The Ideal and the Real
Adriano Bugliani

Discussing the internal dynamics of the psyche, Jung refers to certain problems in the life of the individual in which “conflict and disorientation ensue, an equally strong Yes and No which he can longer keep apart by a rational decision.” The conflict “requires a real solution and necessitates a third thing in which the opposites can unite. Here the logic of the intellect usually fails, for in a logical synthesis there is no third. The ‘solvent’ can only be of an irrational nature.”

Often things are not so different in politics. If in South Africa we had imagined an attempted agreement between the whites and the black “minorities,” and between the black “minorities” themselves – to use a paradoxical but not meaningless expression of P. W. Botha, the Prime minister and subsequently the President of South Africa in the 1980s – it is hard to believe that any genuine solution would be found. Confronted by such a complex calculation, political reasoning in the usual sense would have been insufficient, including rational considerations of one’s own interests (as the case of Palestine shows, forms of imposed segregation are not ultimately in the interest of the dominant power itself). And nor, I believe, would it have been effective simply to appeal to a democratic ideal that is very remote from the terrible post-colonial history of the country.

I am not merely talking about “forgiveness” here, which is also a dimension of the irrational, insofar as this derives neither from a direct moral obligation, from any sense of: “you must,” nor from a calculation that forgiveness could prove advantageous, quite apart from its character as a spontaneous act of goodwill. I am talking about the fact that even when all of the premises for change are given – the meaning and the advantages of forgiveness, the hope for something new, the weariness with continuing violence, considerations of political interest etc. – it is still quite possible that a genuine solution fails to be found. Such a solution has still not been found in Palestine, even if the great majority of people now desire it, on both sides to the dispute. Mandela had the ability to contain, to hold together, all the ingredients of a potential reaction to rapidly changing circumstances. If the whites and the blacks continued to live in proximity with one another in a

2 See La Repubblica, 14 June 1984, p. 10.
broadly peaceful and equal manner that appears extremely unusual and surprising, given the previous history, this was greatly assisted by the patience of a man tempered by almost three decades in prison: it is impossible to believe that Mandela’s faith in this regard was that of a man given to simple or naive illusions. The prison years contributed to Mandela’s charisma and to his credibility in the eyes of those on both sides, to a certain standing that was indispensable to the final outcome: indispensable but not sufficient.

That there is so little “talk” in the film precisely reflects, it seems to me, the fact that the emergence of a common cause – a res publica – of black and white alike is entrusted not to explicit dialogue, but to a deeper and more unfathomable labour, to a level that generates an ethos that reason could not produce – the ethos of a new South Africa. One would not perhaps have expected that many words from rugby captain François, yet the words he addresses to his team are surely fewer than the usual cinematographic conventions would lead one to expect, at least in my experience: there are no memorable phrases, no central dramatic scenes. The entire film stands under the sign of measure or restraint, of “less” where we might rather expect “more.” Even Morgan Freeman does not allow himself many words in those moments which could have been treated as big scenes in the usual American manner (such as his arrival by helicopter at the team training ground), and this in a film that in large part is truly his. It is true that some critics have described Invictus a rhetorical film. But I think that this aesthetic sense of measure corresponds to the fact that political reasons and considerations have encountered their ultimate limit – every obvious horror of the apartheid system has already been evident for some time – and everyone involved in the process more or less clearly recognizes this.

This sense of measure, of the limits of discourse, recalls Bille August’s film Goodbye Bafana (2007). In this excellent film too we see that James, the white prison guard, gets to know Mandela with the passing of time, rather than with words, and indeed only after a long period of time. And even when understanding has turned into a kind of friendship, the two men still exchange few words with one another. The chasm that separated their experience could not be surmounted by discourse, the encounter between them transpired on a quite different level. Their mutual propinquity was certainly indispensable. But for people to see and interact with one another, day after day, is not always sufficient here. If some of the Springbok players had never before really seen the shacks and hovels of the black population, and their eyes were opened by the experience, there were prison guards other than James who had also seen Mandela over a very long time, but, unlike James, had understood nothing.

