’ South Africa in ways that made the project not merely plausible, but persuasive. He also made it appear proximate, even intimate. Affectionately embraced as Madiba, his clan name, connoting simultaneously his elevated station and popular accessibility, he was the avuncular elder whose appeal breached the sedimented South African divisions of race, class, gender and ethnicity (71).

The politics of enchantment engendered by Mandela’s image entailed not only an astonishing symbolic reversal – the refiguring of white South Africa’s ‘iconic terrorist, public enemy number one, as … exemplary human being’ (75) – but, moreover, his metonymic power to stand in for and enact this ‘new’ inclusive idea of South Africa. South Africans after 1994 were, as Posel puts it, ‘a people in his image’ (87).

Posel’s engagement with the Mandela imaginary anticipates a series of affective features that I will soon stress from a psychoanalytic perspective. The effects of enchantment, she says, include

a feeling of being in the midst of truth, but one that is revelatory rather than discursive, blindingly evident rather than produced on the strength of rationally assembled evidence … we are enchanted, in part, by the absence of any need for further explication, as if the occurrence that produces our feelings of conviction is self-explanatory, tautologically obvious through the sheer fact of what occurs, even if it is impossible to fathom fully how and why it occurred (84).
'Mandela' as transcendent signifier

Let us now take up a more overtly psychoanalytic perspective. A name starts to function as a 'master signifier' when, despite the predominance of a general 'preferred meaning', it comes to signify a great many different things to a great many different people. Moreover, despite the diversity of such personal investments, all related parties – the public as a whole, we might say – remain identified with the name in question. They have, in other words, taken it on as a crucial element of who they are or who they would like to be. The emotive signifier in question – it is always an emotive signifier – be it 'England', 'the new South Africa', 'God', 'die volk' or, indeed, 'Mandela', makes a type of subjectivity possible and anchors an array of beliefs. This constitutive function of the master signifier is often remarked upon in Lacanian discourse theory: in the absence of such a master signifier, there is no committed or believing subject, no subject of the group – indeed, no viable group or constituency at all (see Bracher; Stavrakakis; Verhaeghe).

What this means is that the name 'Mandela' represents a point of hegemonic convergence at which a variety of incompatible values and identifications overlap. George Frederickson's comment that Mandela succeeded in fulfilling a symbolic role as the 'embodiment of the nation that transcends ideology, party, or group' (28) has by now become a political commonplace. Lodge similarly suggests that the moral prestige embodied by Mandela enabled him 'to bring coherence to previously disparate social forces, and in doing so extend [an] exemplary influence across a range of political constituencies' (224). For some, Mandela is the benign, forgiving father of the nation, the embodiment of hope and reconciliation; for others, Mandela is the radical protagonist of the armed struggle, the African National Congress (ANC) icon who played his part in establishing the Youth League and Umkhonto we Sizwe alike; for yet others, he is an emblem of integrity, a touchstone of moral capital, a figure of global renown who transcended the particularity of his political cause to stand for the goals of a universal emancipatory politics.

The ability of 'Mandela' to function as an encapsulating signifier that brings together a series of ostensibly incompatible values has its
own history. Historically, ‘Mandela’ stood for: proponent of African nationalism, representative of African culture and advocate for the sovereignty of African peoples; democrat and student of the values of Western parliamentary democracy; terrorist, communist, anticapitalist and treasonous enemy of the South African state; ANC leader and representative of the universal ends of justice, non-racialism, equality and freedom. This cross-section of themes is perhaps nowhere better embodied that in Mandela’s speech from the dock in the 1964 Rivonia Trial. The event of the trial no doubt proved crucial in transforming Mandela the man into ‘Mandela’ as master signifier, and it is worth examining again sections of his speech in this light:

I am one of the persons who helped to form Umkhonto we Sizwe … I have done whatever I did, both as an individual and as a leader of my people, because of my experience in South Africa, and my own proudly felt African background … In my youth … I listened to the elders of my tribe telling stories of the old days. Amongst the tales they related to me were those of wars fought by our ancestors in defence of the fatherland (Mandela 349–350).

