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*Reappraising the myth of the new South Africa:  
Phaswane Mpe's Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

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**Introduction**

The political transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa naturally generated mythic representations to convey the momentousness of the event, using people, concepts and institutions to bolster its impact and, in Allister Sparks's words, to “[swell] the ineffable spirit of national rebirth” (Sparks 1996: 228). The personality of Nelson Mandela largely contributed to the popularity of a new South Africa as a land of reconciliation and renewal along with the symbol of the rainbow, the notion of “ubuntu” and the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. However a few writers were prompt to point to the lasting legacy of apartheid and in particular to the chasm that still separates the lofty ideals and values encapsulated in the myth of the new South Africa from the difficulties, frustrations and injustices a vast majority of the people of the country are still confronted with.

In this paper I want to consider to what extent Phaswane Mpe's representation of the city in his *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* offers a valid alternative metaphor to the well-publicised myth of the new

South Africa and constitutes a narrative which interprets the present and gives it meaning while laying emphasis on the complexities and ambiguities which the demise of apartheid has brought about.

### **The myth of the new South Africa**

The myth of the new South Africa reflects the nature of the political transition—a negotiated revolution—which sought to ensure that the volatile situation of the country at the time would not flare up into a bloody confrontation. It therefore sought to promote reconciliation in a united nation and foster a sense of commitment for the renewal of the country as a whole.

Roland Barthes, in his essay on myths, “The Myth Today,” asserts that a myth is not a notion or a concept but a “system of communication, a message,” and, more precisely, a semiotic form “which is not determined by the object of its message but by the way in which it represents it” (Barthes 1957: 193). It is a discourse whose components “are chosen by history” (194) but which gives the illusion of transcending history.

The signifiers used in the creation of myths carry with them the symbolic overtones of the discourses from which they have been borrowed. To understand the discursive grounding of the myth of the new South Africa we need only to refer to Nelson Mandela's speech on his inauguration on May 10 1994. Some of the expressions he used, such as “we enter into a covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall,” or “the time for the healing of wounds has come,” or again “each time one of us touches the soil of this land, we feel a sense of personal renewal,” (*The Star*, May 11 1994: 1) bring to mind a range of authoritative discourses which implicitly validate the pronouncements made by the president. These discourses articulate various forms of knowledge ranging from the legal and religious (the covenant), the historical (allusions to the divided and conflictual past of South Africa), the political (the metaphor of the nation as a living body

which needs to be healed), to the mystical (the mysterious link that binds man to the land). All these legitimating elements are finally encapsulated in the much celebrated symbol representing South Africa as “a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world” (*The Star*, May 11 1994: 1). As a result of this legitimating process, the key ideas of reconciliation, healing and truth feature prominently in the final clause of the interim Constitution of 1993, which recommended the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in the preamble of the 1996 Constitution and in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's foreword to the *Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. All these elements have contributed to the construction of a myth whose overall meaning is that the historical transition from apartheid to democracy partakes of a form of transcendence which implicitly validates the form it has taken.

### **Mpe's urban myth**

Today young South African writers, like Phaswane Mpe, take the democratic transformation of society for granted since it is now firmly entrenched by laws and legal institutions which ensure the due process of law. But they have also come to realise that the major challenge South Africa is facing today is the discrepancy between the official attribution and recognition of theoretical rights (human, civil and social rights) and the actual unfair distribution of wealth, goods and services. As a result, the mythic image of South Africa as the country of reconciliation and national rebirth, which served the miraculous transition to democracy so well, needs to be reassessed so as to convey a more appropriate idea of the real country.

Phaswane Mpe's novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is just such an attempt. The image of South Africa he constructs in this short novel has somewhat lost some of its glitter and taken on darker hues but his vision of the country is no less mythical, allegorical and people-centred.

### 1. Hillbrow

Mpe has chosen to set his story in the urban context of the notorious neighbourhood of Hillbrow, an overpopulated, high-rise neighbourhood situated one kilometer north from the central business district of Johannesburg.

As Alan Morris points out in his study of Hillbrow, *Bleakness and Light*, “Hillbrow is one of the few neighbourhoods that, despite the Group Areas Act, moved from being an all-white neighbourhood to being predominantly black” (Morris 1999: 3) As whites moved out more and more blacks moved in and particularly Africans coming from other parts of Africa: Nigeria and French-speaking countries in particular. As time passed the neighbourhood acquired a disreputable reputation and was gradually allowed to deteriorate. Thus Hillbrow carries an image of physical decline, violence, drug dealing, sexual indulgence, poverty and corruption. Yet at the same time Hillbrow was among the first neighbourhoods to be desegregated and no apartheid government succeeded in thwarting this move once it had begun (Morris 1999: 10).

