

Response and Responsibility in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

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Welcome to Our Hillbrow by Phaswane Mpe is a novel faced with the difficult task of both telling a specific story, and simultaneously making that a story of 'Our All' (Mpe 2001:104). Similarly the novel must register the loss of traditional notions of what constitutes a community, while engaging a new, humane community characterised by both hybridity and similarity. Moreover the many self-reflexive remarks within the novel have the unusual effect of implicating the reader in the story being told. In the following essay I will show that all of these supposed 'paradoxes' can be explained in terms of the complex use of the word 'our' and the second-person narration of the novel. I hope to argue that the consistent use of the pronouns 'our' and 'you' forms a quite unique response to Mikhail Bakhtin's linguistic and literary theories. To that end, it will be necessary to discuss certain key concepts in Bakhtin's work and finally, through close analysis of the text, to show that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is a novel that anticipates, from its readers, a responsible response.

Linguistics and Dialogism

Firstly it is important to have a general understanding of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism. The theory developed in response to the monologism of both linguistics and fiction—especially the separation and emphasis on either the self or the other and the ignorance of the effect of context. At this point it is worth keeping in mind that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is equally concerned with issues of self, other and context.

For Bakhtin every aspect of expression is ‘determined by the actual conditions of the given utterance—above all, by its *immediate social situation*’ (e.i.o.) (Vološinov 1973:85). Moreover, any given utterance is orientated toward a specific context and specific addressee by a specific speaker/author. According to Bakhtin, language itself is not, strictly speaking, dialogic precisely because it does not make clear the interdependent relationships between these agents. Thus

any word exists for the speaker in three aspects: as a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody; as an *other’s* word, which belongs to another person and is filled with the echoes of the other’s utterance; and, finally, as *my* word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression (e.i.o.) (Bakhtin 1986:88).

Crucially, Bakhtin argues that the context within which an utterance is generated and/or uttered¹, ineluctably affects all aspects of that utterance. As V.N. Vološinov (1973:63)—arguably an alias for Bakhtin himself and certainly one of Bakhtin’s followers—writes: ‘the constituent factor for understanding the linguistic form is ... orientation in the particular, given context and in the particular, given situation’. As this statement suggests one of the most crucial factors in any social situation that is able to affect the utterance is the person or people to whom the utterance is addressed. It is by recognising this that Bakhtin is able to claim that an utterance is both individual *and* social in nature. Indeed in every sense, the utterance is

a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between... addresser and addressee (e.i.o) (Vološinov 1973:86).

The nature of any given utterance is such that the addressee affects its content, theme and style. This is primarily (and this is the most crucial factor

¹ Of course ‘utterance’, for Bakhtin, cannot be understood in the narrow sense of verbal communication but must include all forms of address, including writing.

for the discussion to follow) because any speaker anticipates active responsive understanding from his/her audience. Moreover, the

speaker himself is orientated precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding. He does not expect passive understanding that, so to speak, only duplicates his own idea in someone else's mind. Rather, he expects response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth (Bakhtin 1986:69).

In point of fact, Bakhtin argues that by *presupposing* such actively responsive understanding the utterance becomes internally marked by the other.

There is another logical conclusion drawn by Bakhtin that is relevant to *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, namely that any speaker/author 'is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not after all the first speaker the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe' (Bakhtin 1986:69). Thus, it is important to note that, for Bakhtin (1986:69), any 'utterance is a link in a very complexly organized [sic] chain of other utterances'. Once again the relationship between self and other (my utterances and all other utterances) is marked by both difference *and* connection.

The Relevance of Bakhtin to Mpe's novel

Firstly, it is worth considering the title of the novel. I think it is accurate to say that to be welcomed is also to be located. Thus in the title the 'Welcome' locates its addressee/s as already in Hillbrow. This is reinforced by the use of the word 'Our' that suggests—amongst other things—belonging, ownership and obligation. Of course the matter is further complicated by the fact that one cannot be sure who the 'Our' refers to—and thus who is being addressed and asked to respond. For instance, it could refer simply to Refentše and the omniscient unnamed narrator; it could refer to Refentše and all other inhabitants of Hillbrow; more enticingly it could also invoke the reader. Yet Carrol Clarkson (2004:12) also notes that 'The phrase "Welcome to Our Hillbrow", is [in a sense] addressed specifically to Refentše, and when it is taken in this way, it is as if the reader is *overhearing* the second-person address to Refentše in the novel' (e.i.o.). Thus the unavoidable task,

already suggested by the title, is to respond appropriately to a novel that places you where you may not actually be, invokes and includes you in a community (denoted by the 'Our') you may not feel you belong to and that simultaneously excludes you.