Mandela likewise proved adept at placing himself in relation to – yet not beholden to – communist allies, from whose ideology he carefully distanced himself. Furthermore, even while espousing fidelity to the African people, he described himself as a man respectful of Western political institutions:

The ANC[s] … chief goal was, and is, for the African people to win unity and full political rights. The Communist Party’s main aim … was to remove capitalists and replace them with a working-class government. The Communist Party sought to emphasize class distinctions whilst the ANC seeks to harmonize them. It is true that there has often been close cooperation between the ANC and the Communist Party. But cooperation is merely proof of a common goal – in this case the removal of white supremacy – and is not proof of a complete community of
interests ... From my reading of Marxist literature ... I have gained the impression that communists regard the parliamentary system of the West as undemocratic and reactionary. But, on the contrary, I am an admirer of such a system ... I have great respect for British political institutions, and for the country's system of justice. I regard the British Parliament as the most democratic institution in the world, and the independence and impartiality of its judiciary never fail to arouse my admiration (352–353).

The ‘magic’ of the master signifier – which the rhetorical performance above goes some way to embodying – is that it is able to knit together different constituencies, appealing equally, albeit in very different ways, to a variety of classes who are otherwise opposed in their political agendas. Although in different ways, the signifier ‘Mandela’ was able to perform something of this task, both in 1964 and – in a more encompassing fashion – in the postapartheid years. A master signifier, we can thus say, makes a version of society, a crucial type of social bond, possible. Manqoba Nxumalo’s commentary on the different legacies Mandela embodies for whites and blacks seems at first to dispute this idea:

Mandela of the black community is and will be different to the Mandela of white society. To the black majority, he is a fighter and a radical militant who refused to be broken down even by jail. To them he is a reminder that in order to get justice you must fight because there is honour in struggle. To the white liberal community, he represents reconciliation, forgiveness and peaceful coexistence ... There is a fundamental departure between blacks and whites on what takes precedence in all the things that make up this icon called Mandela.

What these words suggest is that Mandela is a mediator between racial and class groups whose political ideals are not only very different but are at times diametrically opposed. In this respect, the master signifier achieves what seems impossible: it engenders a type of hegemonic appeal whereby various social antagonisms may (however temporarily) be overcome. A further implication can be read out of Nxumalo’s observations: part of
what was anxiety-provoking about Mandela’s declining health was that South Africa would soon lack a crucial ‘class mediator’, that is, a political figure who not only spoke powerfully to black and white groupings but who also enabled them to speak and engage with one another.

Political theorists such as Ernesto Laclau, also in collaboration with Chantal Mouffe, tend to prefer the notion of an empty as opposed to a master signifier, even though the concept in question is much the same. The benefit of referring to the master signifier as ‘empty’ is that it draws attention to the fact that it maintains no intrinsic or essential meaning, and also that it permits an endless succession of varying applications and uses. A master signifier, that is to say, can never be totalised; it remains always empty, able to accommodate fresh articulations. This is so obviously the case in respect of Mandela’s name – various applications of which are, today in South Africa, seemingly never-ending – that it barely warrants mentioning. Whether in the material form of commemorative architecture or place names; institutions, charities, endowments; commemorative commodities; and even rival political party interests, ‘Mandela’ is a signifier that can be appended to an endless stream of postapartheid objects and aspirations.

