



In the Wings of South Africa's Post-Apartheid Theatre: The Illusions of the South African Miracle in Louis-Ferdinand Desprez's Novel *La Mémoire Courte*

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**IN THE WINGS OF SOUTH AFRICA'S
POST-APARTHEID THEATRE:
THE ILLUSIONS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN MIRACLE IN
LOUIS-FERDINAND DESPREEZ'S NOVEL
LA MÉMOIRE COURTE (2006)**

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La *Mémoire Courte*¹ is a detective story set in contemporary South Africa in which Francis Zondi, a black Pretoria police officer, tries to solve a streak of horrendous crimes: several athletic young black men are found dead week after week, with their bodies mauled and flayed, faces included, rendering identification impossible. Eventually, it will be revealed that these men were poor black boxers hired for fights to the death by a clandestine gambling network controlled by white racist fanatics. Yet, the criminal plot also serves to show that though democracy and the rule of law have settled in, behind the scenes little has changed. L-F. Desprez confessed that denouncing the downside of his country's democratic experiment was a conscious effort². Racism, exploitation, cynicism, power, money still run the show, and for people to go on living, it is better to forget and have a 'short memory'. Therefore the novel is completely out of step with the orthodox Whig view of the country's smooth unimpeded optimistic march to democracy and reconciliation. The 'hero' meets people who claim that everything is all right but cover up South Africa's dirty past and hypocritical present.

The codes of the detective story fit the author's purpose as their investigative, fact-finding nature allows for the gradual uncovering of the inadequacies of contemporary South Africa. Both plots, criminal and political, progress through the gradual unmasking of liars. Desprez scathes the promises of the 'miracle play' of reconciliation by searching the dark wings of the New South Africa's beautiful stage. This paper intends to shed light on the investigation of the police officer trying to unmask the criminals which runs in parallel with the author's exposition of the country's painful history and incapacity to bring about an appeased present, as well as the ambiguities of this objective.

L-F. Desprez said that he would not write in English ('My stories would be awfully trite back home'³) choosing instead to write in French, the language of his Huguenot ancestors and of his wife, in a pedagogical effort to teach 'ignorant' readers what they need to fully appreciate his criticism. Thus specific terms which connote South African reality are explained in a glossary at the end of the book. Some very long (several pages) and didactic passages about aspects of local history, politics or society tend to slow down what is essentially a crime story, but they too correspond to the author's purpose to teach his audience and serve as groundwork for the author to reach his goal. Desprez needs to document reality with details

¹ L-F. DESPREEZ, *La Mémoire courte*, Phébus, Paris, 2006.

² <http://www.lefigaro.fr/litteraire/20060302.LIT000000283_simenon_m_a_donne_envie_d_ecrire_des_romans_policiers.html>. Article in French.

³ 'Mes histoires seraient effroyablement banales chez nous', *ibid.*

which would be unnecessary to a South African reader (Namibia is described as '...in fact, a province of South Africa'⁴). Finally, almost all comparisons and metaphors resort to local wild animals, as if Desprez wanted to carve his Africanness visibly into his text: 'Two white constables the size of hippos'; 'they had flown away like a bunch of ibises'; 'he was watching the itchy and grumpy cop a bit like a lion yawning indifferently before attacking a zebra or an impala'; 'looking as scared as a flock of impalas who'd just spotted a roaming lion'⁵, etc.

The book's genre also matters. Desprez chose to write a detective story (crimes are investigated), more precisely a whodunit (the murderer's name is revealed in due time), which falls in the sub-genre of 'police procedural', in which the work of law enforcement officers is detailed, as successive clues lead to the exposition of the criminals and their motives. Zondi, the investigator whose function is to bring order into seemingly dissimilar elements, serves Desprez's intention to uncover the truth. Being a cop grants magical props to open locked doors: 'Zondi laid his police ID on the reception desk and it worked magic'⁶. But generally more efforts have to be put in to confound the traditional seedy characters of the crime story. To see what the eye can't see and reveal people behind their masks requires someone with experience but also psychology and instinct. Zondi, a conventional old-style fiction cop, is perfect for the job. On the one hand he relies on seasoned investigating methods (canvassing, observation) and common sense. He is repeatedly compared to a hunter or a tracker relying on his senses to read the signs on the trail that will lead him to the beast ('Zondi was like a lion on the hunt... [he was] as excited as a tracker'; 'It was open season now... The captain loaded a second bullet in the barrel to give the *coup de grâce* to the decent farmer who had such a short memory')⁷. On the other he goes with guts and instinct, and simply knows when people lie. He reads through them spontaneously, all powerful and not easily fooled. 'He had a gift to detect what was ugly and base in people and he used it without any scruples'⁸. One example is James Mboweni, the general secretary of the SA National Amateur Boxing Organisation, an upstart member of the black establishment. Zondi knows immediately: 'He belonged to a tribe Zondi knew well, the respected members of a community, who once in a while hid dead bodies in their closets and had a moth-eaten memory'⁹. He bends him easily (summoning him to the police station is enough) into confessing that he supplied fresh boxers for fights to the death.

This innate gift contrasts with what he doesn't need: acquired modern scientific methods, embodied in Lana Woerner, an Afrikaner profiler with a degree in

⁴ '...en réalité une province de l'Afrique du Sud' (117).

