

## SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CLASSICAL ALLUSIONS IN THE WORK OF M B ZIMUNYA

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I first met Prof. P J Conradie in 1960 when I was a first year Latin student at the University of Stellenbosch, and he was a young lecturer teaching the course on Catullus. In my Honours year he taught me Tacitus, and when I later did Greek it was he who introduced me to the dramatists. In 1970 I was privileged to become a colleague and the next year attended the party organised in his honour by Prof. van Rensburg, to mark Dr. Conradie's appointment as Professor. For the last three years he has been External Examiner at the University of Zimbabwe where I now teach, so in the course of 35 years I have been associated with Prof. Conradie in various capacities. I welcome the opportunity to join his many students and colleagues in paying tribute to him, for his scholarship and for the great influence he has had on the teaching of Classics in Southern Africa.

Prof. Conradie's great interest has of course been in drama, and the influence of the Greek dramatists on later generations. In recent years he has focussed on African drama. For the three years that he was external examiner in Zimbabwe, he held Public Lectures on this topic,<sup>1</sup> namely "The Gods are not to Blame—Ola Rotimi's version of the Oedipus Myth" (in 1993), "Theories of Greek, Modern and African Tragedy" (in 1994) and "The Myth of Alcestis and its treatment by Efva Sutherland in her play *Edufa*" (in 1995).

These have all focussed on West African drama, as has for example Etherton (1982) in considering the various ways in which African writers, like Europeans before them, have adapted and transposed plays in terms of their own day.

It prompts the question, whether there has been a classical influence in other African countries, and possibly in other genres? In response to this, I offer some thoughts on three volumes of poems by M B Zimunya.

Musaemura Bonas Zimunya was born in Mutare (Umtali) in 1949 and went to school at Goromonzi where he studied Latin as one of his subjects and, incidentally, won the Classical Association prize in an inter-school competition. It would seem valid to ask what influence, if any, this had on his writing and whether such an influence can be traced. The claims usually made for the benefits of Latin—disciplined thinking, wide vocabulary, insight into the structure of language—are difficult to pin down; even when they are present (as they are) one cannot say how much is due to Latin. It is easier to search for Classical allusions, but these need not have been encountered in the original. Zimunya read English literature at the University of Kent, and is now lecturer in English at the University of Zimbabwe. English literature is therefore a much stronger influence than Latin, and also a mine of classical myths.

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<sup>1</sup> For printed versions, see Conradie 1994 and 1995.

The primary inspiration for his poetry is however his own experience. The first volume, *Thought Tracks* (Zimunya 1982a) is divided into 7 parts: "Home and the Mountains"; "The Prisoner"; "For the Bearers of the Burden"; "To the Fighters"; "Zimbabwe and the Ruins"; "Of Exile and Home"; "Others". Zimunya covers a wide range of themes and moods, and uses a variety of forms and stylistic devices. These are well summarised by Ngara (1990) in his critique.

The overriding impression is of African experience. Many poems recall the world of his childhood—children dancing naked in the rain; herding cattle ("my legs wear stockings of mud"); sun and storm; a family re-union at Christmas, ("dozens of breadloaves, drums of tea, mountains of sadza", i.e. porridge). His images are melons and maize, birds and coggelmanders (sic), the mountains and mists of his home. There is sympathy for the old man seeing an aeroplane for the first time; for the father whose son "BA out of a whole herd of cows ... was Mercedes Benz ash now". There is the bitterness at white domination; the fear of Mr. Bezuidenhout's dogs; the contempt for "Black Padre" aping "White Padre". There is his experience when jailed for his part in the struggle for Independence; the humiliation of prison life; the letters to his mother; the questioning; the longing for freedom. There is the homesickness of exile; England where "Grey weighs heavily on the heart" and there is "hardly enough room to move, to breathe or to think"; the joy of anticipation "I shall go home ..."