Right from the outset, Mpe refers to Hillbrow in mythical terms:

[...] you knew that Hillbrow was a menacing monster... The lure of the monster was, however, hard to resist; Hillbrow has swallowed a number of the children of Tiragalong, who thought that the City of Gold was full of career opportunities for them (Mpe 2001: 3).

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that a similar image was recently found in a column of the *Mail and Guardian* in which the columnist quotes a veteran black politician, Gwede Mantashe, who comments on the political situation in South Africa today, as saying: “At this point, the revolution is about to devour its children” (Seepe 2002: 20). Mpe knows Hillbrow well and manages to construct an image of it which reflects all the contradictions and ambivalence of the real neighbourhood but which is also in keeping with the traditional mythic representation of the city. Burton Pike in his *The Image of the*

*City in Modern Literature*, for instance, considers that “the city embodies man's contradictory feelings—pride, love, anxiety, and hatred—toward the civilisation he has created and the culture he belongs” (Pike 1981: 26).

## **2. Summary**

Mpe's novel is a sad tale of love and betrayal in which many people die. Refentse, the main character, left his native village Tiragalong to study at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg where he subsequently taught as a lecturer and met Lerato, his girlfriend. He committed suicide when he realised that Lerato had betrayed him with his best friend Sammy to whom she had turned for comfort when Refentse turned melancholic for no apparent reason. His sudden change was in fact due to his mother's threat to disown him if he did not part from his girlfriend on the grounds that she was a Hillbrowan. However, prior to that, he had in more or less similar conditions, betrayed Lerato with Sammy's girlfriend, Bohahle, when she had turned to him for comfort after she had quarrelled with her lover. As a result of Refentse's suicide Lerato killed herself out of guilt, and Refentse's mother, who accidentally fell into his grave on the day of his funeral, was burnt alive by the villagers of Tiragalong alleging that her fall was a sure sign of witchcraft. In the meantime, Sammy's girlfriend was killed by a car as she was rushing to the hospital where Sammy had been admitted after being stabbed. Another female character, Refilwe, also plays an important part in the story. She hailed from the same village as Refentse and had been his girlfriend in the past until he discovered she was going out with other boys. He immediately rejected her but she kept loving him and when she went to study in Johannesburg she did her utmost to win him back from Lerato but to no avail. Her attitude towards her was also largely motivated by feelings of xenophobia since it was rumoured that her mother was a foreigner, a “*Lekwerekwere*,” a term of discredit now used to refer to non-South African Africans who are often accused of

bringing Aids and other diseases to South Africa. In fact she came from Durban. Lerato's father, Piet, was assassinated by thugs at the instigation of a villager of Tiragalong, Molori, who was urged to do so by a bone-thrower who, after consulting with his ancestors, had come to the conclusion that Molori's mother had been bewitched by a member of her family who lived close by: it so happened that it was Lerato's father. After Refentse's suicide Refilwe went to Oxford to complete her studies where she fell in love with a Nigerian and declared Aids. She eventually returns to Tiragalong to die.

### ***3. Hillbrow: a labyrinth and a map***

Beyond the entanglement of human relationships, the shift of places and the complexity of social issues, Mpe's representation of the city is coherent. It hinges around the two emblematic figures of the labyrinth and the map. The labyrinth is Hillbrow as represented at ground level, a maze of streets through which the protagonists wander, more or less at random, trying to find their bearings.

The map implies a vision from above and a precise topological layout which Mpe draws up with accuracy at the beginning of the novel by providing the names of the major streets of Hillbrow and of a few well-known buildings and places.

Hillbrow is thus caught in a dual vision—one from below and one from above—which intimates that the perception of the place should not be reduced to its rigid topographical features but should also be seen as a mental space whose meaning varies with the inhabitants' experiences and reminiscences, confirming Burton Pike's idea that, in literature, “the city [is] represented as an unstable refraction of an individual consciousness rather than as an object fixed in space” (Pike 1981: 71).

The semantic instability of Hillbrow is sustained by two factors: the discursive configuration of the novel and the spatial and temporal categories which constitute Hillbrow as a chronotope.

### **The discursive configuration of the novel**

Mpe's novel is a long monologue addressed by the narrator to Refentse who died one year before. He informs him about what happened in his absence, recalls the circumstances which led to his fateful decision and imagines what might have happened if he were still alive. From a rhetorical point of view this pseudo-conversation partakes of the allocution and occasionally of the prosopopeia. The narrator thus sets up unreal conditions of communication in which characters, dead or alive, are made to engage in conversation.