Although I have cited mainly commemorative and commodity objects above, the true measure of a master signifier’s strength has more to do with the social bonds and subjective investments that it underpins, that is, with its role in consolidating a social mass. Having said that, one should not neglect the symbolic paraphernalia noted above: the symbolic density connoted by such activities and representations is a clear signal that a society is fortifying a mode of belief, concretising a cherished set of ideals and subjective or societal investments. In short, we don’t erect monuments simply to celebrate and affirm what we already know; we build and sustain monuments so that we will continue to know and believe what may otherwise be erased through time, various forms of uncertainty or doubt. So, contrary to assuming that the endless proliferation of Mandela signifiers speaks simply to the historical objectivity, to the security, of the Mandela legacy, we might ask whether this activity is fuelled rather by a need to believe. Moreover, we might ask whether it is propelled by
the imminent failure of, or disbelief in, the vision of an integrated South African nation that Mandela championed and, furthermore, whether this multitude of symbolic gestures attempts – desperately perhaps – to affirm such a unified social reality, despite the mounting evidence of growing social and political divisions.

To extend this point, it is worth briefly remarking upon a change that has occurred in South Africa’s relationship to Mandela. Writing in 2006, Lodge commented: ‘Surprisingly … there is little evidence of a cult of personality. The only public statue of Mandela is located in Sandton … His image does not appear on banknotes, or postage stamps, and the museum at his birthplace is low key’ (223). All of this, it is safe to say, has changed, and radically so. Mandela’s image now adorns South African banknotes; there are a number of museums dedicated to Mandela (at Umtata, Mvezo and Qunu); statues of Mandela in Sandton, Bloemfontein (Naval Hill) and Paarl (Groot Drakenstein) – not neglecting, of course, the Mandela monument in Howick – have now been outstripped by the nine-metre statue at the Union Buildings in Pretoria. Why is it then, we might ask, that we need to celebrate and memorialise Mandela now in the immediate aftermath of his death more than ever before? Might it be because now, as we advance into a post-postapartheid era, we are in a time when the exuberance and enthusiasm of the Mandela-led government of 1994–99 already seem to be dated historical phenomena? To reiterate the point made above, we could say that this surge of commemorative practices and signifiers occurs because we need to believe the Mandela myth now more than ever. Such signifiers indicate less the absolute truth of the political changes Mandela helped bring about than the fact that without the constant activity of Mandela signification, we might fail to believe in such changes – promised or otherwise – and begin to fear that many of the country’s divisions of old could resurface in novel postapartheid forms.

Lionel Bailly adds an important qualification to the notion of the master signifier which seems crucial here: ‘master signifiers usually mask their opposites … they exist in a polarised form’ (63). The openly expressed aspect of the master signifier props up an ego – that is, the
imagined identity of a subject or community – while the unenunciated aspect remains ‘buried in the unconscious … constantly pushing up its opposite number’ (63). The function of the master signifier is thus to redirect potentially painful or anxiety-provoking signifiers, and to do so in such a way ‘that a signifying chain with the opposite, bearable, or even comforting meaning emerges’ (63). Following the argument already developed, there could barely be a more apt description of how the signifier ‘Mandela’ is utilised in the postapartheid context.

The bonds of fantasy
Evident in the elevation of Mandela to the realm of ‘pure symbol’ is the role of a type of mythologisation. A master signifier is never merely objective in its meaning and value but is animated rather by subjective belief, by the imagination of those who have invested in it. This is to say that the signifier ‘Mandela’ is today always in part a projection of those who have taken pride in, and identified with, the man and his legacy. There is thus some truth, despite the apparent cynicism, in political evaluations that suggest that Mandela’s greatness ‘is mainly a creation of the collective imagination’ (see Beresford). In speaking of Mandela, we have in mind not just the man or Mandela as historical event, but Mandela as focal point of multiple subjective investments and identifications – Mandela, that is, as shared social fantasy. To make such an observation is by no means to depart from pressing ‘real world’ political concerns. ‘Mandela’ has served as a stabilising signifier, a signifier more able than any other to lend moral purpose and meaning to the social contradictions of the contemporary South African era. Indeed, ‘Mandela’ enables us to knit together the otherwise discontinuous elements of postapartheid experience into a narrative of progress.

