

Mann, C. 2021. *Palimpsests: Poems Based on the Classics that Speak to the Present*. Cape Town: Dryad Press. Pp. 60. ISBN 978-1-990992-26-1. ZAR200.

Palimpsests is a 2021 poetry collection by the late South African poet Chris ‘Zithulele’ Mann, published by Dryad Press and released not long after his untimely death in March 2021. In the same month, *The Johannesburg Review of Books* published his obituary, which serves as an appropriate tribute to a highly celebrated literary career.¹ Throughout the article and the collection, it is abundantly clear that Mann was a South African poet who immersed himself in the indigenous Nguni culture of South Africa. The book’s subtitle reads, ‘poems based on the classics that speak to the present’ and this is the broader focus that this review will consider. In particular, the question of whether these poems really do speak to the present requires an in depth look at Mann’s sentiments as they are presented throughout *Palimpsests*. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that *Palimpsests* serves as the final message of one of the major figures of South African poetry.

One main challenge that Mann takes on in this collection is the inclusion of numerous classical elements in ways in which the modern reader is able to grasp. In the book’s preface, Michael Lambert explains the significance of the collection’s title: ‘Like many words in English, “palimpsest” originates in ancient Greek: it conjures up a manuscript written on parchment so precious that one text is rubbed out and replaced by another’ (p. xi). Lambert was an appropriate choice to write the book’s preface as his academic record reflects a classicist acutely aware of the field’s need to locate itself together with, rather than against, black South African cultures.² Mann has chosen to grapple with the modern world sometimes directly, though more often indirectly, through a recentering of the Classics. From this position he offers subjective observations of the present. He has chosen to utilize a hybrid approach that conflates elements of contemporary history with antiquity. The reader is presented with a question of balance, however, and particularly the question of whether the subject matter in this collection is weighted too heavily in favour of one side or the other.

Mann begins philosophically; the opening poem ‘Heraclitan heresies’ immediately sets the tone for what is to come and, more importantly, is

¹ ‘Chris Mann 1948–2021, RIP’ online at johannesburgreviewofbooks.com (accessed, 11 November 2021).

² See Lambert 2011. *The Classics and South African Identities*. London; Lambert 2014. ‘On rainbows and butterflies: the Classics, the Humanities, and Africa’ *Aclass* 57:1-15.

programmatic of what *Palimpsests* sets out to do. The opening couplet begins, 'So what if map and satellite | can fix your place in space and time?' (p. 1). Mann sets up his poetic apparatus of comparison by way of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, who was known for the assertion that everything is in a state of flux. 'Heraclitan heresies' does the work that an opening poem of a collection should do, which is to capture the reader's interest and lay down the work's foundations. The reader is quickly confronted with notions of unity and the balance of self: 'Is life not flux sinewed by strife? | Is strife not bonded in the whole' (p. 1).

The structure of this work as a whole is the juxtaposition of a series of comparisons between the ancient world and banal everyday life. This is seen particularly in poems such as 'The curse of Sisyphus' (p. 10), 'The Ithaca of the internet' (p. 22), and 'The plague of Athens (430-426 BCE)' (pp. 31-36). Next Mann forefronts his South African present with indigenous Nguni elements: poems such as 'The clan bard of the Drakensberg' (pp. 11-13) and 'A picnic beside Hlambeza Pool' (pp. 16-17) are representative of this mode. It is also seen especially in 'In praise of the shades' (pp. 18-19), in which the shades are what the *abeNguni* refer to as the *amadlozi*, or 'ancestral spirits'. The poem is particularly notable for being one of the few instances of a specific indigenous-culture element composed in a way that is not comparative. The third, and most striking of these references, is found in the poem 'Scapegoat' (pp. 37-38): 'I've watched so many blame-artists switch targets down the years; | it starts way back when we're still young, the teasing and the jeers. | If you think oth'ring gets things right, well - have another go; | I've watched it make extortion, rape and brib'ry grow and grow'. The poem, when contextualised within the sociological implications of ancient Greek and 'barbarian', functions as a critique of the modern world's social divisions. Mention of 'Syrians' in the penultimate stanza brings to mind the South African issue of xenophobia.

One of the strengths of *Palimpsests* is the highlighting of certain periods in antiquity and how their errors have managed to ripple through history. The reoccurring mistakes of past civilisations is at the core of this collection and Mann traces out the moral corruption that caused socio-political instability leading to the demise of ancient civilisations as a subtle warning to the present.

The prosody of *Palimpsests* offers us some variation in versification. While the collection opens with an unrhymed couplet in 'Heraclitan heresies', one of Mann's major strengths are the poems composed in unrhymed tercets, seen, for example in 'The city of Atlantis in a diver's mask' (pp. 7-9), 'Sapphic fragments' (p. 25), and 'Metamorphoses on waking' (p. 26). One of the poems, 'The Comrades marathon' (pp. 14-15) adapts specifically the style of Pindar's Olympian odes to honour Victor Clapham who founded the marathon; the

legacy of which continues to unite South Africans annually ('but men and women of all sorts and shapes, | the black, the blonde, the bronze of our humanity').

The longer poems in this collection are among the most scholarly. 'Saturnalia satirica' (pp. 39-44), 'The plague of Athens' (pp. 31-36), and 'Dispossessing the Britons' (pp. 53-57) demonstrate Mann's detailed and careful research. In contemporary South African poetry *Palimpsests* is nearly unique in reaffirming the need to look back closely at older traditions of composition and in balancing antiquity with contemporary history. It is a bold work.

'Saying goodbye to the Romans' (pp. 58-60), stands as the poet's final poem in his final collection:

When they rip mistletoe from the trees
and shaking fists, harangue unlettered folk
about the loose behaviour in the villages
and the mad expectation burning the youth
that life should get better with every year,
I miss, in a way, an old if bitter consolation.

The recurrent theme of this collection is the emphasis placed on a unified, functioning, and progressive society. The key components of which are both the retrospective and introspective work of bracing ourselves for an everchanging world made more frightening by our intertwined and unpredictable futures, revealed to us by the current global pandemic. *Palimpsests* poses moral questions, both for heads of state, who risk being seen as contemporary kings, and for citizens guilty of betraying their own sense of *ubuntu* through the othering of one another. For Mann it is not all despair, for just as the collection begins with unrhymed couplets, *Palimpsests* ends 'tongue-in-cheek' with a couplet that takes a swipe at Rome's enduring influence ('I miss being able to shrug and say, | *Not us, not us, the Romans are to blame*', p. 60) – the final few lines of a celebrated literary career in South Africa. *Palimpsests* is a revelation of humanity's present shortcomings which can be traced far back as antiquity. Mann's final message is that the moment has now come to accept responsibility for the peculiar positions we find ourselves in; that now is the time to begin the collaborative work of building an inclusive world of togetherness.

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