As if this task were not difficult enough, it is also necessary to consider the preconceptions of Hillbrow held by Mpe's probable readers. Phaswane Mpe (2003:191) in an essay entitled 'Our Missing Store of Memories: City, Literature and Representation' writes of the widely-held 'general idea of Hillbrow as a monster—with crime, drug-dealing, prostitution'. The reference to 'Hillbrow as a monster' is a near-direct quote from *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 'you already knew that Hillbrow was a monster, so threatening ...' (Mpe 2001:3). I would like to suggest that in this way Mpe is attempting to prove that stereotypes are social constructions. On the one hand, this is Refentše's opinion that we should share. Since he is the focaliser of the novel we see the world through his eyes, and if his perception is biased, surely, to some extent, so too must ours be. Conversely this is the generalised opinion that Refentše has internalised: his utterance is therefore internally marked by the prejudices of others. Thus 'Welcome to Our Hillbrow' is not simply a phrase locating one in a physical locality. It is also a phrase which, at least at first, places its readers in the uncomfortable position of sharing certain prejudices that the novel obviously finds wanting. Thus it is apt that Hillbrow is described as a 'monster' since its physical attributes are secondary to its symbolic and abstract qualities.

This is made all the more evident if one briefly notes the events that dominate the first few pages of the novel. The narrator recalls people hurling bottles 'of all sorts from their flat balconies' (Mpe 2001:1); reckless drivers attempting 'U-turns and circles all over the road' (Mpe 2001:2)—one such driver hits and kills a child no older than seven years of age. And, of course, there are the inevitable stories of those who die of AIDS. Notably the disease is immediately associated with the *Makwerekwere*—foreigners, mostly from North and West Africa. All of these details are presented without any moral judgement or use of euphemism—Mpe (2001:3), for example, speaks of 'the shit that the greedy and careless penises sucked out of the equally eager anuses'.

Of course Mpe is well aware of the shocking image he is presenting of Hillbrow—in fact he is depending on it for the novel to achieve its ethical

objective. In 'Our missing Store of Memories' Mpe (2003:191) writes the following:

Perhaps one of the persistent factors in the development and promotion of stereotypes and melodramas is incidental experience or observation, which is then generalised without any rigorous attempt to research and assess the extent to which it may or may not be representative.

Is this not precisely what the first few pages of the novel amount to? Indeed, does Mpe not expect the reader to find such events representative of Hillbrow, that is, of their preconceptions of Hillbrow? Thus, it seems clear that Mpe in order to write a responsible novel about the suburb must first account for the prejudices and stereotypes he *anticipates* his readers will have.

'Our' when considered in this light, suggests, not only ownership and belonging, but also perception. By this I mean that the title of the novel welcomes 'you', the reader, to a particular notion or representation of Hillbrow ('our' *version* of Hillbrow). This is, notably, in keeping with Bakhtin's all-important focus on the position (or context) of the speaker. Michael Holquist writes that dialogism is based on the fact that

everything is perceived from a unique position in existence ... [The] corollary is that the meaning of whatever is being observed is shaped by the place from which it is perceived.

Crucially by acknowledging his subjective position Mpe also immediately anticipates that the reader will compare his/her notions of Hillbrow with those represented in the novel. Obviously in so doing, Mpe hopes the readers will note the biases and failures of *their* version of the suburb. Thus Mpe is able to interrogate the values of his readers through his fiction.

Consider, for instance, the use of second-person narration in the novel. Of course literally the novel is entirely written to and about Refentše, who is dead, and later Refilwe, who is dying. Yet it seems certain that the 'you' of the novel also, on some level, invokes the reader. This leads Peter Blair (2002:163) to write, in his review of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, that the

second-person conceit ... successfully creates an intimate voice that encourages readers to put themselves in the position of the *addressee* and thus identify with the novel's protagonist (e.a.).

