

# An ultra-left pilgrim's progress

**F**rank Anthony has written a remarkable novel. Like many significant works of literature, what it discloses goes way beyond its own up-front theorising, or probable intentions.

It displays, half knowingly, in its structure, language and story-line, the anatomy of a certain brand of ultra-leftism.

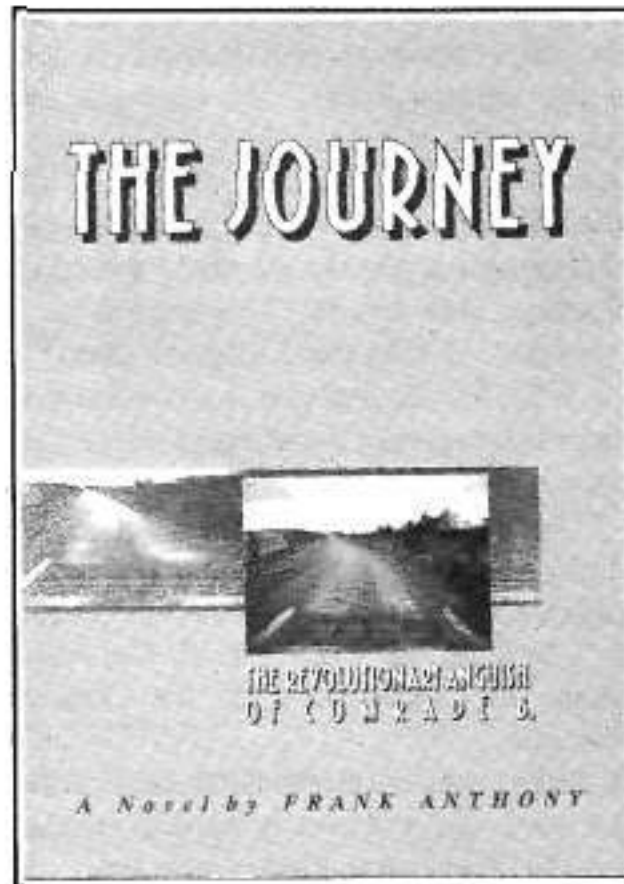
*The Journey*, set in the late 1980s, is the odyssey of Comrade B. A former Robben Island prisoner, the hero leaves his home city, Cape Town, and skips the border into what is almost certainly Botswana (though it is never named). From there he goes on to a secret rendezvous in a third country (Zambia, Lusaka if I not very much mistaken). The rendezvous is with Comrade Chair (a fictional figure whom I suspect is based on Apdusa's IB Tabata).

Comrade B sets off on this pilgrimage full of revolutionary fervour and confidence in some ultimate triumph of the working class. The specific purpose of the journey is to finalise plans for the belated launching of an armed struggle by the organisation of which B is the deputy and internal leader.

The journey is marred by a series of mishaps. Each step of the way suggests incompetence and a deepset rot within the organisation. Comrade B tries desperately to hold his growing demoralisation at bay. The culmination is the shattering rendezvous with a pathetically sad, corrupt and senile Comrade Chair.

B staggers out of this encounter in deep despair. This is the leader he has idolised (a 'black pearl of unnamed majesty' (p39), 'the socialist revolution personified' (p165), 'the human pinnacle of our vanguard' (p167)). This is the man, 'the most perfect human approximation to the ideal of a Marxist revolutionary of my ken' (p165), who has inspired B in his lifetime commitment, through detention, solitary confinement and 6 years on Robben Island.

Comrade B flies back to country number two (Botswana?) and, in sight of the South African border, climbs up to a cliff edge with the intention of committing suicide. There, literally centimetres



**THE JOURNEY: THE  
REVOLUTIONARY ANGUISH OF  
COMRADE B.**  
By Frank Anthony  
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Reviewed by JEREMY CRONIN

from self-annihilation, stripped naked, he looks out across the border, and beyond.

