

## *Black Orpheus*

Under the headline *Black Orpheus Rising This Day* newspaper (21/10/04) carried an edited excerpt of a speech given by the Minister of Arts and Culture, Z. Pallo Jordan.

It is a striking speech and remarkable for many things but its most powerful invocation comes at the end.

**The African creative artist has often been referred to as “Black Orpheus”. If our Orpheus is ever to win back his Eurydice, who was swallowed up by the darkness of slavery, colonialism and apartheid, like his classic namesake he must march forward and upward into the light of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He would be wise also to heed the admonition against looking back in nostalgic longing; lest, as in the classical tale Eurydice be called back, and reclaimed by the darkness of Hades.**

This short paragraph offers much to think about. The Minister’s call to the creative arts borrows the authority of the great classical legend of the power of art.

The classical Orpheus, son of the god Apollo, was the supreme poet, able through his music to draw emotion from even inanimate things. After his wife Eurydice’s death he followed her into the underworld of the god Hades where she was confined among the spirits of the dead. Orpheus so charmed Hades with his lute that he released Eurydice from death, but only on condition that Orpheus would lead her back up to earth without looking back. At the moment of putting his foot on the earth he glanced back and she vanished for ever. Orpheus’s expression of grief at his second loss of Eurydice so haunted the wild women followers of Bacchus (the Maenads) that they tore his body to pieces. However to honour his art the Muses gathered the fragments of his body and buried them at the foot of Mount Olympus.

So what does the myth tell us and why should it appeal to the Minister? It speaks of the miraculous power of art but it also speaks of the vulnerability of the artist. It creates an image of the intense stress of artistic work and of the enormous courage required to undertake and carry the creative process through to conclusion. Black Orpheus is the African artist now visiting the underworld in search of his Eurydice. She is what was once the spirit of African life which is now lost to the world. The African artist must enter the past to recover the now dead spirit, but once returned to life through art there must be no anxious or nostalgic backward glance: “he must march forward and upward into the light of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” bringing with him the redeemed spirit of Africa.

There is a good deal of similarity between Jordan’s image of the Black Orpheus and President Mbeki’s invocation of the novelist James Baldwin’s *Nobody Knows My Name* as an example of the spiritual quest for identity in a hostile world. Both give insight into the kind of thinking about art and culture that is shaping the social purpose of the government. The philosopher Tony Holiday’s comments in the *Cape*

*Times* on Mbeki's letter make the similarities with the Orpheus image startlingly clear.

**The President is surely right to see in this writer's lonely and courageous journey into self an analogy with our country's spiritual pilgrimage from the alienating deserts of slavery, colonisation and apartheid towards a re-discovered homeland of self-understanding and self-respect. He is right too, it seems to me to identify this mission as the fruit of a hunger for an African rebirth, through which its peoples will find afresh the networks of conjoined cultural strands, which bind them into a single nation.**

It is becoming clear that the quest for a genuine renaissance of the spirit is getting its proper intellectual definition as a process of exploring the African past in order to make it new. In his article Holiday makes the point in specific detail.

**To take one example: the decorated pieces of ochre and shell beads discovered at Blombos cave, overlooking the Indian Ocean, are more than 70,000 years old. Their excavation stands to archaeology and its related disciplines somewhat as the discovery of nuclear fission once stood to physics. The find has revolutionised our understanding of the origins of symbolism and of the inner life of our 'primitive' African ancestors.**

A different, but equally compelling, instance of the process of renewal can be found in historian Shamil Jeppie's account of the recovery of ancient African manuscripts in and around Timbuktu. In focusing on manuscripts it is worth recalling that the European Renaissance gained its initial direction and energy from the recovery of the manuscripts of classical antiquity from the Middle East. They gave the monastic scholars the insights on which to found a new conception of the purpose and form of human social life and led to the flowering of a fresh consciousness of human possibility throughout Europe and beyond.

Jeppie notes that there are more than 200,000 manuscripts in Timbuktu alone, produced in and around the city between 1300 and the late 1900's. A great many have only recently been discovered and as yet there is no accurate archive of what exists. Most are written in a unique regional Arabic calligraphic script and have not yet been constituted as objects of study and interpretation. In Jeppie's words

**The CEDRAB (documentation Centre) material is thus a symbol of a productive past that has only tenuous continuity into the present. The Centre's collection is a record of lively and extensive literary activity. It is tangible evidence of African scholarship, of Africans reading and writing, and at extremely high levels of sophistication as well, and centuries before colonialism. The levels of discourse were often abstract and speculative. These African scholars left traces of their work on grammar and rhetoric, on jurisprudence and religion and mysticism. Many of the manuscripts reflect scientific pursuits covering mathematics, astronomy, medicine and astrology and geomancy.**

According to Jeppie the manuscripts have been ‘long hidden and obscure’ and are now being slowly rediscovered. He views them as ‘an African legacy and an expression of humanity’s collective intellectual heritage’ and concludes on an Orphean note

**...our emerging writers and historians should be encouraged to look north of the Limpopo to study and engage with the historical traditions of the Niger bend and adjoining regions. We could also collaborate with the locals in finding ways to let its brighter past provide opportunities to improve Timbuktu’s difficult present.**

These separate and different instances give an indication of the Orphean labour required of creative minds. The interpretation of lost worlds is arduous and specialised work which requires dedication and discipline. Minister Jordan is surely right, nostalgia has no place, no simple looking back to an Edenic pre-colonial Africa, no simple celebration of ‘heritage’. The inheritance must yield fresh meaning and gain currency in the present, and in the future. And Orpheus’s fate reminds us that the new meanings created in art can be dangerous.

It is within this intellectual landscape that the Cultural Observatory has been established. Its purpose is to commission and present fresh research into the trends and growth of cultural work as the Orphean project unfolds. It will explore developments across the full range of artistic and cultural endeavour through both research and debate. The website is designed to present current interpretations of South African arts and culture but it must also to operate as an open forum in which counter-interpretations or additional inter-disciplinary insights can be logged for the interest and enlightenment of the broadest possible public.