In point of fact, the use of second-person narration encourages the readers to empathise with a protagonist who makes love to his best friend's girlfriend, feels increasingly isolated from his friends and family and finally commits suicide. Indeed, since the novel is written to Refentše only once he is dead, the reader must surely consider what, if anything, he/she has in common with this protagonist. Thus I would argue that, at least as much as the use of second-person narration leads to alignment between readers and protagonists, it also anticipates distance. The effect of this simultaneous distancing and engagement is 'disorientating' to say the least (Clarkson 2004:10). Yet it seems clear that Mpe expects this since it is only possible that a reader will consider his/her position (prejudices, opinions, limits etc.) if that position is destabilised, and is thus made difficult to adopt without some measure of insecurity.

Moreover, it should by now be relatively obvious that since 'you' in the novel addresses both a specific individual and an anticipated other there is an overt connection to Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. As Vološinov (1973:86) writes:

A word [in this case 'you'] is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on my addressee.

It is apt that Vološinov should write of the word as a 'bridge' between oneself and another, since it is precisely the early distance between Refentše (and indeed Mpe too) and the reader that the novel ultimately bridges.

Consider, for instance, the first time the phrase 'Welcome to Our Hillbrow' is used in the novel:

Welcome to Our Hillbrow! You heard one man say to his female companion, who was a seeming newcomer to this place of bustling activity, visiting it for the first time since the conspiracy between her parents and fate decided to usher her presence onto the face of the Earth (Mpe 2001:2).

Of course, there is a degree of ironic detachment in this welcome since it is uttered immediately after a seven-year old child has been struck by a car and has died. It is probably for this reason that Ralph Goodman² (2003:96) writes of the phrase as never 'free from the strong echo of formal yet empty public utterances [made] at crowded airports and banal signposts ...'. I think however that to recognise only this aspect of how the phrase is used is to miss the point. For instance, in the cited passage the actual narration contextualises the welcome by mentioning conception, birth and the entire 'face of the Earth'. Thus, a phrase that, seemingly, is cynical and that locates one in a very small physical area is linked ineluctably (and linguistically) to the entire scope of human experience.

It is also by keeping in mind this relentless alignment of the individual and the collective other that one can best understand Mpe's representation of place, especially places other than Hillbrow. Of course, in many ways Mpe's novel is a response to the traditional South African novel in which a protagonist moves from the purity and peace of rural life to the corruption, degradation and squalour of the city—that usually destroys him/her morally and/or physically. Written into the novel is a seemingly overt case of exactly this, namely the story of Piet. The aspects of Piet's story known to most is that he was a decent man from Tiragalong who was stabbed to death in Alexandria, apparently for no reason. Thus, in Heaven Refentše's mother is quick to tell Lerato of her father 'And how the monstrous city swallowed him' (Mpe 2001:70). It is only later that the true story is revealed. It is made clear that an unscrupulous bone thrower from the village had falsely made Molori, Piet's cousin, believe that Piet, because of jealousy, bewitched Molori's mother causing her to be seriously ill. This deception led Molori to hire two professional killers. Piet's story is thus not an example of the corruption and violence of the city, but rather an example of Tiragalong's corruption. Thus, claims Blair (2002:166),

part of Mpe's purpose is to subvert the traditional dichotomy of

² Goodman's essay does actually focus on *Welcome to Our Hillbrow's* relation to Bakhtin's work (most notably the idea of the text as 'carnavalesque' and an example of a 'parodic-travestying' novel) but it does not really raise issues relevant to my essay.

corrupting city and nurturing village that has had such a powerful claim on the imaginations of South African creative writers.

I would go further and argue that this 'Jim comes to Jo'burg motif' (Blair 2002:166) is so prevalent that it is probably expected by most readers—especially when they are faced with a novel about the 'notorious Hillbrow'. Thus, Mpe's self-conscious deconstruction of that narrative is not only a response to its persistence in South African fiction, but it is also a way of anticipating the preconceived notions of his readers. In this way Mpe's novel enters into a dialogic relationship with this dominant narrative, incorporating it into his 'total speech plan' (Bakhtin 1986:69). Were Mpe to present his novel in opposition to that dominant narrative he would run the risk of making his narrative simply a *different* eternal, transcendental truth. This would clearly defeat Mpe's purpose since even Heaven—the classical realm of the eternal and transcendental—is a place of configuration and interpretation in the novel

Heaven is the world of our continuing existence, located in the memory and consciousness of those who live with us and after us. It is the archive that those left behind keep visiting and revisiting; digging this out, suppressing or burying that ... (Mpe 2001:124).

Also by virtually ending the novel on this note Mpe challenges the desire to read his text as the final word. Once again the text anticipates its response. This has two obvious results. The first is that Mpe, who wishes to write a story about humanity, is able to intimate that the story of humanity is on-going and can thus be changed. The second is that it challenges the reader ethically since the story, though it ends on the page, continues, so to speak, in the reader's personal life.