⁵ 'Deux constables blancs taillés comme des hippopotames' (29); 'Il regardait le flic rétif et grognon un peu comme un lion qui bâille avec indifférence avant de sauter sur un zèbre ou un impala' (29); 'ils s'étaient égaillés comme une volée d'ibis (71)'; rich travellers look 'apeurés comme un troupeau d'impalas qui ont flairé un lion en goguette' (32).

⁶ 'Zondi posa sa carte sur le comptoir de la réception et le sésame opéra' (100). In French, 'un sésame' is a metaphor for a magic device or word that opens locked doors or gets silent people to talk. It is a metonymy of the mouth of the cavern Ali Baba opens using the words 'Open Sesame!' in the Book of One Thousand and One Nights.

⁷ 'Zondi était comme un lion en chasse (et) ... excité comme un pisteur' (46); 'La chasse était ouverte... Le capitaine fit monter une deuxième balle dans le canon pour donner le coup de grâce à ce brave fermier qui avait la mémoire courte' (161).

⁸ 'Il avait un don pour déceler ce qui était moche et minable chez les gens et il s'en servait sans scrupules' (104).

⁹ 'Il faisait partie d'une tribu que Zondi connaissait bien: les petits notables qui avaient de temps à autres un cadavre dans le placard et la mémoire mangée par les mites' (131).

psychiatry from Wits University, who works with the police. Her arrogant babble and intellectual approach contrasts with the cop's acts and common sense. For example, she wrote a book in which she boasts the merit of the arrest of a serial killer, when Zondi did most of the work, losing a phalanx in a fight with the murderer. Her alleged superiority is inscribed in her futile mastery of the language: 'She knocks out a bunch of poor helpless cops with her prospective tautologies'¹⁰. In a similar line of argument, the influence of US movies and TV cop shows is lamented by Zondi because of their clichés, which actually slow down their work. Thus Lana Woerner talks '...as in the serial killer films they had so often seen on M-Net'¹¹. She was also partly trained in Quantico, the FBI's academy, and took it all very seriously. Zondi too spent some time there to learn about profiling and investigation techniques, but he remained a distant critic, describing the boring, arrogant speakers, and their racist attitude towards '...his class of nice and quiet underdeveloped niggers, Arabs and Asians'¹². According to him, precisely, 'Not one of all these forensics gimmicks they had thrust into his head could be exported back home. (...) For eight weeks he had been fed on psychiatric platitudes and criminal clichés for hours on end at Quantico'¹³. Desprez mocks the ridiculous attitude of the South African police, who try to apply those principles when the first body is found. Obviously they are out of touch with the reality of the crime scene, as they vainly ape television cops:

*A few pieces of garbage, supposedly potential clues, had been picked up within 15 feet of the DOA and had been carefully collected in small numbered transparent plastic bags, but the officers had rapidly given up on account of the amount of useless trash that had been littering the dirt there for centuries.*¹⁴

Zondi knows this is totally useless ('If he decided to play it "American style", like a TV show profiler, Zondi knew he would be nowhere near making any headway.'¹⁵)

Zondi's psychological strength and professionalism allow him to read efficiently the clues on the crime scenes as well as the signs in people's faces, words and attitudes. He can fathom the depths under the surface, make bare the souls under the skin. As a South African, Zondi is the perfect guide: he has proper knowledge of the local scene, but at 40, he is also a bridge between past and present, old enough to have lived through and suffered under apartheid, yet young enough to have faith in his country and be incensed at the horrors he discovers. He is a man of several cultures, a true South African who speaks indifferently several of the 11 official languages – English, Afrikaans, Zulu, but also Shangaan. He has intimate knowledge of the black man's world, yet works with whites and Indians (the police station is a cultural and racial microcosm, where the fixed racial hierarchy is replaced by an apparently colour-blind functional hierarchy). He knows instinctively

¹⁰ 'Elle assène (...) des tautologies prospectives sur une pauvre bande de flics désemparés' (41).

¹¹ '...comme dans les films de tueurs en série américains qu'ils avaient si souvent vus sur M-NET' (33).

¹² '...sa promo de bons sous-développés nègres, arabes ou asiatiques' (38).

¹³ 'Rien n'était exportable de tous ces gimmicks de police scientifique dont on lui avait bourré le crâne (...) En 8 semaines [il] avait bouffé à Quantico du lieu commun psychiatrique et du cliché criminel à longueur de journée...' (39).

¹⁴ 'Quelques ordures supposées être des indices potentiels avaient été ramassées dans un rayon de quinze pieds autour du mort et avaient été soigneusement récoltées dans de petites pochettes transparentes numérotées, mais les enquêteurs avaient vite renoncé vu le nombre de cochonneries sans intérêt qui jonchaient la terre battue depuis des siècles' (16).

¹⁵ 'S'il décidait de se la jouer "à l'américaine", style profiler de téléfilm (...) Zondi savait qu'il n'était pas près d'avoir des résultats' (39).

how to behave with the people he meets and knows what is behind the racial or cultural mask. He talks as easily to a poor old female cleaner as to a Congolese illegal immigrant, a powerful politician, a shebeen owner, or a racist Afrikaner fanatic. Yet most of what is revealed is not just personal details of people's lives but is in direct relation to the ailment of contemporary South Africa.