## The Vision

His numbed mental finger rests on the rewind button. He loops backwards in imagination, along the trajectory of his outward journey, back through the Karroo, over the Boland, down into the Cape Flats and home.

And this sweeping vista, the classical dying person's 'entire life carried before their eyes', swells into a political vision. It is a vision of massive working class demonstrations.

But the demonstrations have all been 'hijacked', in Frank Anthony's terms, by the 'populists':

'A great silence descended on the crowd. Thousands of eyes looked at me in stupefied surprise. But when they came around they shouted with anger, "Who are you?"

'I said, "I am the one who came to speak on behalf of the working class!"

"Who invited you?"

"The working class did."

"We are the working class! We don't know you!" (p223-4)

This final and ultimate rebuff, lived out in imagination, does not propel Comrade B off his ledge to the depths below. On the contrary, the rebuff confirms him in his vocation! It recreates him, it brings him back to life.

"We don't know you!"

"Yes, you do. Only you don't know it yet." (p224)

The Prophet Unrecognised, the Voice in the Wilderness - Comrade B might have had some dreadful blows. But he remains fundamentally unrepentant in his style of politics. In the words of the very last two sentences of the book: 'Only then did I rise to dress myself. There was work waiting, a hell of a lot of work.' (p225)

## Politics on the brink

The editor on the back-flap of the book claims there are 'No easy slogans or revivalist incantations here'. Well, maybe the slogans and incantations are not easy, but revivalism is here alright.

The near suicidal end of the book is entirely emblematic of a whole brand of political theory and practice. It is a politics of the strictest and most abstract dogmatism, a politics of the straight and narrow, of walking the brink:

'Such were the narrow parameters within which the revolutionary subsisted. It was in every sense like walking a tight-rope over a chasm whose deadly depths had proven beyond the ken of man. There was for the revolutionary turning neither left nor right. Any turning whatever from the straight course dictated by the revolution led inexorably to self-annihilation. Along the long and arduous road of revolution lay splattered the corpses of men and women who had not heeded the brutal demands of the path they had chosen.' (p70)

It is possible to read passages like these as purely satirical. But I am not so sure. If they are indeed satirical then the satire is coming from a place that cannot

think itself out of its own on-the-edge mind-set.

'Could one be a revolutionist *only* if one's life was so reduced to a single dimension and poised on the edge of total personal catastrophe; that to be an instrument in the service of humankind, of the masses, one had to become so insular?' (p87)

Everything in the book seems to answer this question with a loud and resounding Yes! Insularity, the Prophet Abandoned, the Voice in the Wilderness, these are the things that confirm the orthodoxy of the practitioner. There is no easy populism here. B's odyssey might produce disillusionment with a particular organisation, or with a particular Comrade Chair, but B keeps faith with his political logic.

And in this keeping of faith, the novel discloses the deeper anatomy of ultra-trotskyism. It rests on two fundamental pillars.

On the one hand there is a self that is abstracted out into virtual nothingness, into insularity - the Prophet Unrecognised. It is also a self that is reduced to virtual inactivity, since each action requires such minute moral and political examination. ('A large part of our activism was to prevent retrograde behaviour...' p61).

When Comrade B does act, as in his illegal crossing of the border, the activity is invested with such vast, sweeping historical and existential significance that neither B nor the reader has emotional energy left for much more.

On the other hand, over against the self as nullity, is the sweeping, romantic revolutionary vista: 'Pursuing the goal of revolution compels the pursuer to cast his perception wide, to make the world his stage; to penetrate and comprehend, but also to apprehend, the tidal waves of mass social movement, of social movement on a global scale. His vision perforce becomes wide-angled and majestic in its sweep!' (p38)

That, then, is the essential anatomy of this brand of ultra-leftism: abstraction of the I (and of the here and now on which that I stands) to the point of virtual disappearance. But this virtual disappearance is always conducted on the edge of some grand vista.