It is also important to recognise that since *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* interrogates the traditional representation of the rural idyll it must also interrogate the traditional notions of community encapsulated in that representation. In the traditional African community the individual's sense of self is believed to be the product of that community, and therefore the

individual is in many ways responsible for his/her community³. It is of course precisely such an understanding of the self as dependent on the collective other that Bakhtin advocates. As Vološinov (1973:89f) writes: one's sense of self is 'only another social conception of addressee peculiar to himself'. Similarly, Mpe's concern with the responsibility of the individual for the other is evident throughout his novel. Yet in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

the image of an ideal community ... does not match the lived experiences of the characters in the novel, even in those traditional communities' (e.i.o.) (Clarkson 2004:6).

Indeed, Tiragalong is the site for much of the violence in the novel—the necklacing of Refentše's mother being only the most obvious example. Moreover, much of the violence that occurs in Hillbrow either directly or indirectly originates in Tiragalong—as Refentše himself notes:

hadn't we better also admit that quite a large percentage of our home relatives and friends who get killed in Hillbrow are in fact killed by other relatives and friends (Mpe 2001:18).

The condemnation of the 'loose Hillbrowan sins' (Mpe 2001:46) of the Johannesburg and especially the *Makwerekwere* women are obviously rendered hypocritical since Refilwe is most promiscuous while living in Tiragalong. Moreover, sexual infidelity in general does not, in the novel, lead to the deaths of Refentše, Lerato and Refilwe, as Tiragalong villagers are so quick to assume. Rather it is that those acts are taken out of context and are stripped of their 'humanness' that leads to so much pain and tragedy. Yet it is worth noting that Refentše—arguably the most fair-minded and least prejudicial character in the novel—should fail to hear Lerato's reasons for making love to Sammy. On the one hand, this links Refentše to what is most appalling and cruel about those in Tiragalong. Like most in that village

³ Clarkson's essay addresses this issue in far more detail than I am able to and also relates it to the notion of identity in the novel (an aspect that is not particularly relevant to my own focus).

Refentše does not recognise the position of the other in relation to himself, that is, he never realises that Lerato's position is influenced by his and vice versa (Lerato seeks solace from Sammy because of her concern for Refentše). Thus Refentše is, at least partly, to blame for what ensues.

Yet it should also be remembered that Refentše has himself slept with another who sought only solace. Yet the novel does not seem to find either of these acts cruel or malicious. Thus, the alignment of Refentše with what is worst about Tiragalong, whilst not condoning the prejudices and narrow-mindedness of the village, does nevertheless demand that the actions of the villagers be viewed in context. Also it suggests that Tiragalong is not a space *outside* of the 'humanness' that the text so values. Rather Tiragalong is influenced by all other spaces and, similarly, Tiragalong influences all other spaces. It is for this reason that Mpe writes (2001:49):

Tiragalong was in Hillbrow. You always took Tiragalong with you in your consciousness whenever you came to Hillbrow or any other place.

That said, there are at least some forms of constructing difference that Mpe will not abide, most notably the discrimination of foreigners and those suffering from HIV/AIDS. Perhaps it is in this regard that Tiragalong is most dangerous. As the novel makes clear, Tiragalong bases its sense of 'community' on beliefs that are at best destructive, and it is hardly surprising that this too links the village to Hillbrow—a suburb with, seemingly, no shared beliefs and/or history. Therefore, prejudice is ultimately only another thing used by Mpe to suggest the interconnectedness of things and places. Tiragalong, of course, views those from Johannesburg and those from elsewhere in Africa with near equal distrust. It is also worth noting that a third community—one which is arguably the pinnacle of educated society—is also linked through its prejudices, namely England. At Heathrow Airport (where one enters the country and should therefore be welcomed) Refilwe is disappointed by the treatment of Nigerians and Algerians 'at the hands of Customs Officials' (Mpe 2001:100). This leads Refilwe to the conclusion that England has

another word for foreigners that [is] not very different in connotation from *Makwerekwere* or *Mapolontane*. Except that it [is] a much

more widely used term: *Africans* (e.i.o.) (Mpe 2001:102).

Hillbrow too is the site for much mistreatment of foreigners. Note, for example, the way in which Cousin humiliates and extorts the *Makwerekwere* since they have no legal rights. Finally all three communities are blatantly discriminatory against those infected with HIV/AIDS.

