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PART I

Prologue

# 1 | The Azanian Muse: Classicism in Unexpected Places

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On 12 February 1991 a meeting took place at Cape Town’s airport, then known as D. F. Malan Airport in memory of the first apartheid-era prime minister, between leaders of the African National Congress and President F. W. de Klerk’s ruling National Party. One year earlier, Nelson Mandela, the African National Congress (ANC) leader, had been released from lengthy imprisonment and the organisation itself unbanned. The purpose of the meeting was to clear the way for formal talks about the transition to democracy, talks which had at the time stalled as a result of violent exchanges involving both the black population and the security forces. The meeting ultimately produced the D. F. Malan Accord, an agreement on the terms of engagement that did much to make possible the first democratic election of April 1994. This was uncharted territory and the mood was tense. Sceptics on each side questioned the entire exercise of negotiating a democratic solution to the country’s political impasse, which had long been marked by violence. There was no guarantee of a peaceful outcome.<sup>1</sup>

During a tea break, one member of the African National Congress delegation, Chris Hani, initiated a conversation with Gerrit Viljoen, who was at the time Minister of Constitutional Development and De Klerk’s right-hand man (Fig. 1.1). Hani was Chief of Staff of the ANC’s armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (‘Spear of the Nation’). The subject of their conversation was Sophocles’ tragedy *Philoctetes*, about which Hani raised some detailed points of interpretation. Together with Pallo Jordan, also of the ANC delegation, Hani and Viljoen fell into deep discussion. According to De Klerk, Viljoen was ‘impressed’ by their ‘enthusiasm and depth of knowledge’.<sup>2</sup> The fact that an ancient, scholarly topic arose in a high-voltage political meeting certainly occasioned surprise at the time, all the more because it was initiated by a guerrilla who grew up among the country’s poorest. Indeed, Hani had spent his early years in the rural Eastern Cape, his parents minimally

<sup>1</sup> Sparks 1994: 131.  
<sup>2</sup> F. W. de Klerk, private communication, 1 April 2010: for recollections of the incident I thank the former President, as well as former Minister Pallo Jordan (private communications, 19 and 21 August 2010).



**Figure 1.1** Gerrit Viljoen alongside President F. W. de Klerk and Adriaan Vlok (Minister of Law and Order), in the second round of talks with the ANC. Viljoen is seated opposite Nelson Mandela, who led the ANC delegation, and Alfred Nzo. Pretoria, 6 August 1990.

educated.<sup>3</sup> Despite the two leaders' differences of allegiance and background, Sophocles' play provided common ground and, in particular, an icebreaker.

Gerrit Viljoen (1926–2009) was the son of a professor of Greek, and had had a stellar academic career: having studied initially at the University of Pretoria, he took the Classical Tripos (first class) at Cambridge and then a doctorate in classical philology at Leiden. He became professor of Greek at the University of South Africa (1957), then rector of the newly formed Rand Afrikaans University, now known as the University of Johannesburg (1967), before taking political office in 1978. His academic research focused on Greek lyric poetry, especially the *Odes* of Pindar.<sup>4</sup> Viljoen was an establishment figure par excellence, and at one stage chaired the influential and partly secret Afrikaner organisation, the Broederbond (1974–80).<sup>5</sup> Having initially been the senior constitutional expert on de Klerk's team, Viljoen resigned in 1992 for health reasons, and left politics completely. He died in 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Hani's autobiographical essay of 1991 is reproduced in Houston and Ngcucu 2014: 55–56; compare Smith and Tromp 2009 and MacMillan 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Kriel 2009: vii–x; Louw and van Rensburg 1997. Viljoen's Leiden dissertation appeared as *Pindaros se Tiende en Twaalfde Olimpiese Odes* (Viljoen 1955). Given the aristocratic character of Pindar's poems, it is tempting to argue that their particular inflection of antiquity resonated with the Broederbond's exclusivist style of Afrikaner nationalism.

<sup>5</sup> Smith 2009 and Giliomee 2003: esp. 583–84.



**Figure 1.2** Chris Hani, with fellow ANC leaders Tony Yengeni and Willie Hofmeyr, on Church Square, Cape Town (1991). In the background is the Slave Lodge, which functioned at the time as the SA Cultural History Museum: see also Figs 1.13, 9.9 and 9.11.