Yet the limits of dialogue do not imply the absence of ideals. For it is obvious that Mandela is, at the same time, a man of enormously strong ideals, and also of great shrewdness. It is through the integration of these two elements that his political genius saw the opportunity of investing these ideals in a symbol, in the game of rugby, rather than appealing to a democratic ideal and applying political reason in one way or another. The symbol says much with little. It brings people together without recourse to words or principles that blacks and whites might find very remote, and perhaps for similar reasons. For Greek, European, Western democracy is not something that is immediately at home in South Africa, at least in the sense that it would require a

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3 The judgement of M. Mancuso, for example, is particularly harsh. See Il Foglio, 27 February 2010.
highly realistic rather than overly ideal embodiment for South Africans. And this, on the other hand, is also the eternally problematic side of democracy: Mandela’s men are not happy with the overtures that must be made to the whites, and the whites feel threatened at the prospect of sharing the domain of the common good, of sharing social and economic resources in a more equitable fashion.

The need to compromise in this situation is a sign of reality, and represents a dominant tone in the film itself. Reality always appears rather “besmirched” in comparison the ideal. But the relations between the real and the ideal need not be grasped in terms of mutual exclusion or subordination. On the concrete plane, this signifies that the blacks take on more “reality,” or more power and wellbeing, and the whites take on more of the “ideal” in the overabundant reality they already enjoy. In the film Mandela effectively says: I shall offer you an ideal, and this is the most surprising, and the most effective, aspect of his political genius. For this is what works on the whites, and indeed presupposes a knowledge of their world, even of their inner world (“I have studied them,” as Mandela puts it). After all, it is the whites who need to be convinced. Mandela grasped that the bare existence of wealth and luxury was not enough for the whites themselves, quite apart from the privations this imposed on the black population. It is humiliating for human beings to drown in senseless wealth, and is especially humiliating to be seen to do so. Mandela says: we (= you) shall no longer be a scandal in the eyes of the entire world. At any rate, this wealth and this absolute power are now a wound for the consciousness – for the very identity – of any Western individual. A wound not indeed for the criminal or incurable egoist, but for the ordinary individuals who constitute the overwhelming majority of the white population of South Africa. For every such person, for a part of every such person, it had become intolerable to go on living alongside millions of poverty-stricken people who are effectively deprived of civil rights.

In conclusion: throughout the film we sense that the encounter between the blacks and the whites can by no means be guaranteed. In the quarters of Mandela’s bodyguards, for example, they do not waste many words either. On the other hand, we know that rational grounds and considerations have hardly proved effective in the history of humanity, in spite of their claims and pretensions to the contrary. I think the greatness of Mandela both in the film and in reality consists in an unshakeable trust (expressed in W. H. Henley’s poem) combined with a sober lack of illusions regarding the resources of expressly rational politics. He has understood that democratic dialogue, pace Habermas, is not necessarily transparent or sufficient here. Of course, Mandela could not have achieved everything that he has if he had not been a fundamentally good human being – albeit also a very real one, as we can clearly see from his relationship with his own family.4

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4 In Ridley Scott’s film Gladiator (2000) the Emperor, Commodus, announces that he will give the people “a vision of Rome” through the games staged in the Coliseum, but unlike Mandela he is not a good man and brings nothing but a perverted ideal to birth.
Brothers, Sisters, Comrades
Andrea Panzavolta

1. O koinon autadelphon kara
In a crucial scene of the film *Invictus* President Mandela addresses the members of the newly elected National Sports Committee, who had just decided to dissolve the Springboks, the national rugby team that was lionized by the Afrikaners and was thus also a symbol of apartheid, with the words “Brothers, sisters, comrades.” This apostrophe may recall that with which the *Antigone* of Sophocles begins: “O koinon autadelphon Ismenes kara.”

If we exclude the instantly comprehensible vocative expressions here, the other three words of the phrase reveal a polysemic richness that it is impossible to capture fully (to use a graphic image of Benjamin’s: they are the lightning flash and the commentary is merely “the thunder which follows and resounds long afterwards”). Nonetheless, it is worth reflecting on this Sophoclean *incipit* since it may provide a useful means for analyzing the conflictual conditions so well narrated by Eastwood in his recent film.

It is three words, then, that we must consider here, if only briefly: “O koinon autadelphon [...] kara.” The first word, *koinon*, harbors an enigmatic double meaning: it signifies “common”, “widely shared,” “pertaining to all,” but also “of the same blood” and “of a single origin.” The hendiadys included in the adjective *koinon* is reinforced by the adjective that immediately follows, *autadelphon*, which signifies “of one’s own brother (or sister).” These words disclose a number of extraordinary implications if we consider the threefold parental bond that links Antigone and Ismene (as daughters Oedipus and Jocasta, nieces of Jocasta, sisters of the son of Laius). But what interests us here is the way in which this adjective only serves to underline the identity, the bond of blood, the fact of being precisely *adelphoi*, born from the selfsame *delphys*, from a single “womb.”