None of the characters is without a dark side, each of them standing for a sad aspect of South African society or history. All have something to hide which they would rather keep in the dark. By necessity, Zondi is the one who unveils the secrets and brings light on the dark stretches. Ultimately this is how he nabs the culprits, ultimately this is how the reader learns the truth about South Africa. Both Desprez and Zondi have a conflicting view of their country though: Zondi has faith in his work but is fatalistic about his country, which he 'loved with all his soul and all his guts but hated it with all his head'¹⁶. After apartheid, he had become a cop, Madiba had become president, and the Rainbow Nation was hiccupping into the third millennium with unbelievable goodwill if you considered not just the past but also the liabilities from the past¹⁷. There is even some admiration for the Miracle ('It had to be acknowledged that the transition to democracy was unfolding amid goodwill and intelligence, and with disconcerting candour'¹⁸). As for Desprez, he works for the New South Africa, seemingly accepting the new dispensation, yet writes a book denouncing the ills of his country, especially the rigid orthodoxy of the very same New South Africa, a mythological play built along with the nation to bring order and stability into an uncertain world at a time (1990-94) when a bloodshed was still considered an option, but which tends to keep the ugly reality behind the scenes. What both men criticize though is that long after the transition, the expounders of the reconciliation discourse keep excluding those who don't adhere to the self-proclaimed truth that South Africa is a Rainbow Nation where a Miracle made by a providential man (Mandela) rescued millions of people from death and destruction. Desprez and Zondi beg to differ. At a symbolic level both are self-proclaimed messengers of a different revealed truth, 'angels' voicing a contradictory gospel.

The B-side of South Africa's democratization is symbolically inscribed in the land – the real New South Africa is dirty and ugly. Several bodies are found in dark derelict places. The first one is found '...in the heart of darkness, in the backyard of a clandestine shebeen in Mamelodi, cluttered with car wrecks and old plastic drums'¹⁹. Body #2 is found in a dustbin. Another serial killer left his victims '...in dozens of dreary isolated places, dumping grounds and slag heaps (...) dozens of quarries and waste grounds (...) building sites and muddy ponds in abandoned farms on the veld'²⁰. Rough patches and the veld have no special identity, they are

¹⁶ '...il aimait de toute son âme et de ses tripes, mais ...détestait de toute sa tête' (22).

¹⁷ 'Il était devenu flic, Madiba était devenu président et la Nation Arc-en-Ciel entraînait cahin-caha dans le troisième millénaire avec une bonne volonté inimaginable lorsqu'on regardait non seulement le passé mais surtout le passif' (58).

¹⁸ 'Il fallait admettre que la transition démocratique se déroulait dans la bonne volonté et l'intelligence, avec un naturel déconcertant' (79).

¹⁹ '...au cœur de l'obscurité, dans l'arrière-cour encombrée d'épaves de voitures et de vieux bidons en plastique d'un shebeen clandestin de Mamelodi' (13).

²⁰ 'dans des dizaines d'endroits isolés et sinistres, des décharges publiques ou des terrils... des dizaines de carrières ou de terrain vagues... des chantiers de construction et des mares boueuses dans des fermes abandonnées du veld' (36).

nowhere, could be anywhere. The gyms where the boxers were recruited are no better:

*The Buffalo gym was a seedy, barely lit place, which reeked of sweat and liniment. The equipment was lousy and dirty and the decoration was hideous. (...) Sergeant Bertie Booysen was just as seedy as the gym he ran.*²¹

Once protected places have turned into no-go zones and ghettos. The same words connoting dilapidation, destruction and trash recur to describe Johannesburg, a living paradox of the liberation, which lost out on its new found freedom and drowned into darkness as it opened up to crime.

*In the 1990s, while black people were liberated and democracy took root, E'Goli sank... In less than a decade, Jo'Burg had become a huge dumping ground and a flea market for Pan-African fences and traffickers who lacked both ID and scruples. (...) Joubert Park [hosted] hordes of junkies.*²²

Destitution has extended under new disguises to new places, like Hillbrow, once a patch of liberalism and racial integration:

*...a carefree tropical Harlem, (...) the crucible of South Africa 20 years ahead (...), a green oasis of serenity (...) had become South Africa's dumpster (...) the epicentre of drug trafficking, and a gigantic brothel peopled with HIV-positive or syphilitic Ghanaian or Nigerian hookers... All buildings (...) had become transit camps for illegal immigrants. (...) Zondi wasn't too sad to be living far from this squalor*²³

Crime is rampant as Despreez's direct, dry writing suggests with endless lists of gruesome offences: assault and theft caused by gross inequality ('...thousands of houses belonging to filthy rich white folks which were just a crowbar away and guarded by famished phoney armed response guards, who would open the door with a smile in return for a few rags'²⁴), daily violence trivialized ('...a hi-jacking every six hours, a violent murder every twelve hours and a few rape or domestic violence cases in between', what Zondi calls 'his routine occupations'²⁵), Nigerian criminals who took advantage of the transition period, sex and drug trades run by Chinese triads, etc.

The criticism extends to the ANC's 'socialist' government, held responsible for the failure. Condemnation goes from the ironic ('The ANC had always been a bureaucratic organisation in which every little thing was recorded, whether it be

²¹ La salle Buffalo était une salle pouilleuse et à peine éclairée qui puait la transpiration et le liniment. Le matériel était minable et sale et la décoration était à gerber. (...) Le sergent Bertie Booysen était effectivement aussi pouilleux que sa salle (107).

²² Dans les années quatre-vingt-dix, avec la libération des Noirs et l'avènement de la démocratie, E'Goli avait coulé... Joburg était devenu en moins de dix ans un immense dépotoir et un marché aux puces pour receleurs et trafiquants panafricains sans papiers ni scrupules. (...) Joubert Park (accueillait) des hordes de toxicomanes (65-66).