The issue of AIDS in the novel is made all the more complex if one reads Mpe's comments about Kgafela oa Magagodi's poem 'varara'. Mpe (2003:193) writes that the poem deals with the fact that people (readers included) do not accept 'responsibility for their own involvement in the spreading of viruses and diseases *as well as stereotypes*' (e.a.). In this way I think Mpe is trying to suggest that AIDS is represented so often in terms of preconceptions and generalisations that the disease itself is difficult to extricate from what people think about it. Thus, it is apt that Mpe (2001:122) refers to 'Linguistic chisels, furthering the process of carving your death that AIDS had begun'. The effects of this passage are many and complex. Most notably, it asks the reader to take responsibility for and dismiss prejudices that are, at least in part, of their own making. Similarly, if, on some level, the 'you' makes the readers put themselves in the position of Refilwe, then it is almost as if their own stereotypes have helped further the 'process of carving [their] death[s]'.

Finally it is necessary to note that Mpe's novel has a strong connection to Bakhtin's ideas on the nature of quasi-direct discourse which generally refers to any report of another's speech in which the utterance simultaneously contains

an expression characterizing [sic] ... the speaker himself—his manner of speech (individual, or typological, or both); his state of mind as expressed not in the content but in the forms of speech ... and so on (Vološinov 1973:130).

Examples of quasi-direct discourse are numerous in the novel, but for the purposes of this essay only one needs be looked at. This example occurs while the villagers of Tiragalong are discussing the validity of Refilwe's version of Lerato's parentage. Mpe (2001:46) reports their discussion in the following way:

Some said it didn't matter, that whether you died because of *Lekwerekwere* or a Johannesburger did not make much difference. Were the two not equally dangerous? Immoral... drug-dealing... murderous... sexually loose

The most interesting thing about the cited passage is that these words are not attributed to specific speakers. This leads to the conclusion that these are generally held beliefs and therefore might themselves be mere generalisations. Similarly, the use of ellipsis dots suggests that these are simply snippets of many conversations of this nature. In this way Mpe is able, quite literally, to show that such assumptions are made without context, that is, they are generated in the absolute absence of the very situations and people they purport to describe.

Self-reflexivity, Response and Responsibility

It should by now be clear that Mpe's novel absolutely centres itself on the responses of its readers. It seems that this is so much the case that the issue of response becomes central to those readers too. It is to this aspect of the novel that I now turn my attention.

Firstly it is worth noting that the actual plot of the novel is marked by encounter after encounter in which a character either makes some form of request/invitation or conversely responds to such a request/invitation. For instance, Refilwe invites Refentše to supper at her flat. This, in turn, mirrors an earlier episode in which Bohlale asks Refentše to come to her place, as she is distressed. Notably, Bohlale and Refentše's affair is also described using the language of request and response: Refentše's 'dilating eyes' send out 'an innocent message' to which 'Bohlale's heart [is] receptive' (Mpe 2001:37). Moreover, Lerato's affair with Sammy could be construed as a response to Refentše's sudden aloofness. When Lerato pleads with Refentše to tell her what is wrong his response of 'Nothing' is 'not ... a satisfactory answer'. If Refentše's answer is considered a non-response then this scene could be interpreted as a subtle warning to the reader concerning his/her response. Indeed, Mpe (2001:65) certainly intimates, in a passage dealing with crime in Hillbrow, that those who refuse to help, that is to respond, are in some sense complicit in those egregious acts:

there were many such vulnerable people in Hillbrow, where human cries for help often went *unanswered*, the multitudes passing by as if oblivious to what was happening ... (e.a.).