Hani (1942–93), on the other hand, had studied Latin and English at the historically black University of Fort Hare and then at Rhodes University, both in the Eastern Cape (Fig. 1.2).<sup>6</sup> While fighting against apartheid in exile, he maintained scholarly habits, reading voraciously. His original choice to study Latin was linked to the fact that it was a requirement for entry into the legal profession. Hani's popularity in South Africa was enormous following his return from exile in 1991. However, he would not live to see the first democratic election, since he was assassinated at his home near Johannesburg by a white supremacist in April 1993. As we shall see, the relation between classical antiquity and South Africa's emerging elite had many facets, involving no less a figure than Mandela himself during his Robben Island imprisonment. Translated ancient texts were among the library books available to prisoners, even to political prisoners on Robben Island. Such ancient works, typically in Penguin translations, were considered by the authorities to be innocuous and innocent of the subversiveness they sought to quell (Fig. 1.3).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> I thank Mr Steven Fourie, Registrar of Rhodes University, for making available Hani's academic record, covering the years 1959–61 (copy dated 22 April 2010). Cf. Lambert 2011: 110–15.

<sup>7</sup> See the publication accompanying an exhibit at Cape Town's South African Museum: Kathrada and Deacon 1996. Cf. Coombes 2003: 61.



Figure 1.3 Books from the prison library: *Esiqithini: the Robben Island exhibition*, South African Museum, Cape Town (1996). Penguin edition translations of Greek tragedies are pictured alongside Indian sacred texts, which are inscribed with A. M. Kathrada’s name on the cover. Photograph by Matthew Willman.

In itself, the airport episode amounts to little, and is hard to document following the deaths of the two main protagonists. Nonetheless, it should at the very least attune us to the element of surprise: whereas classical antiquity is very widely attested as a source of social hierarchy and division, its role as a bridge-builder – or, to put it differently, a safety-valve – is much less known. The Hani/Viljoen exchange is thus emblematic of the scope and nature of the current volume, which seeks to excavate distinctively South African contexts of classical antiquity, to explore the often surprising afterlives of ancient Greek and Roman texts, ideas, styles and artefacts. To be sure, classical antiquity has been part of the colonial legacy, during both the Dutch- and the British-ruled periods of South African history, roughly 1652–1806 and 1806–1910, respectively. Several of the essays that follow make the colonial connection clear. Recent scholarship has shown the small but influential role classics played in the formation of the Indian Civil Service, both at the East India Company College at Haileybury (founded 1806) and later at Balliol College, Oxford.<sup>8</sup> But clearly neither of these characterisations tells the whole story. For one thing, Hani’s undoubted attachment to ancient literature casts into question

<sup>8</sup> Vasunia 2008.

any assumption that classical antiquity has been merely the handmaid of colonialism or of apartheid. Classicism has been evident in some unexpected places, and it has been part of the lives not merely of those whose elite education enabled them to learn Latin at a young age. In the spectrum of South African interactions with ancient Greece and Rome presented below, it will be as important to show some familiar, mainstream instances of classicism alongside less expected and less canonical ones. What is more, the episode coincides with a critical period in South African history, namely the transition to democracy that started in earnest when, opening Parliament on 2 February 1990, De Klerk unexpectedly announced the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Mandela. In one sense the Viljoen/Hani moment looks forward to the post-1994 period of ANC-led majority government, and to a time when, amid the restructuring of school and university curricula, university departments of ancient studies have had to define and defend their turf anew in a changing landscape. Most departments have been reduced in the number of instructors, through attrition, redeployment and retrenchment; others have been closed down or amalgamated out of existence. Historically white universities face the challenge of how to appeal to the new student demographic. This is now much more racially diverse, containing a high percentage of non-native speakers of English or Afrikaans, the established languages for teaching Latin and Greek especially, and of first-generation university attenders, who gravitate naturally to the professional tracks rather than the humanities. In another sense the episode also looks back upon a time in which ancient Greece and Rome held a place of some prominence, if one thinks beyond the figure of Viljoen himself to the country's Roman–Dutch juristic tradition and to some of its most prominent buildings, including the Union Buildings in Pretoria. Far from being a one-sided, unchanging set of material, classical antiquity has fulfilled very different social roles at different times. At that critical point in South Africa's history, Sophocles played a minor but revealing role.

## 1. The Muse in Azania

The muse herself needs no introduction. As the collective symbols of artistic and other kinds of creativity, the muses go all the way back to the earliest Greek literature. Best known is the invocation of the muse that begins Homer's *Odyssey*: 'Tell me, Muse, of the man of many turns...' (1.1). They appear sometimes singly and sometimes in groups of different

sizes, linked initially with Pieria and nearby Mount Olympus. These goddesses were a source of inspiration for poets, intellectuals and others.<sup>9</sup>

In this essay the muse is a metaphor for classicism, namely the ideas, forms, artefacts and texts of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The notion of the classical is by no means without its complications, particularly as it relates to the intellectual and aesthetic histories of idealised forms.<sup>10</sup> It has aesthetic and ethical implications. Another element at the edges of the current collection is the relative role of other traditions of antiquity, including Egyptian and Phoenician.<sup>11</sup> For present purposes, however, we may take the term ‘classical’ to denote the cultural productions of ancient Greece and Rome. Unless otherwise specified, the term ‘antiquity’ in the pages that follow refers to those particular ancient cultures. Their special status in Western European civilisation is a large topic in its own right, involving the history of the Christian church as well as the deployment of ancient symbols as a source of legitimacy on the part of several post-ancient polities. While this special status of ‘classical’ antiquity in Europe is well established, its role in Africa, including South Africa, is much less obvious. That role is explored in the current volume.