Then there is stone, which is a recurring theme in his poetry—the stone of the mountains, stone sculpture, the stone Zimbabwe bird, the stone of Great Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe, or Dzimbahwe, means House of Stone; the place and the stone are symbolic. In his Introduction, Zimunya (1982a:x-xi) says that during the liberation struggle, Great Zimbabwe was a living myth, speaking to those who fought for the freedom of the land, but with a message "proportionally impossible to capture". It is the symbol of the beginning, of nationhood, of identity, of self, for he realises

while we were looking for Freedom, we were also engaged in a quest, a quest for individual accommodation with existence ...

It became obvious that for eight years or so one had been moving towards a discovery, or rediscovery, of one's roots and identity, and a discovery of myth. For in Rhodesia, as this land was called then, our old myths had been systematically denigrated, disrupted and even destroyed. Generations and generations of us were reared on European myths and heroes and sucked into the vortex of European culture and behaviour where all identity with the past was threatened with extinction ...

So, the poems move from early youthful days of tender passion evoked. Gradually the umbilical cord is broken by the sword of the conqueror and the innocence is lost. Here, the original beauty is submerged in the confrontation with the subhuman condition imposed upon us by the oppressor. Politics is an ugly cyclopean monster that swallows all the frail beauty of the past, just like life itself. Only what gives succour to the human soul provides the beauty ...

Where does the classical influence fit in? It is in the "cyclopean monster" of the introduction, linked to destruction, so one would expect it in the period of "lost

identity”, to be discarded on finding an “own identity”, or in connection with the whites and those who ape them. Is this in fact the case? Let us first examine the mythological allusions in the poems.

I think one can ignore the description of the roots of the big tree as “a deep labyrinth” (p.82), and also the “pyrrhic” nature of the customers in the pub (p.83) as common English usage. In *Monstrous (after the hypocrites)* (p.31) there is a description of a bird that brings death and destruction. It is “blind as a Cyclops shot in the eye”. Is this also common usage? or an echo of Vergil’s description of the Cyclops as monstrous, *monstrum horrendum* (*Aen.* 3:658)? Is it significant that Zimbabwe’s monster has a classical connotation?

*Roads I* (p.62) is about a car accident:

We who could not grow feathers  
upon this flesh of ours  
who could not turn arms into wings  
who sought to violate bounds  
imposed upon our genius  
found flight in steel things  
jaguaring on the road ...

Shona culture does have stories about metamorphosis into birds, and one might think this refers to one of those, but in the next stanza we find

Black Icarus  
whiskey bottle in mouth ...

This Icarus also dies a terrible death. A man who has attained Western life style (a car) is described in classical terms. Is this significant?

*Inside the sculpture* (p.97) examines the contrast between the earlier “land of everything” and the state after the gun came, the “European paradise” that is also “a land of Judgement and Death”.

... And every stranger  
can see this Arcadia, the rainbow in the flying spray,  
and the old stone acropolis, but not Me.

Can one say that the classical term for a pastoral paradise, Arcadia, is applicable to the foreigner but not to the indigenous inhabitant?

*The stone speaks* (p.102) has the stone saying

I am old and age-less ...  
Older than Moses and Jesus,  
older than Greece and Rome ...

The foreign element, Greece and Rome, is rejected in favour of the ‘own’—but it is also “older than Chaminuka”. This is literal truth, the stone older than people or civilizations, either foreign or local.

In *Humiliated* (p.46) the poet speaks of  
 a defeated king of this self,  
 watching my blood sink in the field  
 where I was crushed  
 seeing the heavy hand of Caesar ...

Is this a commonly used symbol of authority, known from the Biblical "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's", or does it betray a closer knowledge of his work? Either way, it equates the Roman with oppression.

If the hypothesis classical = non-black/non-nationalist held good, one would expect classical allusions for unsympathetic characters like *Black Padre*, "graft of white man's soul inside black clay" (p.41). There are none, instead a contemporary comparison,

like H Wilson  
 puffing into the sky ...