²³ '...un joyeux Harlem tropical, (...) avec vingt ans d'avance, le creuset de l'Afrique du Sud (...), une oasis de verdure et de sérénité (...), en était devenu la poubelle...l'épicentre du trafic de drogue, doublé d'un gigantesque claque peuplé de putes ghanéennes ou nigérianes séropositives ou syphilitiques (...) Tous les immeubles (...) s'étaient transformés en camps de transit pour immigrants illégaux. (...) Zondi n'avait pas été fâché de vivre loin de cette décrépitude' (65).

²⁴ '...des milliers de baraques de Blancs bourrés d'oseille à portée de pied-de-biche et gardées par des vigiles de pacotille affamés qui ne demandent qu'à ouvrir la porte en échange d'un biffeton' (14).

²⁵ '...un hi-jacking toutes les six heures, un meurtre violent toutes les douze heures et quelques viols ou violences conjugales entre les deux' ... 'ses occupations routinières (30).

purchasing a whole building or a pen (...) good penpusher habits²⁶) to the disgusting as the party appears to be an all-powerful entity trying to cover up anything that could harm its image. To make his point, Desprez uses several real-life examples, such as the abductions and murders of children by witch doctors, which the police is ordered to hush up:

*The kidnappers (...) had cropped up at the most disastrous and harmful moment for the 'Rainbow Nation', smack in the middle of the reconciliation process and of a general election campaign. (...) The Pretoria mayor had implored the police to work the case as discreetly as possible; the ANC was celebrating its tenth year in power, and the very conservative Citizen as well as the Pretoria News, which relished in such horror stories would feast like hyenas on the government's incompetence or on black people's savagery...*²⁷

The black man was not to be stigmatized: 'South Africa had its dark side and, for now at least, it was not "politically correct" to turn the spotlight on such archaic actions, which presented black people in a less than favourable way'²⁸. Another genuine scandal appears in the novel: the government's handling of the AIDS crisis, during which '...the stupid declarations of some of moronic officials at the Department of Health had explained that AIDS might be cured with beetroot juice or onion marmalade!'²⁹. This is a direct reference to Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, the current health minister, who declared in 2004 that AIDS could be fought by eating garlic, lemon, beetroot and potatoes. Since she took office, HIV infection levels have failed to fall (by mid-2006, 5.5 million people were HIV positive³⁰, and life expectancy has dropped to a miserable 50 years). Nicknamed 'Dr Beetroot' or 'Dr No' or even 'Dr Death', she has earned a reputation for being 'stubborn, unapologetic and incredibly uncooperative'³¹, and received international condemnation³².

The ANC also failed to deliver on its socialist redistribution and egalitarian promises, that remain mere incantations for the masses. The new black bourgeoisie has moved out to the suburbs into exclusive neighbourhoods ('The beautiful neighbourhoods of Atteridgeville'³³), but behind the pleasant set meant for the happy few, most of the 'historically disadvantaged' (ANC parlance for poor blacks) have not enjoyed the fruit of the ANC's policies. Thus nothing had changed for

²⁶ 'L'ANC avait toujours été une organisation viscéralement bureaucratique qui notait tout et rien, de l'achat d'un immeuble à celui d'un stylo (...) les bonnes habitudes de rond-de-cuir' (63).

²⁷ 'Les rabatteurs d'enfants (...) étaient apparus sous le jour le plus désastreux et le plus pénalisant pour la 'Nation Arc en Ciel' en pleine réconciliation et en pleine campagne électorale. (...) Le maire de Pretoria avait supplié la police de suivre l'affaire avec la plus grande discrétion; l'ANC fêtait son dixième anniversaire au pouvoir, et le très conservateur *Citizen* et le *Pretoria News*, toujours friands de ce genre de faits divers, allaient se repaître comme des hyènes de la nullité des autorités ou de la sauvagerie des Noirs' (20-21).

²⁸ 'L'Afrique du Sud avait sa part d'ombre et, pour le moment en tout cas, il n'était pas 'politiquement correct' de braquer les projecteurs sur des comportements archaïques qui présentaient les Noirs sous un jour peu flatteur' (18).

²⁹ 'Les propos imbéciles de quelques officiels incultes du ministère de la Santé avaient laissé entendre qu'on pouvait soigner le sida avec du jus de betterave ou de la confiture d'oignon !' (18)

³⁰ Richard KNIGHT, *South Africa 2006, Population and HIV/AIDS*, November 2006
<<http://richardknight.homestead.com/files/SouthAfrica2006-PopulationandHIV-AIDS.pdf>>

³¹ Health South Africa, Health Minister is clearly a minister in poor health, Feb. 17, 2007
<http://zahealth.blogspot.com/>

³² IOL, Beetroot Leaves Sour Taste in Manto's Mouth, Dec. 20, 2006,
<http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=iol1166624391618B232>

³³ 'Les jolis quartiers d'Atteridgeville' (46).