A crucial qualification should be made here: in psychoanalytic terms, ‘fantasy’ is not akin to an imaginary flight of fancy, an idle illusion, something that should be rejected in favour of careful consideration of the objective facts of reality. Fantasy is rather what underlies and mediates what we experience as reality; it is what makes reality as such possible. Fantasy is thus indispensable; it provides the lens through
which the chaotic and fragmentary nature of subjective and societal reality is afforded a rudimentary narrative coherence. Although not working from a psychoanalytic perspective, Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe’s comments on Mandela’s death point to precisely such a fantasmatic function:

Mandela’s death might reveal a void at the heart of a country that has always struggled to mask such an emptiness at its centre: a country that has struggled to define itself as a nation and to draw together its many fragments into a sustained sense of commonality in the wake of a long racist past. More than anybody else, Mandela embodied this sense of commonality, and his passing is likely to reignite the metaphysical anxiety that South Africa is neither a concept nor an idea – just a place, a geographical accident (268).

It was in this respect that the demise of Mandela seemed so anxiety-provoking for the country. It heralded the prospect of a crisis of redefinition and, more than that, of the divergent strands of postapartheid society simply failing to cohere. Or, more dramatically yet – extrapolating a somewhat bleak vision from Nuttall and Mbembe’s comments – Mandela’s decline may be thought to represent the end of the fantasy, the point at which the concept of South Africa ceases to work in any other way than as a geographical designation. Perhaps it is the case – easy enough to imagine if Mandela’s legacy was erased from history – that ‘South Africa’ is no more than the name for a set of historical events to which no special status, no historical essence, no grand march of progress can rightly be said to apply.⁴

As sombre as such an eventuality might seem, it is nonetheless one worth contemplating; it may have ‘therapeutic’ benefits. How, for instance, might South Africans see themselves differently; what social, civic and political responsibilities come to the fore once complacent stories of ‘democracy achieved’ are interrupted? What possibilities for self-interrogation emerge once we suspend the narratives of an extraordinary history and nation that our proximity to the greatness of
Mandela has for so long allowed us to maintain? Despite fantasy making a non-psychotic reality possible, it is also necessary, so psychoanalysis tells us, to work through those fantasies upon which we have become overly reliant. This gives us a different relation to those fantasies which have come to function as a protective shell; those fantasies which routinely obscure disturbing or traumatic conditions that we would prefer to remain concealed.\(^5\)

**The ways of love**

The question of how – or why – we love Mandela is also crucial. We may distinguish between several different modalities of love. There is a type of love that is largely narcissistic in nature and that operates most fundamentally to facilitate self-love. We love those who enable us to maintain an idealised image of ourselves, to bolster and extend the positive qualities of our own self-image. The loved person here is essentially a prop for our own self-regard, a mirror reflecting what (we believe) is best about ourselves and screening out less admirable qualities. Given the function of this type of love, one appreciates both the importance that the figure of Mandela plays in the libidinal economy of the nation and, once again, why his prospective demise occasioned so much anxiety. The death of Mandela means – at least in part – the loss of what South Africans feel makes them an exceptional nation, remarkable in the eyes of the world.

There is also the more abstract love of shared social and historical ideals. This type of love concerns those beliefs – what we might call ‘to live and die for’ values – that not only ground a society, but also link it to its history and set out the ideals that it will continue to strive for. Such a constellation of social and symbolic ideals necessarily exceeds the role of any one person. These comments put us in a position to respond to the question – painful for many – of how, and in what capacity, to let Mandela go. Now that Mandela has died, this may seem a merely academic question; yet his image of course remains, and we should not be too quick to assume that we have in fact relinquished our hold upon him. If it is then the first of the two types of love that underscores our
reticence to give Mandela up, if we love Mandela chiefly as a means of loving ourselves, then, surely, it must by now be time to cut the cord, to bid him a final farewell. We can extend this argument. If we love the image of Mandela in ways that enable us to conceal the injustices and inequalities of the postapartheid condition and thus idealise the current social conditions of the country, then it would seem necessary that we leave him behind. More succinctly put: we need to forgo the comforting illusions that the imaginary figure of Mandela allows us to maintain.

