

Watch me skip without your rope

Jack Mapanje, *The Last of the Sweet Bananas: New and Selected Poems*
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Oftentimes a poet whose early work is tagged with the label “political” – especially if he is subsequently imprisoned as a consequence – has a hard job escaping that designation throughout his career, no matter which direction his poetry may take. So, while there are several new poems in *The Last of the Sweet Bananas* which suggest he may want to focus on other concerns and other aspects of his life, this may well be the fate of Jack Mapanje, perhaps the most high profile contemporary African poet writing in English. Edgy and engaged as it has always been, Mapanje’s poetry never espoused an overt revolutionary agenda or any simple oppositional party line. Rather, like many other African poets writing in English (still the language of power in much of post-colonial Africa), Mapanje has – as he tells us in the introduction to this volume – always felt himself bound to take on the role of “the spokesperson for the so-called ‘dregs of society’”, a dangerous role to play under a repressive and elitist dictatorship. A radical young intellectual in Hastings Banda’s ossifying Malawi, Mapanje was always conscious of the real danger and likely consequences of offending those in power. So he understood the need to write in some sort of code, early poems that appeared uncontroversial – like “Song of Chicken” in the “Cycles” sequence – perhaps bearing a subversive meaning for those with the wit to see through the verbal camouflage:

Master, you talked with bows,
Arrows and catapults once
Your hands steaming with hawk blood
To protect your chicken.

Why do you talk with knives now,
Your hands teeming with eggshells
And hot blood from your own chicken?
Is it to impress your visitors?

It was appropriate, then, that the teasing, inscrutable chameleon should

become the image presiding over Mapanje's early poetry, work rooted in the landscapes and manscapes of Malawi, its history and its traditions, but also looking forward to the emergence of a different kind of society, a democratic meritocracy that might replace the prevailing "political, social and cultural structures that imprison the human spirit and erase creative endeavour and energy". Like so much African literature in English, this is work committed to the notion of poetry as a kind of interventionist social commentary, a poetry of satire and irony intended to expose hypocrisy and undermine the pomposity of those in power. All the same, it is hard to see how it could represent any real threat to an entrenched and all powerful regime like that which Banda had established in Malawi by the mid-1980s. That those in power reacted so brutally to a handful of – seemingly – critical poems tells us much about their insecurity as well as their values.

As was clear from his recent discussion on *Desert Island Discs*, it's not clear, even now, that Jack Mapanje really knows who he had offended or why the response to his first major collection of poems, *Of Chameleons and Gods* should lead first to the book being banned in Malawi, and then to his arrest and imprisonment for almost four years in the notorious Mikuyu Prison in Zomba. The cruelties and injustices of that period of imprisonment haunt Mapanje's imagination still, fifteen years after his release and settled as he is on

another continent. The two collections he has published since the Banda regime released him into exile in the UK, have both been dominated by a writing out of the demons of that prison experience. He has spoken and written movingly of the discomfort and distress – although the words are hardly strong enough – of the day-to-day routine in the prison, the ritual humiliations and blatant contempt of Hastings Banda's regime for issues of justice or human rights. "The Streak-Tease At Mikuyu Prison, 25 Sept. 1987", describing his strip-search induction into the prison regime on the night of his arrest is characteristically wry, beginning in a post-grad student memory of "the

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striptease at The Bird's Nest / London Street, Paddington in the seventies", and ending with the cruel realisation of his new reality:

Now the stinking shit-bucket tripped over drowns

The news about the lights being left over night for
You to scare night creepers, as the putrid bwezi

Blanket-rag enters the single cell & staggers on to
The cracked cold cement floor of Mikuyu Prison.

That poem is included in the first collection Mapanje published after his release, *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (1993), a book which bristles with indignation and outrage, but also retains an ability to laugh at the grim farce that was life inside the prison, and at the ridiculousness of the regime's self-aggrandising pomposities. The spirit of resistance bound up in that mocking laughter is explored in greater depth in the next collection Mapanje published, *Skipping Without Ropes* (1998). The brilliant title poem is a powerful declaration of that human spirit of resistance and of the poet's resilience when confronted by the regime's cruelty and weasel words. Denied skipping ropes to exercise with on the grounds that he might try to harm himself, the poet rhymes "rope" with "hope" to generate a skipping aide as he defies this latest attempt to break his spirit:

Watch, watch me skip without your
Rope; watch me skip with my hope –
a-one, a-two, a-three, a-four, a-five
I will, a-seven, I do, will skip, a-ten

Eleven, I will skip without, will skip
Within and skip I do without your
rope but with my hope; and I will,
Will always skip you dull, will skip

Your silly rules, skip your filthy walls

Like that imagined rope, the real thing that distinguishes Mapanje's work from the political and prison verse of many other African writers is his apparent belief in – and understanding of – the ways *poetry* works. This is not the by now familiar poetry of statement and protest, simply reflecting back the horror of injustice, cruelty or oppression – shocking and worthy as some of

that writing can be. Such work dates and very quickly becomes more interesting to the historian and social scientist than to readers of poetry. Mapanje's measured and crafted poems depend for their authority and their most memorable effects on metaphor and literary cunning. These poems speak far beyond the immediate context of the grim events that inspired their making.

STEWART BROWN

