



## *Palimpsests*

Chris Mann (Dryad Press, 2021)

This collection, published posthumously, is a fine memorial to the late, lamented poet Chris Mann (1948–2021). The volume’s title, *Palimpsests* (manuscripts in which later text has been superimposed on effaced earlier text), is aptly chosen for poems that overlay the contemporary world with ancient Greece and Rome, and vice versa. Everywhere, as one would expect from this writer, shades from the past make their influence felt on the present—personal shades, shades of ordinary or famous South Africans, and ancient shades of historical or mythological characters.

The ordering of the items in *Palimpsests* has been thought through with care and sensitivity so as to create multiple echoes and links between poems. For instance, in ‘The Pool of Narcissus’, a subtle rewriting of the myth from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the eponymous character becomes obsessed with thrilling images in a pool-like device (the mythological equivalent of a cellphone) to the exclusion of any real, human relationship. But later, in ‘A Picnic Beside Hlambeza Pool’, the water that had blankly imaged self back to self becomes a place of rich reflection, where the poet glimpses “deep in a pool of memory, // the faces of the living dead, the shades.” And ‘The Ithaca of the Internet’ again mythically expresses the tension between the virtual and real worlds, having the poet sail like Odysseus “out of a desktop port” and be lulled by “lotus-lands of images”, only to be drawn back to wife and reality, to “the logos-land, the Ithaca of home.”

Mann grapples with other present-day concerns through the medium of the classics. In ‘The Curse of Sisyphus’ the character doomed to push his rock uphill, only to have it eternally escape him and roll back down from the summit, warns modern people that endless, mindless work is a trap, and that they must allow time “to stop and pray, to dance, or weep, or sing.” More indirectly, ‘The City of Atlantis in a Diver’s Mask’ hints at the perils of climate change through a fevered dream of a city and its people suddenly destroyed as “water in the streets // engulfs the banquet frescoed round a villa’s hall, / ... silent as the workings of the unforeseen”.

‘The Plague of Athens (430–426 BCE)’, recounting the death from plague of the city’s leader Pericles and the lament for him by his partner Aspasia, cannot but conjure up for contemporary readers the Covid pandemic and its devastating effects.

But myth, for Mann, also illuminates purely personal moments. The story of Orpheus and his wife (their names never appear in the text) underlies the beautifully delicate poem ‘Living with Eurydice’. Like Orpheus who lost Eurydice just as he emerged from the underworld, the poet struggles (though in the end he manages) to hold on to a joyful, subliminal memory of his wife:

My netherworld of memories  
released a flux of ghosts.  
You came and went then in my mind,  
a wash, a twitch of light.

In ‘Metamorphoses on Waking’ his partner now appears to the poet—who is watching her from bed while she dresses—as “a sculpture, an archetype, / an Aphrodite in a leaf-green bra.”

Substantial narrative poems set in the ancient world make up the last section of *Palimpsests*. One senses here the influence of Cavafy, who had similarly refracted his poetic interests through historical or invented characters and situations located in classical antiquity. Mann’s ‘Getting Ready for the Vandals’ (saluting Cavafy’s famous ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’) is a dark piece, in which there is no escape for the haves from the depredations of the have-nots. The poem seems prophetic in its anticipation of the looting and burning that broke out in South Africa very recently. ‘Dispossessing the Britons’ is, for me, one of the finest of this group of poems. Cast in the form of letters from a wife, Julia, to her husband, the Roman historian Tacitus, the poem alludes to Tacitus’ famous comment on Rome’s violence towards other peoples: “They create a wasteland, then call it peace.” Mann’s poem dramatises the reality that Britain, later the arch-coloniser, was itself once colonised—demonstrating that, when one takes the long view, history is never simple but multi-layered, complicated. Finally, ‘Saying Goodbye to the Romans’ imagines a Britain (like postcolonial Africa) after the occupier has withdrawn. The poem voices the anxiety of its narrator, the relief of the inhabitants, the high hopes of the youth, and ends: “I miss, in a way, an old if bitter consolation. // I miss being able to shrug and say, / *Not us, not us, the Romans are to blame.*”

As regards technique, *Palimpsests* keeps the reader engaged and

delighted by its sheer variety of forms and rhythms—poems using lines of between three and seven beats, cast in stanzas from two to six lines, or in paragraphs of varying numbers of lines—and by the hard-won simplicity, directness and clarity of its language.

The Roman poet Horace began the last poem of his great three-book collection of odes with the line, “*Exegi monumentum aere perennius*” (I have built a monument more lasting than bronze). In *Palimpsests*, Mann, too, has left us a work that will long outlive its creator.

RICHARD WHITAKER