However, inasmuch as Mandela encapsulated a vision of social bonds traversing apartheid’s structural divisions, a vision which made the (imperfect) transition from apartheid possible, then it is appropriate that we cherish the unfinished legacy he has left. For, after all, this set of ideals is bigger than any one figure, even if Mandela did more than most to bring these values to life and lend them a recognisable human face. Dawes makes much the same point, reflecting hopefully on the course that such a permeation of values might take:

Mandela’s long goodbye takes on the form of a return, not as a statue, or as a caricature, but as living potential. That potential is around us in democratic institutions and traditions that, if young, or threatened, are also resilient and powerful … It is visible in the agonisingly slow, but vital change in the shape of our cities, and the refusal of South Africans to be content with half-a-life, or with the outer forms of freedom, absent its content.

Then, again, anxiety may emerge here also, even in respect of Mandela’s symbolic legacy. If Mandela made possible ‘the postapartheid’, as both political era and mode of subjectivity, then his death cannot but imply the question: What comes after the postapartheid era, an era which has been synonymous precisely with the figure of Mandela? Furthermore, if we are to credit the notion that Mandela made a version of South African subjectivity possible, then what types of South African subjectivity will be possible in a future where he no longer exists?

Having intimated that love and idealisation are rarely innocent, we may now turn to a facet of the public obsession with Mandela that few
have remarked upon. The universal outpouring of love and idealisation for Mandela in the immediate aftermath of his death has been accompanied by a period of intense vilification directed at his successor as leader of both the ANC and the country, namely Jacob Zuma. Lize van Robbroeck’s analysis of ‘the visual Mandela’ is particularly helpful in this respect, drawing attention, as it does, to the strikingly different portrayals of Mandela and Zuma in contemporary South African popular culture. Zuma, she remarks, has been subject to scathing iconoclasm (the cartoonist Zapiro’s showerhead caricature being a case in point), while the figure of Mandela remains the embodiment of good citizenship:

Zuma … has managed to rekindle white anxieties and shatter much of the strategic harmony Mandela managed to effect between Africanist symbolic power and the demands of global neoliberal realpolitik. The media’s open hostility toward Zuma … has opened up deep … fault lines in the South African political and cultural sphere … Mandela’s painstaking stitching together of African traditional values, Western democratic liberal structures, global capitalism, and pan-African communitarianism is in the process of being unravelled. The harmonious multivocality of Mandela … has now deteriorated into a cacophony of incoherent voices: the tenuous centre established by Mandela is not holding and things are beginning to fall apart (263).

We might add to this commentary by stressing how these respective modes of depiction – idealisation and vilification – are connected. Psychoanalytically, we would be remiss if we did not note how they are linked; indeed, are part of one and the same dynamic. The more Mandela is progressively idealised, the more Zuma’s (not inconsiderable) faults are magnified. Mandela is lionised; Zuma is lampooned, reduced to caricature and stereotype, lambasted as the embodiment of everything wrong with South Africa.

This dynamic reflects something of the country’s self-ruminations. More to the point yet, it represents the country’s inability to bring together what is best and worst, what is most inspiring and most shameful, in its
history. One is reminded of the resentful words that the director Oliver Stone puts into Richard Nixon’s mouth in a fictitious scene from his 1995 film *Nixon*. Staring with bitterness at a portrait of John F. Kennedy and wondering why the American people loved the younger man so much, he laments: ‘When they look at him, they see themselves as they want to be; when they look at me, they see themselves as they are.’ It perhaps goes without saying that this perfectly illustrates the libidinal dynamism that Jacques Lacan outlines in his notion of the mirror stage. We have thus on a national level the continual interplay between the loved, narcissistically affirming image on the one hand (Mandela) and the associated rival and much reviled image (Zuma) – both of course reflecting the same subject (the South African nation) – that threatens this idealising self-representation. Resistant as many may be to this conclusion, we should insist: both images stem from the same self-conflicted, narcissistic and yet also self-hating source, namely, the image South Africans have of themselves.