In fact the matter of responsibility becomes even more urgent as the novel progresses and the welcome of the title is extended to include an ever-growing community. At various points, the novel welcomes 'you' to 'Our All' (Mpe 2001:104), to 'Our Heaven' (Mpe 2001:124) and to the 'world of Our Humanity' (Mpe 2001:113). Thus, argues Clarkson (2004:13), 'a refusal to be welcomed to our Hillbrow becomes difficult to extricate from a refusal to be welcomed to the "World of Our Humanity" to "Our All"'. Once again, the idea that Mpe is anticipating the responses of his readers is quite obvious. Like the characters in the novel (such as Refilwe who overcomes her xenophobia and Refentše who wants to be a part of the Hillbrow community), Mpe assumes that the readers' desire to be included will overcome their early desire to be distanced. In this sense 'you' now hails each and every person, simultaneously in his/her singularity. Therefore, the use of second-person narration '*hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*' (Althusser 1970:173). According to Louis Althusser (1970:174) the individual is transformed into a subject the moment he/she recognises 'that the hail "really" [is] addressed to him, and that it [is] *really him* who [is] hailed (and not someone else)' (e.i.o.). More importantly, Althusser (1970:178f) is quick to note that the process of interpellation obligates one to act in a way deemed responsible by the 'Unique and central Other Subject in whose name the ... ideology interpellates all individuals as subjects'—in this case *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* could rightly be construed as the 'Subject'. Thus, argues Althusser (1970:182), the ambiguity of subjecthood (both its ideological purpose and its semantic meanings) is such that 'the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject... in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection' (e.i.o.). Thus Althusser rightly claims that we as individuals subscribe to an ideology and act accordingly because this ideology is already implied by the hail. Similarly the use of 'you' in the novel has from its first use to its last already implied that the reader should act responsibly.

It is for this reason worth considering the effects of the many self-

reflexive remarks in the novel. Carrol Clarkson (2004:11) writes the following:

Mpe's provocative use of 'you' destabilises a distinction that Roman Jakobson makes, a distinction between the 'narrated event'—the story being told—and the 'speech event', that is to say, the situation of address in which the story is told.

It seems that in a similar way by making the act of storytelling *a part* of the 'narrated event', Mpe has closed off the distance between the reader of the novel and the characters in the novel.

To further develop this notion of responsibility it is necessary to firstly note the use of self-reflexivity in the novel. Examples of such self-reflexivity are too numerous to be all mentioned, but here are some of the most striking examples within the context of this essay: Refentše, while in Heaven, watches movies about the lives of Piet and Refilwe (notably despite the fact that movies are considered 'fictions', they depict Piet and Refilwe's *real* lives, more so than do the stories those in Tiragalong have told); Refilwe tells an erroneous story regarding Lerato's part in Refentše's death; and perhaps most interestingly, Refentše is himself a writer who has written a short story about Hillbrow.

It is worth noting that Refentše's short story leads to the conflation of 'fictional characters' and 'non-fictional characters'⁴. The character in the story, a woman from Tiragalong (who is herself a writer), contracts AIDS and is ostracised by the community. In this way her story strongly resembles that of Refilwe's. Yet there is an even more intriguing parallel created by the story. Refentše begins writing his story because he is disturbed by the 'scarcity of written Hillbrow fictions in ... all eleven official South African languages' (Mpe 2001:29). Notably, Refentše therefore thinks of his writing as 'a mission in all this omission—a mission to explore Hillbrow in writing' (Mpe 2001:30). Of course, it seems right to assume that this 'mission' is Mpe's also (in this sense the story is dialogic as it speaks for both Refentše

⁴ For the time being it is still necessary to use terms such as 'fictional' and 'non-fictional' but it should be understood that it is precisely such distinctions that Mpe finds wanting.

and Mpe). Obviously such remarks in the novel lead one to the realisation that Mpe's work is itself a response; it is not what Bakhtin terms 'the first word'. Further still, Mpe's ethical mission—to represent Hillbrow in fiction—is a response not even to stereotypical literary representations of Hillbrow, but to the startling scarcity of any works on the subject. Mpe, throughout his novel, attempts to show that Hillbrow's colourful history and status as a 'changing society' makes it ideal for writers. Considered in this light, the scarcity of fiction dealing with a suburb that *demand*s precisely such representations could be construed as a non-response to the challenges posed by this suburb. Yet if Mpe is able to respond to this 'absence' then surely even these non-responses are a response. As Jacques Derrida (1995:17) puts it: 'Clearly it will always be possible to say, and it will always be true, that nonresponse [sic] is a response'.

Yet the question that still remains is: What specific challenges does Hillbrow present and, more precisely, what does Mpe respond to? Obviously there are those this essay has already tackled, namely stereotypes, AIDS, crime etc., but there are still others that should at this point be discussed. The first relates to an observation made by Refentše:

there are few Hillbrowans, if you think about it, who were not originally wanderers from Tiragalong and other rural villages, who have come here, as we have, in search of education and work (Mpe 2001:18).