No wonder Comrade B doesn't really learn from his disaster. On the contrary, on the edge of suicide from a high place, he resuscitates. And the resuscitation is due precisely to the fact that alone on the brink he is once more back home, sym-

bolically, in the very ultra-leftism that has led him to the physical edge in the first place.

### The grand voice

The abstraction of the particular in favour of a grand vista is deeply written into the texture of the novel itself. It is to be found in the strange disjuncture between the grand voice of Comrade B the narrator (sample: 'What was the portent of the deleterious nexus?' - p169), and the voice of Comrade B, the occasionally speaking character in the novel ('"Hey man! What's up with you? Why the quiet game, man?"' - p32). This last, active, interventionist voice is largely drowned out by the grand, contemplative, theorising voice.

The same process is present in the slightly irritating device of names for the main characters - Comrade B, Comrade R, Comrade M, Comrade Z, Comrade Chair, the Document Man, the Contact Man, etc.

To be sure, this is a well established literary device, used mostly by authors who wish to claim some kind of timeless universality for their subject. But when your mission is the illegal crossing of a southern African border in the late 1980s, the small question of whether your surname happens to be February, Jones or Mompoti actually matters - not the name itself, of course, but all that it signifies about the self.

Comrade B sticks out like a sore thumb in the front-line state into which he escapes. He is detained within hours. But he can only explain his misfortune by suspecting treachery, or by invoking a pseudo-marxist cosmology: 'I had walked across the path of the blow in that configuration of time and space. The real target was the working class.' (p146)

Perhaps a much simpler explanation would be that his name, and therefore everything about him, was not Mompoti.

Well, Comrade B might be guilty of gross misjudgment, my point is that the author aids and abets this kind of misperception with a literary naming device that washes out all signs of ethnicity, specificity, concrete historical reality. (Interestingly, Frank Anthony doesn't quite remain consistent to this device. The one key personage who does have a real name is B's arch rival in the organisation - the treacherous Moonsami. Is the inconsistency a symptom of some unworked through emotion?)

### Trotskyism and stalinism

The case of Moonsami raises another fas-

cinating truth laid bare (unwittingly?) by the novel. This is the remarkable resemblance between B's brand of trotskyism and many of the core features of stalinism. I have already quoted some of the adulatory passages on Comrade Chair.

But besides a cult of the personality, there is also a cult of conspiracy and betrayal. The world out there is thick with Moonsamis. When all the romantic revolutionary vistas and cosmology remain unfulfilled, then B quickly assumes 'the most sinister conspiracy', everything becomes 'part of this undeniable conspiracy against me' (p160-1).

Even the most chilling feature of stalinism, the mass purges, has its counterpart here. When B's comrades show the least sign of deviating from the straight and narrow, he dumps them 'on the mass grave of revolutionary has-beens' (p48).

To be sure, this is purging without state power, no Cheka, no Beria. It terminates comradeship, friendship, understanding - but not life itself. Nevertheless, the attitude is chilling enough.

It is in this whole area that, for me, Frank Anthony's *The Journey* throws out its most intriguing challenge. It would be easy, but cheap, to have a good laugh at the misfortunes of Comrade B, holding him at comfortable arm's length. We could read the novel as the well deserved comeuppance of an ultra-left dogmatist.

But Comrade B is not the only person who has to grapple with the contradictory, complex reality of a leadership that once (in its distant exile or inaccessible imprisonment) could be elevated into an infallible ideal.

That idealisation was always infantile. The most outstanding revolutionary leaders have their imperfections, their weak sides. Faced with this mundane reality, we can become suicidal, a-political, or ... we can grow up.

In one of the wisest moments of the novel, Comrade B comes to realise that his idealisation of Comrade Chair, was always a postponement of his own political maturity.

At the end B has possibly outgrown his Comrade Chair complex. But the ideal leader, the authority figure is there to underwrite something else - 'Marxism' as The Line, Dogma, Timeless and Instant Truth (just add water).

I am less sure that B has worked his way out of that one.

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