**Suffering idealisation**

We are all familiar with the figure of the tragic hero, the gallant character who is willing to sacrifice himself or herself for the good of a cause. Importantly, however, the sacrifice in question may not always be the hero’s life; it may be of a symbolic sort. That is to say, as in Lacan’s notion of being ‘between the two deaths’, one can die symbolically before one is in fact physically dead. Let us consider a figure – rare at the best of times – that is willing to take on the hate of a community or nation, to assume the role of the villain if this is ultimately what serves the greater public good. One is reminded of the role the psychoanalyst is forced to endure during the travails of negative transference, in which the patient comes – quite unjustifiably – to see in the analyst everything that she or he, the patient, most detests and resents. Or, to provide a more dramatic example from within the domain of popular culture, we might follow the argument Slavoj Žižek makes in *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* in respect of the character of Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns*. In order to allow the public to continue to believe in the figure of Harvey Dent, a public
prosecutor who is seen as pursuing the ends of justice even in the face of insurmountable odds, Batman assumes the role of the criminal ‘public enemy number one’ which in fact really belongs to Dent. The heroic here has to do not only with the fact of self-sacrifice, but with the fact that this heroism, this very fact of self-sacrifice, may never be acknowledged as such.

It is not hard to find historical examples of leaders who have had to endure such a treatment, who have been vilified beyond what seems reasonable. Both of Mandela’s successors as president – Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma – might be considered cases in point. There is a sense of ethical grandeur that, retrospectively, attaches to such a position, even if it is perhaps not, in the final analysis, fully justified. Hated as one might be in present circumstances, there is always the possibility that what one has done, what one has sacrificed one’s self for, will one day by recognised by a future generation.

Lonely as it may be to find one’s self in such a position, there is another situation which is potentially even more debilitating. Consider the case of the hero who, rather than being sacrificed for or by the people, is lauded, granted every conceivable honour for qualities and actions that are (at least in part) projections, misrepresentations of who they are. A different type of falsity is involved here – not the falsity of the negative transference (when one is not as bad as has been imagined) but the falsity of the positive transference (when one is not as good as has been imagined). Here too, as in the case of the tragic hero, a type of sacrifice is involved, not the sacrifice of one’s life, but a sacrifice of what one might privately be, or believe in, for the sake of what people need to see in you. This is part of what Mandela had to undergo: he needed to put himself in the service of the image that others had of him.

Being sublimated in such a way, elevated into the position of ‘the most admired person on earth … a secular saint, an embodiment of greatness and an icon of peace and wisdom’ (Stengel), is a necessarily violent process. Such a process would entail the exclusion of many of one’s own political values, some of which would have to be silenced so as not to undermine the mythical image one has come to embody. Not all of what one ideally
represents, believes or strives for can be shown under such circumstances, particularly in respect of more radical views. This, for a man like Mandela, who was so famously prepared to die for what he believed in, was perhaps more difficult than we at first imagine. Moreover, it was not as if Mandela did not hold controversial views. One only needs to consult one of the many muckraking websites established after his death to see such controversial facts listed: Mandela stood alongside ANC comrades singing ‘death to the whites’; Mandela was for many years secretly a member of the South African Communist Party; Mandela was unapologetic about his longstanding friendship with Muammar Gaddafi; Mandela condemned the Iraq War and was an ardent opponent of America’s aggressive foreign policy, and so on and so on (see also Malan).

Of course, it can be said that it is better to be loved rather than hated for what one is not (that is, for what others have projected upon you). This, surely, is a far more rewarding – even ennobling – form of sacrifice. The rapturous attention of so many might be thought to offset the alienating effects of adopting a persona never quite commensurate with one’s own beliefs. Then again, the experience of needing to suffer idealisation, to stifle the radical political instincts that had been his lifeblood, cannot have been easy for Mandela.