Samuel Moroka, one of the boxers, whose house 'could have been used in the museum of apartheid to illustrate the condition of black servants under the former regime, *except that 10 years had elapsed...*'³⁴ (emphasis mine). The segregationist past and the democratic present are on a par. The bouts take place in an abandoned railway tunnel on an old mining site, whose entrance is described as 'the gaping and dark mouth of a tunnel from where rose a deafening racket'³⁵, very much the hellish depths which the mine pit used to be for blacks. The recycling of an industrial site into a boxing arena is emblematic: on the surface, things have changed, but deep down, the black man still dies shedding his sweat, manipulated by the white man for profit. The only difference is that 'kaffir (black) bashing' can no longer take place in the open. Skin colour defined who one was and consequently where power lay. Now money justifies the new social hierarchy and success is defined by the brand of car one drives ('Money had no colour in the new South Africa'³⁶). A new set of values has replaced the old one, but the balance of power has not changed: the rich and mighty still have the upper hand. In this system, the ANC revealed itself for what it is: another political party whose unscrupulous upstart executives are interested in quick financial retribution. Desprez hits at the 'fat cats' who were in the right place at the right time and reaped the fruit of the country's liberation – and liberalization – opposing ironically 'the brand new BMW and the worn-down minibuses, overflowing with the almost equal New South Africans'³⁷, and commenting bitterly on 'the posh suburbs of Waterkloof and Fairie Glenn where the loaded Cabinet ministers and yuppies of the New South Africa lived and crashed at night'³⁸. Zondi shares the traditional populist view of those disappointed by the post-apartheid settlement: that it boiled down to financial arrangements. 'Politicians on both sides hadn't failed to agree to lay the foundations of the New South Africa by getting together on what promised to be a most enjoyable gravy train ride'³⁹. Put bluntly, the ANC betrayed the cause.

*The ANC's 'red devils', running the country comfortably, became unashamed free-market supporters who started with barely a tinge of pink to start with and finished like die-hard capitalists (...) The kingpins had jumped straight out of the paddy wagon and into a Jaguar XJ8...*⁴⁰

Even more shocking is the fate of those who genuinely fought for the cause, the former freedom fighters. Zondi learns about the Quadro camp, run by the Mbokodo, the police of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the ANC's armed wing. Quadro (nicknamed 'an African gulag' or 'Buchenwald') was a reeducation camp, notorious for its treatment of 'traitors', in fact men who were just critical of the direction taken by the movement and refused to blindly obey absurd orders. Such was the case of

³⁴ 'La maison aurait pu figurer au musée de l'apartheid pour illustrer la condition des domestiques noirs sous l'ancien régime, sauf que dix ans avaient passé...' (99).

³⁵ '...la bouche béante et noire d'un tunnel où résonnait un vacarme assourdissant (195).

³⁶ 'L'argent n'avait plus de couleur dans la Nouvelle Afrique du Sud' (108).

³⁷ 'Les BMW neuves et les minibus délabrés et bondés des Nouveaux Sud-Africains presque tous égaux' (11).

³⁸ 'Les banlieues chic de Waterkloof et Fairie Glenn où crèchent les ministres et les yuppies friqués de la Rainbow Nation' (13).

³⁹ 'Les politiciens des deux bords n'avaient pas manqué de s'entendre pour poser les bases de la Nouvelle Afrique du Sud en se partageant un fromage qui promettait d'être nourrissant' (78).

⁴⁰ Les 'diabes rouges' de l'ANC, confortablement installés aux affaires, devenaient sans vergogne des libéraux à peine teintés de rose pour commencer et des capitalistes purs et durs pour finir (...) Les vrais grossiums étaient passés presque direct du fourgon cellulaire à la Jaguar six cylindres (158).

Pat Mofokeng who refused to join MPLA troops to fight the Pretoria and CIA-supported UNITA in Angola, and was considered as a rebel to be disciplined.

*He was also one of the obscure victims of the system in general, of History, of apartheid, of the left-wing revolutions and even of the ANC, the organisation which had raised him and then annihilated him.*⁴¹

But not only did the ANC leave its own men to be crushed, it let them down even after the liberation.

*Most MK fighters, who had never had the chance to fight anyone to free South Africa, had returned home disillusioned, in complete indifference and anonymity, convinced that they were and had been useless. History had squandered them.*⁴²

Those who had remained in South Africa accused the exiles of taking advantage of the European and African support and living a good life. But Mofokeng 'had never "gotten fat" anywhere of course (...) His soul was still in exile in his own country today (...) A sad and unfair trial between brothers'⁴³. Mofokeng, who was taken for a ride for all those years, stands in contrast with the post-liberation fat cats.

The Congress tries to keep these troublemakers under control because they may soil the mythical image of the liberation heroes and the glorious official history ('The ANC, the rising star of the liberation movements, was not to be stained'⁴⁴). This is the role of Jackie 'Beria' Tshabalala, head of the ANC information and intelligence service and close counsel of President Mandela, 'the eyes and ears of the president' who never forgot anything, a Robben Island veteran, described as 'an aristocrat of the struggle'⁴⁵, keen to keep the legacy of the fight unstained. Zondi refuses to do what he asks him (accuse a far right Afrikaner movement of the crimes) to help the ANC just before the election, because he has no proof. Tshabalala illustrates how much 'the ANC's strength was that it had remained a Stalinist organization'⁴⁶. Hence the stinging feeling of the ANC's ingratitude. Like Mofokeng, the former heroes feel out of place and at a loss in the new South Africa they dreamt about. 'All of us who had come back in the early 90s really felt like we had missed a page'⁴⁷. Some are left on the roadside, outcasts in their own country, left without a role to play. Worse still, they were used and abused by the ANC for nothing: 'All he was able to do was carry a piece and blow up bridges and electricity pylons, skills that were not precisely useful in the young Rainbow Nation, awash in a building frenzy.'⁴⁸

⁴¹ 'Il était aussi une de ces obscures victimes du système en général, de l'Histoire, de l'apartheid, des révolutions de gauche et même de l'ANC, l'organisation qui l'avait élevé et ensuite anéanti' (77).