Similarly, it is worth noting that most who live in Hillbrow are simply tenants since those 'who can afford [to buy] would mostly hesitate anyway, given that they are unlikely to view buying as an investment' (Mpe 2003:190). Finally, the actual geographic area defined as Hillbrow is disputed. Thus, Mpe has chosen to write a novel about an area that is geographically questioned, not owned by its own inhabitants and is populated mostly by people who come originally from elsewhere. Obviously this relates symbolically to the crucial idea that our supposed boundaries—of race, origin, and class etc.—should hold little sway when what is common is recognised. More importantly though, it also seems that these challenges faced by Mpe make *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* a distinctly open text, that is, since Hillbrow—the subject of the novel—is so indeterminate (in its

boundaries) it is only right that the novel itself should be too. The novel thus enters into the 'complexly organized chain of other utterances'. That is, though clearly the novel begins and ends, one might say that the story does not. The story becomes part of the consciousness of its readers and thus has a profound effect on their thinking and expression.

One might therefore argue that the novel employs, at times, a form of stream-of-consciousness narration precisely because it must show that other utterances are at play within it. For example, Mpe (2001:61), at one point, writes the following

And so when you finally come to this part of your journey to embracing suicide the spinning of cars the prostitution drug use and misuse the grime and crime... flowing into each other in your consciousness

Yet, intriguingly stream-of-consciousness narration as well as the use of self-reflexive remarks are both techniques most commonly associated with modernism. Modernism, in turn, is often associated on a theoretical level with Formalism. Notably, Viktor Shklovsky (1989:19), a leading Russian Formalist, writes the following in his seminal essay, 'Art as Technique': 'An image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it; its purpose is not to make us *perceive meaning*, but to create a special perception of the object (e.a.). It is also worth keeping in mind that Shklovsky, later in the same essay, elaborates on how euphemism can be used for this purpose, that is, to 'defamiliarize'. Similarly Ann Jefferson (1982:32) argues that according to Formalists 'self-conscious comments made by the author ... [point] out the differences between *fabula* [the content] and *syuhet* [the form]'⁵. It is therefore the nature of Formalism to distinguish between form and content, and also between art and life. The difficulty of Mpe's novel is that it uses these modernist techniques, but *crucially* it does not in the process render itself a purely aesthetic object, that is, a novel unable to depict, connect to and therefore initiate change in the world beyond its borders. In point of fact,

⁵ Though it is beyond the scope of this essay it is worth noting that Bakhtin opposed the distinction of *fabula* and *syuhet* made by the Formalists.

Mpe's novel seeks to disrupt the tendency in modern art to create such boundaries in the first place.

In this regard it is worth considering Mpe's own comments about techniques such as euphemism. Once again the passage has to do with Refentše's short story. The protagonist of the story, like Refentše and Mpe, is disappointed to find that even in the new South Africa 'euphemism is believed to equal good morals' and thus to 'too realistically call things by their proper name' is to be an 'immoral and unsuitable writer' (Mpe 2001:57). It is, in my opinion, through such self-conscious remarks that Mpe is able to overcome the dangers of euphemism and other modernist techniques. This is because he constantly uses these techniques to invoke the reader; to place the reader in the novel and, so to speak, place the novel in the reader. In this sense the novel allows the readers 'to relate to themselves as subjects of aesthetic experience', not for purely aesthetic reasons (as Formalists might suggest), but so that the work of art can become what Ian Hunter (1990:351) terms 'a device in the practice of self-problematization [sic]' for the readers. Indeed, when considered in this way the text cannot be separated

from the sphere of *our* real existence. To the contrary, it means that ... the aesthetic [is] a distinctive way of actually conducting one's life—as a self-supporting ensemble of techniques and practices for problematizing [sic] conduct and events (e.a.) (Hunter 1990:348).

It is, not coincidentally, worth noting that Bakhtin too writes of a fluid boundary between the text and life. As Michael Holquist (2002:111) notes:

Both art and lived experiences are aspects of the same phenomenon, the heteroglossia of words, values, and actions whose interaction makes dialogue the fundamental category of dialogism.

Thus, Mpe (2001:59) is right, the 'worlds of fiction ... are never quite what we label them'.