The third and final word, *kara*, provokes an eminently paradoxical reflection on the ambiguity of the human condition, an ambiguity already miraculously captured in the two powerful and concordant adjectives that precede it. The Greek word signifies “head,” but also “look” or “aspect.” Thus besides being one part of the body, *kara* is also that which makes that body unique and irreducible, with its own distinctive individuality. And yet – here is the paradox – this head is *koinon*, common to Antigone and Ismene: the head of the one is that of the other, and vice versa (we are inevitably reminded here of the extremely famous image in the film *Persona* where Bergman combines the heads of Liv Ullman and Bibi Anderson as a single image).

To adopt another almost unfathomable epithet from *Antigone*, we could describe the incipit of this Sophoclean drama as something truly *deinon*, as *tremendum effascinans*: it reveals how human beings are marked by an irrepressible duality since belonging to the same *genos* is, in certain respects, the most universal socio-biological factor of all, while in other respects it is also the most particular and specific one.

This duality – which in *Antigone* also assumes specific grammatical form through the repeated use of the dual – also marks the opening words with which Mandela addresses the members of the sporting committee. The President is well aware that he is speaking to men and women who, while belonging to the same country, sharing the
same land, as the Afrikaners, have long been marginalized by the Afrikaners in this respect. South Africa is *koinon*: a single country, yet divided between two *genoi* – the blacks and the whites – that are individually specific and thus irreducibly singular (and each moreover speaks its own idiom or tongue, that is to say, an “exclusive” and “particular” language, one that belongs to “a specific clan or group,” as the Greek origins of the word *idiom* suggests).

The speech Mandela addresses to his former comrades in arms thus provides an illuminating exegesis of the Sophoclean conception of *koinonia*, of a common domain, while simultaneously indicating the overcoming of this conception. It is an exegesis because Mandela recognizes, without dissimulation, the significance of both horns of the problem – the “I” as opposed to the first person plural, the dimension of individuality (at once the private sphere guaranteed by law and also the fertile ground of pernicious endogamous relations) as opposed to the dimension of sociality (at once the leaven that permits human beings to open themselves to the other and also an occasion for totemic regression). But is also an overcoming because it shows the only possible path to take: the path towards the epiphany of the other.

2. The most difficult objective

In the middle of the 19th century the Russian socialist Alexander Herzen wrote: “To embrace the entire breadth, the reality, the sacred character of the rights of the person without destroying society, without fragmenting it into atoms, this is the most difficult social objective.” Mandela achieves this objective through a brilliant political intuition: the idea of transforming the *Springboks* into the national rugby team of the entire nation – where the motto will be “one team, one country” – and of winning the upcoming world championship.

In his speech to the members of the sporting committee – a massively political speech since it is concerned with founding a new polis that can make a break with the past) – Mandela explains his reasons for acting as he does: I know the whites very well, I have studied them closely for twenty seven years; I have studied them closely: without *studium*, without “passion,” “desire,” “love,” “zeal,” or “concern” (and these are all meanings of the Latin word) it is impossible to approach the other. Proximity, therefore, is not simply the sharing of a *genos*, or of a particular language, but is a movement conducted towards the other, and indeed above all a movement towards ourselves. The greatest victory achieved by Mandela during his twenty seven years of imprisonment is thus the recognition that the other lies within us.

It is entirely consistent with this assumption that the portrait of Mandela that Eastwood offers us is anything but uniform or one-dimensional. On the contrary, it is one traversed by contradictions, by failures, by fears. Alongside the image of the indomitable leader who freely assumes the risks of responsible action, we are presented with other faces of Mandela too: the prisoner who knows moments of acute despair, the thinking man who finds a form of resistance in literature, the father who has a difficult relationship with his own daughter.

Yet we should note that this dialectic of proximity is as remote as it is possible to be from any unctuous and thus merely edifying morality of simple welcome or acceptance. Mandela does not ask his men to embrace the Afrikaners, but to try and know them. The film is somewhat reticent on this point, but there is a good possibility,
once the initial euphoria of sporting victory has passed, that the conflicts between the blacks and the whites will be reignited once again. Nonetheless, at least one extraordinary thing has happened: both one side and the other have learnt to compare themselves with one another.

