Review


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‘It is February 2003. I am 75 years old. I live in a comfortable middle-class suburb’ (2003:11). Ben Turok’s autobiography, Nothing But the Truth, starts in the present and, over nine chapters from ‘Rebel Son’ to ‘The 1990 Miracle and its Aftermath’, covers one of the most significant periods of South Africa’s evolution into a democracy. It is a remarkable story, told by the sole surviving member of the original underground leadership structure of the Communist Party (CP), that emphasises the ‘need to look behind us’ in order to answer the question: ‘Can the ANC bring about the transition and transformation promised over all those years?’ (2003:9).

The title, Nothing But the Truth, raises questions from the outset about the status of truth. The autobiographical narrative offers a subjective ‘truth’ rather than ‘fact’. The Colombian Nobel Laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez prefaces his recent autobiography, Living To Tell The Tale with the observation: ‘Life is not what one lived but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it’. Turok, in his preface, acknowledges the difficulties of the task he has set himself: ‘What follows is a story. It is not a formal history and it is both selective and subjective. Much of what I have to say is subject to other interpretations, as memory plays tricks with us’ (2003:7-8). At the same time, Turok is conscious that, as the only surviving voice of the CP underground, it is crucial that he not only ‘record these thoughts but try to be as objective and accurate’ (2003:135) as he can.

Compounding these difficulties of remembering and telling is the narrator’s admission that, as an ANC activist, he has had to subordinate personal life and feelings to the collective (the shift from ‘I’ to ‘we’ and ‘our’ registers this stylistically) (2003:8). Writing about these experiences is difficult; not only
is this narrative revelatory (the autobiography is subtitled, *Behind the ANC’s Struggle Politics*) and therefore potentially controversial, it is also self-revelatory.

The narrating ‘I’ is self-reflective about the act of remembering, of ‘opening up on everything’ (2003:11). ‘This is a painful business and perhaps a mere exercise in self-justification, but it is no ego trip’ (2003:7). Why is it important to narrate this personal story? The narrator addresses the issue of authority and authenticity, the ‘right’ to speak this story, directly: ‘Much of what follows has not been told before. I am the sole survivor of some crucial events in our history’. It is told ‘from the perspective of one engaged in the struggle, not only by arm’s-length historians’ or ‘political scientists’ (2003:7-8). The narrator claims a unique perspective, thereby validating the account – ‘to be at the centre of things, when history is being made, has a special kind of thrill which remains with you forever’ (2003:98).

The narrative is given additional credence by the incorporation of a variety of documents, such as letters pertaining to Turok’s expulsion from the Communist Party, and a number of annexures. These include ‘Document 73’, ‘Document Mayibuye’ and the unpublished [until now] memorandum that Turok wrote to the ANC leadership at its 1969 conference in Morogoro: ‘What is Wrong? A discussion on the present situation in the South African liberation movement’, as well as the reply from Joe Matthews, the conference secretary.

A theme running through Turok’s narrative is the relationship between the committed individual and the collective, whether it be the ANC or the CP. He deeply admires comrades such as Moses Kotane and leaders like Tambo and Mandela. ‘My experience of the Treason Trial was … the significance of individual talent and individual blemishes and weaknesses. I say this because it is the tradition in the ANC to call up the collective as the source of all wisdom and authority in decision-making. Yet when I look back on the whole period that I am describing, I cannot but be struck by the importance of personality and character’ (2003: 97). He continues, relating this to the present: ‘Bombast, heroics … are of little value in a people’s struggle. Unfortunately, the present political scene, with its fruits of office and its party politics, does lend itself to posturing’ (2003:99).

Early in the narrative an interesting contrast is drawn between the ‘rebelliousness’ of the white comrades, which served to isolate them from their social networks of family and friends, and the less individualistic,
more traditional black comrades:

This was in strange contrast with the outlook and style of the older generation of African comrades who, no matter how revolutionary their politics, they were, in my eyes at least, hobbled by their deference to tradition and custom. … I understood that my own rebellion against the system served to isolate me within my white environment while their rebellion against the apartheid system made them heroes in theirs. I felt, in order to accomplish my freedom, I had to rebel systematically – to reject all my inherited values – whereas as long as they retained the values and ethos of their traditions, they could be rebellious but admired. Indeed the most successful of our African leaders have been those who breathed, and best articulated, the traditions, hopes and fears of their people, and who desisted from being seen as idiosyncratic individualists who adopted unacceptable European norms. (2003:20)

The tension between Turok’s individualism and his commitment to the Party reaches its climax in his expulsion from the CP in 1976 over the issue of his distribution of funds to the trade union movement in South Africa without official permission. Turok had responded to appeals from fellow ‘bandiet’ Harold Strachan for some financial assistance in supporting the creation of unions in Durban. With the help of Hugh Lewin, Turok sent money donated by a Canadian source to South Africa where it was legitimately used and accounted for. His unilateral action and refusal to reveal Strachan’s identity (because he had real doubts about the ANC’s security arrangements), constituted a ‘flagrant breach of communist discipline’ (2003:238). A decade later, in response to assertions by a leading figure in the ANC that he had ‘betrayed the movement’ (2003:247), Turok again attempts to set the record straight. Previously unpublished letters to Rusty Bernstein and Joe Modise reveal the inside story. None of the letters was answered.