The consequences of this choice are twofold. First, the narrative pattern transgresses the categories of realistic fiction and raises questions as to the generic criteria which should be applied to interpret the story. The diegetic space of the novel is that of a unified but contradictory field of reference caught in a tension between the polar opposites of reality and unreality, the world of the living and the realm of the dead, the assertion of African religious beliefs and sheer fancy. As we shall see later, this uncertain transcendental dimension is an essential thematic component of the novel.

Second, Refentse, who is located in Heaven, is placed in the position of an omniscient interlocutor who could, if he so wished, give his own vision of the world and version of his life story. Although he never directly talks back to the the narrator, we can infer from the latter's discourse that it actually takes on the detached and ironical stance which Referentse is likely to enjoy from such a high vantage point as Heaven. As a result the narrative rings with a mixture of irony and melancholy. It exposes all the characters' betrayals, lies, illusions, false pretentions, prejudices and exposes their inadequate responses to the major social issues such as street violence, drug addiction, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the town/country divide, xenophobia.

Thus, right from the outset, the novel inserts a critical distance within a transcendental perspective recalling that of the more glamorous myth of the new South Africa but with a more ironical twist.

### **Hillbrow as a chronotope**

The meaning of this discursive configuration is reinforced by Mpe's use of the spatial and temporal categories which define Hillbrow as a chronotope.

#### ***1. Fluidity and ubiquity***

According to Mikhail Bakhtin's definition, the chronotope is an aesthetic category which operates the fusion of time and space to create an intelligible and concrete whole (Bakhtine 1978: 237). This is achieved when both are linked to man's fate in society. Bakhtin further adds that in the chronotope, time thickens, becomes compact and visible whereas space is caught in the flux of time and History. In other words, time can be seen in terms of space and space is inscribed within a temporal framework and perceived through narrative time (Bakhtine 1978: 237-238).

What characterizes Mpe's spatial representation of Hillbrow is the impression of fluidity. It is caught in the temporal flux of the narration with its impression of an ever widening space expanding from Hillbrow and flowing to such places as Alexandra, the whole of Johannesburg, rural Tiragalong, Heathrow, Oxford and eventually Heaven—with South Africa somewhere in between—as the characters move from place to place carrying with them their personal memories of Hillbrow. Conversely Hillbrow is made to merge with the outside places with which the characters are linked, as suggested in the following passage:

And as Refilwe comes to this part of her journey to AIDS and Tiragalong condemning her and the Bone of her Heart and Refilwe herself reaping the bitter fruits of the xenophobic prejudice that she had helped to sow Hillbrow and Tiragalong flowing into each in her consciousness with her new understanding of life love and prejudice gained in our Oxford and Heathrow... (Mpe: 113).

The absence of punctuation in this passage, as in several others, underscores both the ubiquity of Hillbrow and the impression of continuity which prevails in the novel. The hovering presence of the place is further suggested by the recurrent use of the eponymous formula with which the narrator ironically greets the visitors to Hillbrow, "Welcome to our Hillbrow," and which he also uses for other places, as though its spirit travelled with the characters: "Welcome to our new Hillbrow" when Referentse welcomes Lerato in Heaven (Mpe: 68), or again, "Welcome to our Hillbrow... Welcome to our Alexandra... Welcome to our Tiragalong in Johannesburg" (Mpe: 79), "Welcome to our England" (Mpe: 97).

The upshot of this combination of elements is that Hillbrow, beyond its notorious reputation, emerges as the metaphor of an open-minded and dynamic place where a living community, despite its differences, manages to survive against all odds and whose collective identity seems to have been welded by the people's stand against the prejudices with which they are confronted.

Hillbrow is thus the image of a crucible in which patterns of thought, behaviour and social differentiation inherited from various social backgrounds, are reconsidered and adapted to meet new requirements. In a sense *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* continues the tradition initiated in the 50s and 60s with the literary images of such famous neighbourhoods as Sophiatown and District Six but whereas the former represented multiracial and prejudice-free communities, isolated in a racially segregated South Africa, Mpe's Hillbrow constitutes a metonymic part of contemporary South Africa. This is why the theme of the town/country divide is given so much prominence.

Mpe uses it with a vengeance pointing out that if the racial divide which disadvantaged black people in the former dispensation had theoretically been abolished by the political transition, there now exist forms of racial discrimination among black people when it comes to the irrational fear of foreigners and of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In this respect, Mpe's novel turns out to be a rather damning indictment of a kind of parochial mentality or, more precisely, of an ethnic identity.