As the above-mentioned references to 'self-problematizing' suggest, the final concern of this essay will be the link between response and responsibility in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Firstly, on a semantic level the

two words are very similar, so much so that, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (1963), one of the definitions of 'responsible' is 'Correspondent or answering *to* something' (e.i.o.). Furthermore, it has already been intimated that the novel does not allow the reader the possibility of a non-response (since that too would constitute a response). Two questions then arise: 1) is the novel not in this sense demanding one specific type of response? and 2) does this not go against the spirit of the reader-text relationship (one which includes you in its community and asks that people be treated humanely and as individuals)? In short, is the novel's request not irresponsible? In this regard it is worth noting Jacques Derrida's (1995:7) comments about the nature of the invitation: 'A gesture "of friendship" or "of politeness" would be neither friendly nor polite if it were purely to obey a ritual rule'. Thus, claims Derrida (1995:8)

the 'ought'... of friendship, like that of politeness, *must not be on the order of duty*. It must not even take the form of a rule, and certainly not a ritual rule. As soon as it yields to the necessity of applying the generality of a prescription to a single case, the gesture of friendship or of politeness would itself be destroyed (e.i.o.).

Therefore, the complexity of an invitation is that it should 'never imply: you are obliged to come, you have to come, it is necessary', yet paradoxically it should also

never imply: you are free not to come and if you don't come, never mind, it doesn't matter. Without the pressure of some desire—which at once says 'come' and leaves, nevertheless, the other his absolute freedom—the invitation immediately withdraws and becomes *unwelcoming* (e.a.) (Derrida 1995:14).

There are several ways in which the novel, either implicitly or explicitly, is able to negate its invitation being construed as a 'ritual rule'. Firstly, it seems logical that the very openness of the text would render any request/invitation it makes similarly open, especially since the request/invitation is precisely the thing that makes this text so open. Also, since the novel constantly focuses on contextualising even the most cruel of acts (for example the crime in Hillbrow) it seems likely that this novel would

'forgive' its readers if they did not respond as requested. Similarly, the emphasis on the context of any given action must surely, to some extent, nullify the possibility that the novel's request will become 'the generality of a prescription to a single case'. Also if the phrase 'Welcome to Our Hillbrow' both distances and invokes the reader, is this not an almost perfect example of an invitation that 'at once says "come" and leaves, nevertheless, the other his absolute freedom'? Finally, I would argue that even though the novel consistently anticipates and thus problematises certain responses, it does ultimately suggest that all responses, like all utterances, are connected in an intricate, complex pattern. Thus, even as the reader responds in one particular way (in a way deemed responsible, irresponsible etc.) all other possible responses are necessarily intimated. In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* it is only possible for the reader to respond responsibly because he/she has already read, in the text, the other possible responses⁶.

Finally it is this very condition in which the other must be taken into account that is at the heart of Mpe's notion of responsibility. Once again Derrida (1995:10f) is interesting:

From this point of view responsibility would be *problematic* to the further [*supplémentaire*] extent that it could sometimes, perhaps even always, be what one takes, not for oneself, *in one's own name* and *before the other* (the most classically metaphysical definition of responsibility) but what one must take for another, in his place, in the name of the other (e.i.o.).

It is a responsibility that Mpe has taken on since by anticipating the other's response he speaks in the name of the other. Far more importantly, it is a responsibility that the reader is also asked to take on. Increasingly as the reader is included in an ever-growing community, he/she is obliged to speak in the name of that community. No longer can he/she speak only for him/herself since, as the novel proves, the self too is marked by that community. Refentše, who feels so absolutely isolated that he chooses suicide, is not simply a warning to the readers against forgetting one's

⁶ Derrida is thus doubly appropriate since the notion that the possibility of failure enables an appropriate response is distinctly deconstructive.

implicit connection to others. Rather, he is also the *embodiment of that connection*. The reader is responsible, in many ways, for Refentše's death (this much should by now be clear). More importantly, the reader is also responsible, since Refentše's Heaven is dependent on how he is remembered and accounted for, for Refentše's voice after death. Perhaps then, it might yet be possible that Refentše need not altogether die, since he should still live on within us. At one point after Refilwe has been diagnosed with AIDS she notes that 'These other voices within her consciousness told her that there were those who loved her still. For them, she would try to live ...' (Mpe 2001:116). Surely, if love is the connection between one and another, then this is the responsibility of the reader too. Also, the reference to 'voices' is an unequivocal signal to the reader that this novel is dialogic, that is, that it speaks to and for many. Further still, it is right that a character in a novel should express ideas that belong, in various guises, to Mikhail Bakhtin, Phaswane Mpe, Refentše and the readers. As Refilwe herself understands, her consciousness, and therefore her voice are only ever in existence at the convergence of all these other voices. Thus she and by association the reader is rendered responsible for the other as much as she is responsible for herself.

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