It is only recently that colonial and postcolonial receptions of antiquity have begun to receive attention.<sup>12</sup> Some such studies have emphasised the role of classics in the scholarly background of metropolitan-trained colonial elite. Others have shown that, in its (post)colonial manifestations, antiquity has sometimes been a source of social power for upwardly mobile people, in the colonies as indeed in the motherland; that it has been no monolith, with classical material deployed sometimes in subversive ways that challenge rather than reinforce the colonial establishment. Such themes will be apparent in the current collection.

Azania needs rather more explanation. This is the ancient name for the Horn of Africa, attested first in the anonymous *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (sections 16–19), a captain’s manual of around AD 40–70. In ancient topography it denotes the land immediately adjacent to the north-west

<sup>9</sup> Bottini 2006. <sup>10</sup> Porter 2006, esp. 1–67.

<sup>11</sup> There are special problems in comparing the reception of Egypt and Phoenicia in South Africa. Most significantly, both are better known through the Hebrew Bible, especially the Pentateuch, than in any more direct sense. To take a concrete example, obelisks may be considered a link with Egypt, for example in early twentieth-century commemorations of the Anglo-Boer War and of the Great Trek. But the link is an indirect one, since obelisks were first imported by Roman emperors and have since then been widely deployed as a symbol of power. See further Cornelius 2003. Furthermore, scholarly accounts of the Phoenicians emphasise how little is known of them, e.g. Markoe 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Notably Goff 2005; Hardwick and Gillespie 2007; Greenwood 2010.



Indian Ocean, today's Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania.<sup>13</sup> Later, the term would be found also in Claudius Ptolemy's *Geography*, a second-century AD text representing both the culmination of ancient geography and also, as we shall see, an important point of departure for early modern European geography, following its translation into Latin in 1406.<sup>14</sup> Much later, the name 'Azania' would be revived in the attempt to find an anti-colonial alternative to the term 'South Africa', which was officially used after the Act of Union in 1910. In practice, use of the name 'Azania' marked the split of an Africanist faction away from the African National Congress in 1959. This faction became the Pan Africanist Congress under the leadership of Robert Sobukwe (1924–78).<sup>15</sup> A small number of political organisations continue to use the name Azania today: an act of continued defiance against the dominance of the ANC and its partners in government. Consequently, the ancient name is far from obscurantist and pedantic: for some, it signals the failure of the ANC since the 1950s to constitute a single, unified organisation. This would be the only apparent explanation for the fact that the term continues to raise hackles in South Africa today, even though both the Pan Africanist Congress and Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) have had only negligible popular support, as reflected in the elections since 1994. Beyond this narrowly political use, the name has been a symbol of African pride, by implication invoking the glories of Egypt and Ethiopia as alternatives to the seeming monopoly of Greece and Rome. Other factors too might have determined its use: in general, the desire to make the point that South Africa is part of the African continent; and specifically to signal Kenyan and Tanzanian support for the struggle against apartheid. Nonetheless, the choice of the name is problematic if its main aim is to decolonise minds: as the chapters here show, the classical tradition in South Africa has been associated with colonialism in various forms. The name 'Azania' has emerged at a particular moment; as will be very apparent, the reasons for invoking antiquity and circumstances in doing so have been remarkably different, and it is questionable whether the preference for 'Azania' over 'South Africa' as a name constitutes any meaningful stand against colonialism in itself.