The butt of the narrator's attacks is Tiragalong and its inhabitants, their crass self-complacency, their gross ignorance of what city life is, their staunch prejudices and their marked propensity to detect witchcraft everywhere and resort to necklacing as a form of justice. The initial cause which brought about so many deaths is indeed located in Tiragalong: it is Refentse's mother's strong disapproval of her son's girlfriend for being a Hillbrowan and therefore an allegedly dissolute girl. Her rival, Refilwe, also fuels the rumour that Lerato, like all *Makwerekwere* women, has bewitched him. Moreover, the people of Tiragalong give full credence to the rumour that foreigners are responsible for having brought the dreaded HIV/AIDS disease into the country and as a result fully endorse decisions aimed at discriminating against them or expelling them.

The extended chronotope of Hillbrow therefore shapes the destinies of the characters whoever they are, whatever they do and wherever they go. The same fate indiscriminately wipes them out, along with their prejudices and illusions, and dispatches them to Heaven. Their failure can be ascribed to their inability or unwillingness to properly assess the sustained efforts of adaptation that are necessary to meet the demands of Hillbrow life.

## *2. A story of education*

The discovery of Hillbrow life thus boils down to a story of education. The main characters, Refentse and Refilwe, come to realize before they die that the place and its inhabitants are not as thoroughly bad and corrupt as the people of Tiragalong are prone to think. As the narrator points out:

You Refentse, child of Tiragalong (and, as you insisted in the days just before your death, also of Hillbrow) had never shared such sentiments. It was your opinion that the moral decay of Hillbrow, so often talked about, was in fact no worse than that of Tiragalong (Mpe: 17).

The novel thus gradually builds up a picture of the neighbourhood as a place rife with ambiguities where negative aspects coexist with positive ones and whose social fabric is an entangled web of interwoven life stories. They map out Hillbrow as a mental territory which lives on and expands in each of its inhabitants' consciousness, as the narrator points out:

As you sat in the lounge of Heaven and pondered the complex paradox of life, death and everything in between, you seemed to see, simultaneously the vibrating panorama of Hillbrow and all its multitudinous life stories, conducting themselves in the milk, honey and bile regions of your expanding brain (Mpe: 79).

The topographical and social reality of Hillbrow dissolves into the refracted consciousnesses and memories of all the protagonists but also into imaginary narratives such as the documentary film on Hillbrow shown in Heaven or, more significantly, into the story of the Aids-struck heroine imagined by Referentse in his first short story, creating a dizzying effect of *mise-en-abyme* which shows a duplicated image of the very situation which Mpe's novel deals with to the reader:

You, Refentse, had written the story of your fictitious scarecrow heroine in an attempt to grapple with these profound questions of euphemism, xenophobia, prejudice and AIDS, to which Tiragalong pretended to have answers (Mpe: 59).

Thus the identity of the people of Hillbrow is not rigidly determined by some mystical or transcendental bond or by a strict obedience to some inherited tradition: it fluctuates, it is elusive, it depends on personal experiences, chance encounters and social interrelationships. Hence the final ironic twist which comes with the narrator's secular definition of Heaven:

[Refentse] only knew, as he watched [Refilwe] from his high vantage point that God and the gods of our happiness were more likely to be found in Hillbrow and Oxford and Tiragalong—everywhere and anywhere except in Heaven that we read about in the Big Book. God, gods and the Devil—that

horned, black monster holding his large fork in his hideous hands—lived in the skulls and hearts of the people taking their unplanned and haphazard journeys through our world... (Mpe: 111)

Heaven is the world of our continuing existence located in the memory and of consciousness of those who live with us and after us... Heaven can also be Hell, depending on the nature of our continuing existence in the memories and consciousness of the living (Mpe: 124).

### **Elusiveness and liminality**

This final and ironical reversal aptly reinforces the metaphorical drive which underpins Mpe's novel: it is clearly an invitation to adopt new patterns of thinking.

As shown above, the novel evinces a critical stance as it disparages aspects of contemporary South African life, but in fact the main target of Mpe's attacks is the persistence of a mode of thinking which largely prevailed under the old political dispensation and which the new one has not yet totally eradicated.

What characterises this mode of thinking is its propensity to formulate judgements on the basis of simplistic divisions or binary opposites, resorting to rigid categories of inclusion and exclusion, of racial and social differentiation. Thus the novel exposes the dichotomy imposed by the people of Tiragalong between on the one hand the rural world, an alleged authentic African identity characterised by decent ways of behaving and thinking and on the other the urban world, corrupt, lawless, full of foreigners and diseases.