The emotional cost of his painful and undeserved marginalisation after 22 years in the CP is fully registered by Turok when he reflects on why he wanted to return to South Africa in 1990. ‘Did I want to prove something in the face of my expulsion from the party, my exclusion from MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe) and my marginalisation in the ANC? … Or was it the sheer heroics of someone who had independent tendencies, never reluctant to go ahead when others were more hesitant – acting out a kind of voluntarism? Someone who had contempt for the robots in the movement?’ The narrator concludes that his commitment to the ANC was never in doubt and that he had done what he thought right.

After his release from a three-year imprisonment, Turok and his family
went to Tanzania, where he was able to observe at first hand ANC structures in exile. He is particularly critical of the ANC’s inability to learn any lessons from the rest of the continent and the general incompetence of the movement in exile. In contrast, this reader is struck by Turok’s dedication and efficiency under the most trying of circumstances. On leaving for Britain in 1969, Turok addresses a characteristically powerful and courageous letter to the National Executive Committee of the ANC in which he explains his decision to leave by analysing some perceived weaknesses in the movement, most provocatively racism. ‘It gradually became clear to us that the reason for our estrangement was our whiteness and nothing else’ (2003:217).

In exile in Britain, Turok portrays his continuing disillusionment and frustration at the state of affairs of the ANC there. Instead of the critical, clear-headed thinking needed, he saw ‘uncritical dogmatism and intolerance’ (2003:226). He is particularly critical of Joe Slovo who was based in London and whom he did not respect or trust. ‘I had some reservations about his role as a peripatetic revolutionary. I was also unhappy about his slack security’ (2003:212).

What kind of story does the narrator seek to tell about himself? The tone is generally serious and the style prosaic, with little use of figurative language or attempt at dramatisation. As Strachan, Turok’s old comrade in and out of prison, has observed: ‘Ben is not an artist, he is a surveyor’ (Turok attributes his recruitment into MK to his expertise as a land surveyor). In his attempt to be as objective and analytical as possible, Turok typically tempers his criticism with the use of stylistic qualifiers such as ‘I suppose’, ‘I believe’, ‘perhaps’, and the use of the passive ‘it was to be expected’ (2003:136-8) in his observations on the 1960 Emergency and subsequent formation of MK.

If Turok’s identity, on the one hand, is partly a function of the collective, there is another model of identity on display in Nothing But the Truth – the narrating ‘I’ and the narrated ‘I’ – in which the latter registers as much younger, more idealistic, but not fundamentally misguided. The narrated ‘I’ is (I suspect unconsciously) constructed as a ‘heroic’ figure, seen within the context of a ‘heroic’ period of international liberation movements. ‘The story extends over a historical period much different from the present. It was a period of triumphalism, of the victory of socialism across a third of the globe, of the rise of liberation movements in the Third World and the winning of independence and freedom’ (2003:8) In chapter three, the
narrator examines why the struggle in South Africa became the dominant force in his life. The writings of Marx, Mao, Lenin, Castro were ‘the height of political inspiration, even romance. We hero-worshipped these people’ (2003:62). In the aftermath of Sharpeville, Turok went underground. ‘For me it was a thrilling experience’, characterised as it was by adventure, excitement and danger (2003:104-6).

Nor is the narrative without humour. Turok recounts how he was involved in the setting up of a broadcast to be made by Walter Sisulu over a mobile radio station announcing the emergence of MK. ‘My task was a humble one. I had been learning to play a treble recorder during the Treason Trial and I was asked to play Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika, our ANC anthem. … When my turn came, I was so excited that I fluffed it. I simply could not play the tune accurately so they had to use a taped version instead’ (2003:127).

Nothing But the Truth should appeal to a varied readership, both for those familiar with the period and its discourses as well as younger readers for whom anything pre-1994 is increasingly ‘The Past’. Turok’s account of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly as part of the ANC/CP underground and in exile (which has had little previous coverage), is more interesting than his final chapter, which focuses on the present. His account of a life lived, remembered and recounted with honesty and integrity is a valuable addition to the literature of ‘The Struggle’.