The death of the father

The death of an important father figure – particularly one of the stature of Mandela – can represent a great many things symbolically. It can, of course, result in an ugly series of skirmishes in which various family members and stakeholders struggle for their share of the man’s legacy and wealth. This often seems, and has sadly proved, unavoidable. This is not the only outcome that may be predicted of such an event. The death of an esteemed father may represent just as much an auspicious beginning as an inauspicious end. This is in fact a well-known literary trope: a grand family story – or historical epic – only in effect really begins following the death of a great patriarch. As US soap operas like Six Feet Under, Dallas and Brothers and Sisters demonstrate, little else provides as much by way
of interesting new plot developments as does the demise of a powerful and revered father figure.\textsuperscript{7}

What most certainly is signalled by such an event is that the father’s descendants need to assume responsibility for what had hitherto been his perceived duty. One of Mandela’s tasks – perhaps his overriding achievement – was to pull together a radically divided and diverse society, to enable a postapartheid imaginary that the entire nation could, in very different ways, believe in and identify with. The signifier ‘Mandela’ provided the basis – historically unimaginable until that point – for a type of social consensus that made the postapartheid public sphere viable. It is this perceived ability to transcend apartheid’s lingering culture of hate and separatism, to foster ties of allegiance that cross the boundaries of race, ethnicity and political allegiance, that characterises Mandela’s lasting greatness. What the demise of the ‘father of the nation’ throws into perspective is the fact that we, as individual citizens, will no longer be able to delegate this task to him. This responsibility, the labour of developing a viable postapartheid consensus and, indeed, of supporting a shared public sphere will now fall to those on whom Mandela placed his trust: the people of the country of South Africa.

NOTES
1. The canonical example of obsessional neurosis in the history of psychoanalysis being, of course, Freud’s case study of Ernst Lanzer, the ‘Rat man’, in ‘Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis’.
2. As in the 2013 attempt of South Africa’s Democratic Alliance to appropriate Mandela’s image in its own campaigning materials.
3. See Dennis Walder for an argument that 2009 represented a turning point in South Africa’s recent history. That year saw Jacob Zuma become the country’s third democratically elected president; the country was plunged into recession; the HIV and Aids pandemic soared to new levels; new crises of unemployment, crime and corruption came to the fore; and xenophobic attacks and service delivery protests swept through the country.
4. We can elaborate upon this idea of Mandela as fantasy that makes the notion of the South African nation viable by referring to Posel, who in turn cites Ivor Chipkin’s analysis of the post-1994 South African people who, Chipkin claims, lacked any distinguishing national marks, had no common culture or race, and had only really an idea of what they were not, namely South Africans of old. Posel adds to this (a nice case in point of the anticipatory mode of temporality often stressed in Lacanian psychoanalysis): ‘Mandela’s metonymic power – to stand in for and enact this “new” people as if it had already come into being – provided a resolution to the paradox: South Africans were now a people in his image and what it stood for, made anew’ (87).

5. The notion of ‘traversing the fantasy’ sometimes taken as a precondition for a successful psychoanalytic treatment entails such a trajectory, namely, a crossing through the multiple layers of a given fantasy which shields the subject from disconcerting ‘reals’, revealing thus the radical contingency of both their given circumstances and their own status as subject. Importantly, to ‘traverse the fantasy’ does not imply that the fantasy be completely dissipated or destroyed, but rather that it be ‘passed through’, resituated.

6. Van Robbroeck makes this point wonderfully. The many photographs of Mandela ‘sporting his approving, avuncular smile … serve to affirm the nation’s grandiose narcissism by feeding our sense of specialness’ (252).

7. In these TV shows, the ‘founding father’, that is, the man who has made the wealth and established the name of the family – akin in some ways to the Freudian primal father – dies abruptly within the first few episodes.

REFERENCES


*Nixon.* Directed by Oliver Stone, Cinergi Pictures, 1995.