⁴² 'Les combattants du MK, qui pour la plupart n'avaient jamais eu l'occasion de combattre qui que ce soit pour libérer l'Afrique du Sud, étaient rentrés à la maison, dépités, dans l'indifférence et l'anonymat, convaincus d'être et d'avoir été inutiles. Des "gaspillés" de l'Histoire' (78).

⁴³ 'Il ne s'était jamais engraisé nulle part évidemment. (...) Son âme était toujours aujourd'hui en exil dans son propre pays... Triste et injuste procès entre frères' (78-9).

⁴⁴ 'Il ne fallait surtout pas salir l'ANC, l'étoile montante des mouvements de libération' (79).

⁴⁵ '...les yeux et les oreilles du président ... un aristocrate de la lutte' (67).

⁴⁶ 'La force de l'ANC (...) c'était précisément d'être resté une organisation stalinienne' (70).

⁴⁷ 'Nous tous, qui étions revenus au début des années quatre-vingt-dix, nous avons réellement l'impression d'avoir loupé un épisode' (79).

⁴⁸ 'Il ne savait rien faire d'autre que de porter un flingue ou de dynamiter des ponts ou des pylônes, une spécialité pas vraiment utile dans la jeune Rainbow Nation où la tendance était plutôt de construire tous azimuts...' (73).

Desprez is extremely ironic about the myths of the New South Africa, denouncing the insistence on the symbolic and the political correctness, which mask out reality. Many concepts of the newspeak of the New South Africa ('the Miracle', the 'Liberation' – with a capital L, which confers it a miraculous aura, 63 – the 'Rainbow Nation', 'nation-building' etc.) are denounced as empty shells. 'Economic patriotism' is a case in point. After killing their sixth victim, the murderers planted a small South African flag by his head mocking a slogan of the Department of Trade & Industry meant to promote national products: 'Clearly, the murderer was taking the mickey of the police by playing it *Proudly South African*'.⁴⁹ More significant though is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), an institution which embodied reconciliation by offering amnesty 'to persons who make full disclosure of all the relevant facts'⁵⁰ relating to 'gross violations of human rights' as long as they were related to political crimes. But although truth was a founding principle of the democratic transition, it appeared that the ANC as an institution did not play the game after former ANC camp prisoners made revelations and sent an open letter to Nelson Mandela in April 1990⁵¹. Some of the violations were exposed by the TRC, but apparently to no avail. Mofokeng explains he was let down by the TRC:

*Even the TRC's great reconciliation had not been able to give back their dignity to these hurting exiles during the endless sessions and the great outpouring of witness accounts, which in the end resembled more an expiatory psychodrama than an enterprise of justice.*⁵²

The feeling of betrayal and incomprehension reaches its apex when white torturers seem to attract more compassion than them, while they felt like 'suspects in our own country... sacrificed ... pariahs...' ⁵³ as the reconciliation imperative took its toll on people's memories.

*In the maelstrom of events, everybody had a short memory...*⁵⁴

*With its long-winded procedure and the diluted, sleep-inducing witness accounts, the TRC had ended up dulling everything out and smothering the longing for justice of most victims... Even if the result had been generally positive, many plaintiffs had been frustrated and irremediably exhausted.*⁵⁵

Eventually, the TRC, a sacred cow of the new democracy, appears as a parody of justice because the storytelling of murderers was deemed more credible than that of ANC victims.

Zondi rejects the 'religious-redemptive'⁵⁶ settlement and the spiritual dimension of the 'miracle' embodied in the TRC. In an ironical echo of the TRC's procedure of

⁴⁹ 'De toute évidence, le tueur se payait la tête de la police en la jouant *proudly South African*' (86).

⁵⁰ "Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act n°34 1995", Cape Town: Republic of South Africa Government Gazette, <http://www.truth.org.za/legal/act9534.htm/>

⁵¹ An Open Letter to Nelson Mandela from ex-ANC detainees, April 14, 1990. <http://www.revolutionary-history.co.uk/supplem/Hirson/Quadro.html>

⁵² Même la grande réconciliation de la TRC n'avait pas su rendre à ces exilés meurtris leur dignité pendant les audiences sans fin et le grand débailage qui avait fini par ressembler à un psychodrame expiatoire plus qu'à une entreprise de justice (78).

⁵³ '...suspects dans notre propre pays... sacrifiés... parias (78).

⁵⁴ 'Dans le maelström des événements, tout le monde avait la mémoire courte.'

⁵⁵ 'La TRC, avec son train de sénateur procédurier et la dilution soporifique des témoignages, avait fini par tout banaliser et par avoir raison du désir de justice de la plupart des victimes... Même si le bilan avait été globalement positif, de nombreux plaignants avaient été frustrés mais irréversiblement usés' (89).

⁵⁶ Richard WILSON, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*, Oxford UP, Oxford, 2001.

confession and pardon, there is the dirty confession of one of the criminals, Willie Marais: 'His witness was happy to relieve his conscience (...) he spoke. Better still, he confessed (...) With each revelation, his witness seemed to look for absolution or at least understanding'⁵⁷. Of course, there will be no pardon for the murderer, who is caught and punished. When a serial killer nicknamed 'Le Taxi' is finally arrested, the lofty principles of the New South Africa are immediately shaken to the core by the gut reaction of most people, which corresponds to what many South Africans actually think. 'The death penalty had been abolished since the Liberation, but several judges had suggested that it should be reinstated for the Taxi... To no avail: there's no joking around with the great principles of the Rainbow Nation'⁵⁸. Maybe the culture of human rights needs to be imposed from above because the people is not ready to adopt it voluntarily.