The one allusion to Rhodes, the arch-villain in black nationalist eyes, is that he made his home in the Rock. It is clear that a simplistic correlation of classical imagery with Europeans or Euro-centric Africans does not work.

The most interesting example is *The mountain* (p.88). Zimbabwe is a land of huge granite outcrops, stone mountains for the most part without vegetation. Zimunya acknowledges in his Introduction (p.x) that the landscape "is so topographically dramatic that one cannot afford to miss the physical dimension in one's exploration ..."

We return again to the steep carving  
 without rope  
 without wings  
 groping for the crevices  
 that our rivalries and greed  
 make harder and more suspicious to grasp ...

Ngara (1990:115) sees this as a symbol for the struggle for Zimbabwe, that fighters have to climb and conquer; in the following stanzas their pre-occupation with the struggle is transformed into dreams that haunt them at night, and there is a vivid picture of the impossible task awaiting them.

What Ngara does not comment on, is the phrase, "and compel us to roll the stone up dzimbahwe (sic) ..." This is a changed metaphor; the struggle is not to climb the mountain, but to roll a stone up it—in fact, an allusion to the Sisyphus myth. This is re-inforced by the lines quoted ("our rivalries and greed"), the reasons for his punishment. Zimunya has confirmed in a personal interview that the Greek myth did serve as an inspiration for this section of the poem, and this insight opens new perspectives on the way in which a classical influence may function.

Any poet has the problem of communicating his own vision of the world. This is a double-edged problem—it has to be *his* vision, and he must communicate it

effectively. In this specific context, it means a black Zimbabwean poet with a western education communicating with inter alia fellow blacks. He is searching for himself, after the "vortex of European culture and behaviour"; if he uses European symbols, is he denying that identity?<sup>2</sup> Will his readers have that frame of reference and understand him? Yet, willy-nilly, that education, for good or ill, has been part of his experience.

In *The mountain* Zimunya has successfully fused the two cultures. The mountains of his childhood are his own, a natural feature with which all can identify, a symbol not subordinate to foreign intrusion, yet his experience of a different culture has given him an added dimension:

We saw each night the mountain turn  
and give us a view ...

This suggests a critic should look beyond the direct mythical allusions when looking for a classical influence on Zimunya's work. There is a measure of intertextuality that is hard to assess. *No songs* (p.10) starts with the phrase, "No songs of cicadas—", and in the fourth stanza, "Where shall we find the way back?" Should we see a resemblance to Meliboeus in Vergil's First Eclogue, wondering when he will ever return (*Ecl.* 1.67–69), and concluding "No more songs shall I sing ..." (*Ecl.* 1.77)?

In *Zimbabwe bird* (p.104) the poet expresses the wish:

May this hieroglyph outlive  
the ravages of time  
and human intrigue

This is similar to Catullus' wish that his book survive for more than one age (Catullus 1.10); it also recalls Horace's claim that his monument, more lasting than bronze, will not be worn away by wind, rain or the passage of time (*Hor. Carm.* 3.30.1–5). The reader may also recall Ovid's similar claim, that neither the wrath of Jove, nor fire nor sword nor time could destroy his work (*Ovid Met.* 15.871–879)

Zimunya's poem continues:

Give us a thousand  
another thousand  
and a million years ...

Although he is talking about years, not kisses, and uses the plural "us" instead of the singular "me", it has the ring of Catullus (5.7–9)

*da mi basia mille, deinde centum*  
*dein mille altera, dein centum*  
*deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum*

<sup>2</sup> See also the comments in this regard by Chinweizu 1983.