To gain some perspective on the range of South Africa's classical traditions, it might have seemed obvious to focus on Greek and Latin pedagogy. Indeed, some attempt will be made to do so in the paragraphs immediately following: at the very least, engagement with the languages themselves provides a basis of sorts and can be easily measured. The story has already

<sup>13</sup> Hilton 1993. <sup>14</sup> Berggren and Jones 2000: 52. <sup>15</sup> Lodge 1983: 67–90; Kondlo 2009.



been told.<sup>16</sup> However, in the present volume as a whole, pedagogy is more a matter of historical setting than a central focus. Here the emphasis will be, rather, on cultural productions that have involved Greek and Roman antiquity in a central way. The book seeks variously to address the question, *How have ancient Greece and Rome intersected with South African histories?* The plural ‘histories’ is advisedly used, so to include not only politics and cultural productions but also the more modest *petits récits* (‘small narratives’) of individuals rather than institutions.<sup>17</sup> The overarching question of the book subsumes two related concepts, namely tradition and reception. As used here, both are conceived broadly.<sup>18</sup> The question is also intended to emphasise that South African receptions of antiquity deserve to be explicitly located in that country’s history, particularly of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Several smaller but still fundamental questions follow, for example: Who has been involved in classical reception, and to what ends? Is it possible to identify instances in which classical pasts have displaced other pasts? Between these covers we canvass a broad range of artefacts, styles, texts and ideas. While the case-study format is well suited to such diversity and breadth, the present essay seeks to identify some unifying themes and phenomena.

## 2. Authority

It is already evident that Graeco-Roman antiquity has been implicated in various kinds of authority. As a next step it will be necessary to consider the educational role classical antiquity has played, particularly in an institutional sense.

In classical antiquity the extent of Africa was not known, and there was no awareness of the southern end of the African continent. Herodotus is pointedly vague when, in the course of describing Nilotic geography, he

<sup>16</sup> Smuts 1960 and 1976, to which Lambert 2011 adds a critical edge. For African contexts: Dominik 2007 and Hilton 2007: 11–40. See now also Murray (2014) on women’s classical education.

<sup>17</sup> Cultural history was substantially established as a field in the mid- to late nineteenth century by Jakob Burckhardt 1990. On *petits récits* see Jean-François Lyotard 1984: 60.

<sup>18</sup> Some classicists have argued for the concept of reception as preferable to that of tradition, on the grounds that tradition implies uncritical celebration: e.g. Hardwick 2003. However, since Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, this is not the case: it has become axiomatic, at least in the historical disciplines generally, that the notion of tradition deserves some measure of scepticism, and that the term has lost its supposed innocence.

comes to the area south of Elephantine.<sup>19</sup> The question of Africa's southern extent is, for Herodotus and later geographers, tied up with that of the source of the Nile and its annual inundation.<sup>20</sup> Later ancient writers would also be concerned with this set of questions. In antiquity and well beyond, the southern part of Africa would remain quite literally Europe's 'terra incognita'.<sup>21</sup> It is in these circumstances that Pliny the Elder, composing his *Natural History* in the second half of the first century AD, could refer to a Greek proverb according to which Africa always produces something new.<sup>22</sup>

One factor in the persistence of this idea is the ongoing authority of ancient maps, particularly Claudius Ptolemy's *Geography* (second century AD): apart from some theoretical discussion, the bulk of the work (books 2–7) comprises a list of some 8100 toponyms, together with their coordinates. This work, written in ordinary *koine* Greek and translated into Latin only in 1406, was the point of departure for western map-making from around that time well into the fifteenth century, amid many exploratory voyages. The Ptolemaic schema played an important role in the evolution of western cartography in this so-called Age of Discovery. One divergence that would emerge was that the Indian Ocean proved to be not an inland sea, which Ptolemy had indicated (Fig. 1.4), and this meant that India could be reached from western Europe by rounding the Cape.<sup>23</sup> Martin Waldseemüller's *Universalis Cosmographia* (originally 1507, Fig. 1.5) famously used the name 'America' but it is also one of the first to show Africa's southern limit. In both respects Waldseemüller was responding to voyages undertaken by Iberian explorers, yet the tradition of Claudius Ptolemy continued to provide the larger framework.

The southern end of Africa was less significant to European science in itself than it was as a key point on the sea-route to India. In this context Portuguese explorers were the first Europeans to round the Cape: first

<sup>19</sup> Elephantine is located at the first cataract, in an area that roughly coincides with the southern border of the modern state of Egypt.

<sup>20</sup> Herodotus offers a series of competing theories on the inundation, of which he clearly states his favourite, namely that the sun is driven by storms from its original path onto the inland regions of Africa ('Libya'): *Histories* 2.24, cf. 2.25–27.

<sup>21</sup> Romm 1992: 16, 35, 122.

<sup>22</sup> 'vulgare Graeciae dictum semper aliquid novi Africam adferre': Pliny, *Natural History* 8.42, apparently referring to Aristotle, *Historia animalium* 606b20. See in detail van Stekelenburg 2003 and Ronca 1992. Van Wyk Smith 2009 sketches a broad context, but its main theses require caution.

<sup>23</sup> Grafton 1992. For the history of cartography as a long-term, changing balance of continuity and change, see the cautionary remarks of Woodward 2007.