Perhaps the flimsiest myth is racial equality. As the book unfolds, it appears that racial stereotypes and caricatures are used spontaneously and massively. As much as social mixing, multiculturalism, or racial mixing, defended as a primary goal of modern South Africa, is far from being dominant and accepted. All characters are primarily defined by race and ethnicity. Zondi's chief is immediately said to be Indian, his colleagues are defined by their being Portuguese or Afrikaner. Talking about the whites who leave the country to go to Australia and New Zealand, one protagonist says: 'If you want to leave, leave at the right time. But remember, when the Jews are leaving it's too early, when the Portuguese are leaving, it's too late'⁵⁹. Koos Pistorius, the leader of the criminal gang whose name indicates that he is Afrikaner, is typified as a mad, racist, violent, bigamous fanatic. During the boxing fights, 'Oom Koos, too, was in a trance and all that interested him was the blood running'⁶⁰. Of course, he is a former soldier, who served as an officer in the Kovoet police, an élite counter insurgency unit in South-West Africa with an heroic aura for those nostalgic of the apartheid régime. As expected, the man in charge of the financial aspect of the fights is Chinese. Zondi fills the blanks spontaneously. When he learns about a white man who owns a game reserve in the north, he knows who he is instantly ('Even before he had met his witness, Zondi, as usual, had the impression that he knew everything about him'⁶¹) and goes on with a description of the typical Boer: a churchgoer with a *bakkie* (pick-up truck), making his own *biltong* (dried meat typical of Southern Africa) and living in the *veld*. In other words, Zondi masters essentialism. Essentialism is the idea that a person's, or a group's, identity is fixed and intangible, and the elements which characterize the forms and substance (a name, skin colour, a place of residence, a psychological trait e.g.) automatically entail certain consequences⁶². But what matters here is that Zondi uses these racial masks as significant tools to work his cases – these masks don't need to, and

⁵⁷ 'Son témoin était soulagé de pouvoir libérer sa conscience (...) il parla. Mieux, il se confessa (...) A chaque révélation, son témoin semblait chercher l'absolution, ou du moins la compréhension' (163-4).

⁵⁸ 'La peine de mort était abolie depuis la Libération, mais plusieurs magistrats avaient proposé de la restaurer pour le Taxi... En vain, on ne joue pas avec les grands principes de la Rainbow Nation' (35).

⁵⁹ 'Quitte à partir il faut partir au bon moment, mais souviens-toi, quand les Juifs s'en vont c'est trop tôt et quand les Portugais s'en vont c'est trop tard' (158).

⁶⁰ 'Oom Koos était en transe lui aussi et plus rien ne l'intéressait que le sang qui coulait' (200).

⁶¹ 'Avant même de rencontrer son témoin, Zondi, comme d'habitude, avait l'impression de presque tout savoir sur lui...' (153)

⁶² For a seminal discussion of essentialism in colonial and post-colonial contexts, see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978.

actually must not, be pulled down because they are useful *as masks*, as clues to move forward in his investigation.

Yet a feeling of uneasiness stems from the cop's reliance on essentialism, because he actually follows the categories established by apartheid, which set out to essentialize ethnic groups so as to maintain white domination over the non-white majority. A name and an address are consubstantial to a person for they immediately conjure up a profile and allow Zondi to draw reliable conclusions; yet race, encapsulated in names and addresses, were the two dimensions of the Group Areas Act of 1950, a fundamental apartheid law which assigned people their place of residence by virtue of their skin colour. It is sometimes hard not to see the novel's characters as a series of essentialized caricatures paying lip service to downright racism, as cultural features of particular groups degenerate into clichés and prejudices. Conversely, Zondi's description as a man who can talk all the local languages and feels at ease with everyone may be interpreted as the essentialization of the modern South African.

A side lesson is that South Africa must live with the aching burden of apartheid's essentializing philosophy and the totalitarian presence of the spontaneous categories of race and ethnicity. There are funny or ironic comments on the permanence of ethnic characteristics. Many of them have to do with language and political correctness. Zondi's boss, Payadachee,

*had been told off so often in Afrikaans that he uses it instinctively when he loses it. You're absolutely right, Zondi, Afrikaans is to yell and give orders, English is for demonstrations and self-justifications, and you know what I do with your self-justifications. And if you don't like it, you can always go and whine in Zulu.*⁶³

Each language has attributes corresponding to the alleged nature of its speakers (English is the language of the cry-baby liberals, Afrikaans is associated to the violence of the forces of coercion e.g.). Political correctness is denounced as mere hypocrisy:

*Ian never used the word kaffir to speak about blacks... It had been difficult at the beginning, but now it became natural. He said boykkie instead of kaffir. No one ever said kaffir anymore, even if many people thought it out so loud when they said 'sir' or 'madam' that the word could actually be heard squeaking in their mouths. Sometimes, Ian said 'the Africans' but he too was African after all and he didn't like to mix it all up like that. He had also tried elusive expressions like 'those people', but he could feel it was slightly racist. He wasn't stupid enough not to draw the line between right and wrong. It's just that in the past ten years, he'd had to move the line a little.*⁶⁴

⁶³ 'Payadachee s'est tellement fait engueuler en afrikaans que ça lui revient tout seul lorsqu'il sort de ses gonds... Vous avez parfaitement raison, Zondi, l'afrikaans c'est fait pour gueuler et pour donner des ordres... L'anglais, c'est bon pour revendiquer et pour se justifier et vos justifications, vous savez où je me les mets. Et si ça ne vous plaît pas vous pouvez toujours aller chialer en zoulou' (12).