The second volume, *Kingfisher, Jikinya and other poems* (Zimunya 1982b), is divided into three parts: "Thunderstorm, Sunflower and The City"; "Jikinya and Kingfisher"; "Anniversary". Again there are poems of nature: *Thunderstorm, Rain and Fire, Fig Tree*. There are African subjects: *Mosquito, Tsetse-fly*. There are war poems: *O! War, Underground*, and poems celebrating Independence: *Who Are We?, Anniversary*. The theme of the stone continues. I can find only one classical allusion, in *Leave Me* (p.32) where lightning "trajects Ajax lasers through the windows". Can one conclude that the poet has left the non-African behind him?

The most interesting from the point of view of this study is *You Were* (p.24).

Ben is the one who made the claim:  
 the African cannot write a love poem,  
 he said,  
 And that was two years after Mrs Whitehouse  
 strained her back creaking from an old nationalist's  
 assault  
 to say we cannot write poems

What was his reaction? "I simply stared at her contemptuously ..."

It goes on, "Then I had seen Jikinya's legs ..."

But before I had time to compose an ode  
 I was fuming politically ...

Love poems, political poems. They are not the prerogative of Western literature. R Finnegan (1970) devotes a chapter to "Topical and Political Songs", and another to "Lyric", pointing out that "In the sense of a short poem which is sung, lyric is probably the most common form of poetry in subsaharan Africa", covering just about every topic available, and that "the number of love songs recorded is surprising—at least to those brought up to the idea that the concept of personal love is bound to be lacking in African cultures" (1970:47).

The indignation and contempt of the young Zimunya is understandable, and it would be equally presumptuous to suggest that the form, function or content of his poetry was influenced more by the Latin he learned than by the songs of his mother tongue. I think it is permissible to say there are resemblances, themes and techniques (like repetition) in common with Catullus, but this would be true of other lyricists as well.

The third volume, *Country Dawns and City Lights* (Zimunya 1985) is concerned, as the title implies, with the contrast between rural and urban life. The world of the poet's childhood with its proximity to Nature, its close-knit society, its tenderness but also its superstition and witchcraft, is changing; as buns and bicycles enter, the traditional African rural way of life is threatened and "the long road to the city" begins. The city is the symbol of the alien, European culture—exciting, sophisticated, full of lights, but also ruthless, violent, with mangy dogs, delivery lanes and foetuses in dirtbins.

One might expect any classical allusions to belong to the city. This is not so. I have found only three rather tenuous allusions. One is in Part Two, *City Lights*. *The Philosopher* is a conversation between two mangy dogs:

And what is the meaning of it all,  
my dear Socrates?

asks the one. The name is taken to convey the arch-philosopher and might suggest a certain level of westernization. The answer is brutal:

A slow death, you fool!

Does this apply to westernized Africa?

The other examples are from Part One, *Country Dawns*, and are veiled. The first can be wholly African:

Her ghost returns again and again  
to curse the sons and children  
of the gaol-ridden that claimed her limbs  
when the hired men seized her in midnight  
to force the hand of fate and prosperity  
with axe-blown blood.

Only the title, *Fury* (p.8), suggests that she may be related to the Eumenidae. The second example is in *Fairy Tales* (p.26):

In a fairy tale  
the gods would snatch you out  
through the navel or the thigh of your goddess  
or by some Caesarian operation  
and so you would come out  
complete with armoury:  
bows and arrows, quiver and kerrie  
to become a hunter, lover, husband and father

To a classicist, this is a clear reference to Dionysus (from the thigh of Zeus) and Athene (fully armed, from his head) even though it is not a goddess from whom they were born, nor a kerrie (sic) in the hand. To a Shona, it might suggest one of the wonder children of folk tales, like Pimbirimano, the child born holding a horn and by implication probably clothed, who could talk at birth and set traps for the hyena by that evening (Kahari 1986). Tales like this

would live  
in the ears and minds of keen children  
huddled around an evening fire  
listening to the story of a young god

As in *The Mountain*, the poet appears to have achieved a synthesis. Both aspects of his childhood are under threat:

But now in this new world  
 what god would save your mother  
 and who could pluck you out of a virgin birth  
 and could you be born with boots and pen  
 or with an AK or germ factory or A-bomb  
 and what race of kids would listen tear-ridden  
 as your miracle was told by what surviving raconteur?