3. Now, no longer

A steep path, then, that Mandela has marked out, with no easy short cuts or quick escape routes. It resembles the path through the mountains of Moriah that was trod by Abraham “with great dread” in his heart. And not only this. The path is rendered even more arduous by the fact that it must be broached now, in this very instant.

“The past is the past.” Now it is time to build a nation. This is the message that the President communicates to his companions and associates. Mandela’s speech, then, can be read not only as a commentary on the opening line of *Antigone*, but also as a blazing translation of the *Revelation of Saint John*, the book of the Apocalypse. “Chronos ouk estai eti,” or, as the Vulgate has it: “tempus non erit amplius” (Rev. 10: 6: “there should be time no longer”). The old things have passed away; behold, all things are become new (“facta sunt omnia nova”). But they are new here and now, nun, at this moment (“idou nun kairos euprosdektos”) or again in the Vulgate version: “ecce, nunc tempus acceptabile” (2 Corinthians, 6:2: “Behold now is the accepted time”). The expectation has been fulfilled, the *parousia* is here: after twenty seven years the right moment (*kairos*) has come, but only for the supreme *krisis*, for the ultimate decision that encompasses all possible doing, all *dran*. All of those present at the meeting of the Sports Committee are called to respond to the President’s request: he asks them to change their hearts and minds now, to accomplish a radical conversion or *metanoia*.

If we pay close attention, we see that the entire film is rhythmically marked, in an almost psalmodic fashion, by a recurring request not to flee the forms of space, but to redeem them from within by living out life in its depth within the temporality of the present. It is not quantifiable time that will succeed in uniting South Africa, but only qualitative time, the time of that inner choice that is hardened in the density of decisions for others and with others: only the time that is lived as responsibility is capable of redeeming us from time, from the Chronos that devours his own children.

4. Mandela chez Guermantes

In Eastwood’s film there is a constant contrapuntal emphasis upon the fraternal bond between people. This emphasis takes different forms, but each always reaffirms the same idea: no one can claim to exist independently of the vast body of humanity.

Taken simply on their own, the life of William Ernest Henley, the author of the poem *Invictus*, the life of Nelson Mandela, the life of François Piennar, the captain of the Springboks, appear as so many isolated fragments. But if we consider these lives more closely, we realize that each life can only properly be illuminated in conjunction with those which have preceded them and those which will succeed them, like the interconnected words of an enormous ongoing phrase. The actions of Piennar are clarified in the light of Mandela, and the actions of Mandela in turn are clarified in the light of Henley. In short, innumerable individuals who were born before them are also playing alongside the Springboks on the field of Ellis Park Stadium in Johannesburg on the day of the final. But the way the Springboks play is not a copy of some past
passion, it is that very passion; it is not a servile re-transcription of paths already taken before, but the discovery of a memory that has accumulated a wealth of meanings for the present. Only in this way, as Saint Paul would add, is it possible, when the days (hemeraí) are heavy with care (ponerai), to redeem the present time (kairos).

Reflection on the mysterious bond that links the different generations of human beings with one another has found incomparable artistic expression in Proust’s A la Recherche du temps perdu, precisely in the part where the narrator describes the ball in the house of Guermantes. The narrator observes that by “introducing the past into the present without modifying it at all, just as it was in the moment when it was present” one runs the risk of suppressing “that mighty dimension of time which life follows in its self-realization.” The immense legacy of those who have preceded us cannot be a matter of simple recall, but must be a resurrection: the poem Invictus (and the “intermittences of the heart” that produce it) had the effect of infusing new life into the soul of prisoner no. 46664. Again, as Proust writes: “Precisely the fortuitous, inevitable, way in which the sensation had been encountered ensured the truth of the past that this sensation brought back to life, of the images that it released, since we feel its power of rising once again into the light, we feel the joy of a reality rediscovered.”

Only in this way does Mandela (and Piennar after him, and surely many other South Africans after him) succeed in becoming not a hero, as one of his own bodyguards acutely observes, but a man who, like the evangelist, draws old things from the past – faces, words, gestures, in short dimensions of lives that have been lived – in order to fashion new things, to dare to know and to act in the present.

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