⁶⁴ 'Ian ne disait jamais kaffir en parlant des Noirs... Au début il avait eu du mal, mais maintenant ça venait tout seul, il disait boykkie à la place de kaffir. Plus personne ne disait kaffir, même si beaucoup de gens le pensaient tellement fort en disant monsieur ou madame que le mot grinçait dans leur bouche. Quelquefois Ian disait les Africains, mais lui aussi était africain finalement et ça l'ennuyait un peu de tout mélanger comme ça... Il avait aussi essayé des locutions embrouillées comme 'ces gens-là', mais il sentait que ça avait un petit fond raciste. Il n'était quand même pas con au point de ne pas savoir tirer un trait entre le bien et le mal. C'est juste que depuis dix ans il avait été forcé de changer un peu la place du trait' (15).

Hypocrisy may take more gruesome and cynical forms. The boxing fights were just '...a means to indulge in kaffir-bashing while keeping your hands clean and making a little bit of money on top'⁶⁵. The question this raises is to know if apartheid was 'right' after all or if it merely helped to crystallize characteristics which now appear to be the truth.

Zondi's 'racial' behaviour could be a simple tool to reach his goal; he could be pretending to accept essentialization for short-term purposes, while morally rejecting it. His attitude could be read as an instance of strategic essentialism, as defined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak⁶⁶. Strategic essentialism is a form of essentialism used willingly by groups, especially oppressed ones, to present themselves, emphasizing some of their alleged dominant traits simplistically, for a precise, often political, pragmatic gain. By essentializing themselves, they make use of their oppressors' odious weapons, except that the qualities are ascribed by the group itself not by others (racists e.g.) and the essence is recognized as a construction meant to achieve certain goals, not as something true. Such is not exactly the case for Zondi. He is certainly aware that he relies on caricatures – 'Zondi somewhat hated himself for using such caricatures'⁶⁷ – he even does so voluntarily and justifies his attitude pragmatically by professional gain:

*He could have made the same true portrait of a polygamous Zulu cop, an Indian accountant specialised in earnings management, a Joburg Jewish lawyer or a Cape Province Coloured fisherman... He didn't have any scruples to use such clichés because experience taught him that he was always right... All those people belonged to his tribe or to nearby tribes, ad it was precisely his job to know them.*⁶⁸

This sentence shows that Zondi is convinced that groups' essences do partake of the truth. His acceptance of the racial structure (organised in 'tribes') may simply be a matter of common sense. If he did not accept the rules, he wouldn't be able to adapt to his environment altogether. As a South African investigator, Zondi's essential quality is precisely his knowledge of the racial codes, which helps him work his case correctly. He may feel guilty about it but it doesn't matter: the end justifies the means. The reader even sees that Zondi is always right about people. Far from being a calculated strategy, his reliance on essentialism appears sincere and natural.

Zondi's voyage through his own country leads him to solve his case and discover that little has changed since the Liberation. The ANC failed to reconcile the country and promoted division among Blacks who supposedly fought as one against tyranny. It did not deliver on its promises to offer a better life to the masses as an unbridled free market and financial arrangements led a small oligarchy to confiscate both power and riches. The criminals who made money by sending young men to die are the cynical symbol of a liberal democratic society which offers equal rights and

⁶⁵ '...le moyen de casser du Nègre sans se salir les mains et en faisant un peu de pognon' (140).

⁶⁶ G. SPIVAK, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, strategies, dialogues*, Routledge, New York, 1990.

⁶⁷ 'Zondi s'en voulait un peu d'être aussi caricatural' (153).

⁶⁸ 'Il aurait pu broser le même portrait-vérité pour un flic zoulou polygame, un comptable indien expert en comptabilité créative, un avocat juif de Joburg ou un pêcheur métis du Cap... Il n'avait plus vraiment de scrupules à faire des raccourcis parce qu'il savait d'expérience qu'il tombait toujours juste... Tous ces gens faisaient partie de sa tribu ou des tribus voisines, et c'était précisément son boulot de la connaître' (153-4).

freedom (of enterprise) but fosters as much inequality and suffering as before. Boxing is the cliché way up from misery and into social recognition, but also a way down – or back – into domination and death. Zondi represents his country's paradoxes no less than others. Just as he claims to be wary of America, his street-name is 'Bronx'. He is part of the masquerade as a committed energetic actor (he wants to catch the murderer and plays his role as police officer in the new democratic environment), but he also constantly tries to remain a distanced, *blasé*, witness. Sadly, South Africa's national identity is haunted by the story of segregation. Racism and racial categories still provide the framework not just to understand the country but also to live in it; they form the continuum linking past and present and help see why apparently so little has changed.

Desprez intends to replace the beautiful narrative of the 'New South Africa' meant to justify the post-apartheid order with his own, which he claims to be the right one. But his orthodoxy is just as questionable as the one he claims to write over, all the more so as it is a fictional story which is claimed to be an instrument of truth. Eventually, exposing the myths which found the nation may well be just as questionable as the myths themselves.