The question of intertextuality also arises in *Country Dawns and City Lights*. A recurring character is Loveness, "the sunshine of the city". There is no tangible link between her and Lesbia, but the coupling, of dogs and humans, in *I Couldn't Believe It* and *The Lane* is not far from *nunc in quadriuis et angiportis glubit ...* in Catullus 58.4–5. Both Zimunya and Catullus can wax lyrical over the evening star, "that which shines for the unmarried man" (Zimunya 1982a:21) and shines bringing more pleasure than other stars (the rhetorical *Quis caelo lucet iucundior ignis?* of the young men in Catullus 62.26); they can also be crude in referring to sex in the streets.

Catullus, who can visualize his companions tramping from India or Britain (5.15), but "his girl" embracing 300 lovers simultaneously, *identidem omnium ilia rumpens* (5.20), would doubtless have understood *On the Streets* (Zimunya 1985:50):

A man takes the city by the horns  
 but a woman seizes the world by the testes:  
 see now how Tito is caught  
 between the city and Loveness

Like Tito, Catullus might be said to be caught between the city and his girl (Catullus 37).

The variety of rhythms, the use of everyday words, repetition, direct speech, colloquial phrases and bluntness bordering on obscenity is reminiscent of Catullus; the horrors of life in the city recall, and outdo, Juvenal.

What conclusions can one reach? Three volumes of poetry (admittedly slim ones, 199 short poems *in toto*) have yielded very little, but in an experiment a negative result is still a result, and in this case the findings may have relevance for the teaching of Classics in Southern Africa. In considering them, one should bear in mind Zimunya's assertion (1982a:xii) that the black man's destiny is dual, a *sub-human condition* (his italics), dehumanised by the colonial experience, and the *human condition* laid on him by virtue of the fact of his existence.

- 1) There is very little obvious influence of Latin; classical allusions are general rather than specifically related to a Latin syllabus, and could just as easily be derived from English literature and general knowledge. The strongest influence



is personal experience and the physical reality of Africa. This could serve as a reminder to teachers—for all of us, even white Classicists, Greece and Rome are not the primary source of our experience.

- 2) The reverse of this is that the classical allusions are there—Greece and Rome are part of the general experience of the westernized world, even in rural Africa. Understanding the sources can be relevant to our experience.
- 3) Echoes of phrases (other than mythological allusions) do suggest Latin authors, particularly Catullus. Both write short poems in a variety of meters with a certain overlap in theme; this is a characteristic of lyric poetry and need not be seen as a direct influence.
- 4) Zimunya feels strongly about the “sub-human condition” blacks experience when their own culture is denigrated and replaced by a foreign one. This would include Latin. One would thus expect any references to the Classics to be negative, and to be more general in earlier works where he was questioning his own identity; this is not the case.<sup>3</sup>

It does however serve as a warning: the “Humanities” must not be taught in a way that “de-humanises”. The Classical world is a different culture, not necessarily a better one. We need to be honest about its failures as well as its greatness, and be aware of how hopelessly deficient we are in our knowledge of other cultures.

- 5) What gives the Classical heritage its worth is its contribution to the ‘human condition’, the common elements of humanity that are fundamental regardless of place and time. “Only what gives succour to the human soul provides the beauty” (Zimunya 1982a:xi). This is what the poet fuses with his own world, and this is what we should concentrate on in our teaching, enabling each individual to achieve his own ‘accommodation with reality’.

These are also the elements that are retained as one dramatist transposes the work of another, the bottom line of Prof. Conradie’s research and his contribution to Classics.

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<sup>3</sup> Latin may indeed have provided an opportunity to prove that he was as able, intellectually, as whites.

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