Moreover, to make his point clear, Mpe shows how social or racial differentiation can easily be inscribed in discourse. To illustrate this, Mpe has one of his characters, Refilwe, observe how English people in Oxford introduce a subtle racial distinction between white and black South Africans by using such lexical differences as South Africans and Africans (Mpe: 102). Likewise he spells out how the people of Tiragalong use the term *Makwerekwere* to distinguish between non-South African Africans and foreign Africans.

In order to undermine such a reductive stance, Mpe has appropriately used grammatical and narrative devices which deliberately blur the rigid distinctions imposed by a binary approach so as to reinforce the perception of the city as a metaphorical locus of ambivalence, fluctuation and renewal.

Grammatical tenses are predominantly used to express unreal situations as in the opening sentence of the novel: "If you were still alive Referentse, you would be glad that Bafana Bafana lost to France in the 1998 Soccer World Cup fiasco." (Mpe: 1). But, in other parts of the novel the narrator uses the indicative mood (the past tense) to refer to situations which are purely imaginary, like the encounter of Refentse with his girlfriend and his mother in Heaven.

More generally, the system of tenses hinges on the use of the future in the past which gives an impression of fluidity, reversibility and indeterminacy. It allows the reader to travel through time, from the present of narration back to the past of the characters and then forward into their grim future, but, as a result, the reader is sometimes at a loss to ascertain whether a specific event really took place or when.

Likewise, it is occasionally difficult to determine the origin of discourses. The narrator's discourse is couched in such a way that it is uneasy to say whether the descriptions and pronouncements it contains are his or those expressed by an individual or collective voice. He thus creates an ironic effect as his syntax and diction imitate the discourses of villagers—usually fraught with clichés and set phrases ostensibly conveying commonsense and wisdom—but only with the aim of exposing their speciousness or ruthlessness as illustrated in the following passage showing the reaction of the people of Tiragalong to the return of Refilwe dying of AIDS:

Refilwe, welcome to our Tiragalong, where your fellow villagers are awaiting your arrival... Before long they will be coining words and phrases about your departure to other Worlds. Maybe they have even begun to do so. Perhaps they are even now saying about your impending death:

Oh Refilwe! She left us, yes, these two days past. Departed for Nigeria!

Or:

Aren't the birds becoming a problem in the fields now? Where is that scarecrow? (Mpe: 122).

The indeterminacy of the text also proceeds from the fact that the narrator frequently uses free indirect speech which renders uncertain the identity of the speaker, as in the following example:

You would usually, however, spare Cousin these historical details, since he knew them just as well as you did; or rather, much better than you did, since he himself was part of the interrogating police force that knew only one reliable way of accessing truth from suspects: *torture*. Cousin would interrupt your thoughtful silence, by reminding that you were ignoring more pressing concerns. Like AIDS that *they* transport into this country. Ah! This AIDS nonsense! (Mpe: 19-20).

The general impression of confusion and complexity is further reinforced by the overall movement of the novel, modelled on the geometrical pattern of the spiral, which, with each swing, gradually reveals how entangled the major characters' relationships are.

Mpe's deliberate manipulation of the categories of space and time, his use of rhetorical and narrative devices along with the symbolical import of Hillbrow's chronotope, point in the same direction: they systematically undermine a vision of South Africa based on rigid dichotomies and favour an open-minded approach more attuned to the complexities of the world as it is. Mpe's novel is a kind of exemplary tale which shows, to use Edward Said's remark on post-colonial literature, "how obsolete are the old categories, the tight separations, and the comfortable autonomies" (Said 1994: 53). In fact, Mpe's representation of Hillbrow perfectly illustrates the post-colonial concept of liminal space, defined as "an in-between space in which cultural change may occur... in which strategies for personal or communal self-hood may be elaborated, a region in which there is a continual process of movement and interchange between different states" (Aschcroft 2000: 130).

### **Conclusion**

Mpe's use of the urban myth is an attempt to dispel an illusory perception of South Africa. In a lucid and uncompromising way he exposes some of the major issues which beset South African society today and through a clever handling of rhetorical and narrative devices he underlines the necessity of tackling them by inducing his readers and contemporaries to reassess their ways of thinking. It is not a fable on the glorious transition to democracy—which now belongs to history—but on the urgency of coming to grips with complexity itself so as not to jeopardize a culture of human rights which South Africa's historic political transition has ushered in and entrenched in its institutions and its myth of reconciliation and renewal.

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